

Cambridge Analytica

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Cambridge Analytica: Military Psy-Ops Privatized

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Cambridge Analytica: Military Psy-Ops Privatized

Abstract

This article argues that Cambridge Analytica was developed and operated with the primary objective of pushing far-right nationalist leaders who promoted neoliberal policies in favor of economic elites. Its origins, primary means of funding, and even its techniques were the results of its status as a subsidiary of SCL Group, a firm well entrenched within the military industrial complex and right-wing politics. Furthermore, an examination of many of its most prominent operations shows a long trail of support for right-wing ideologies. The case study of Cambridge Analytica contrasts the narrative that privately-contracted disinformation companies are fringe, mercenary entities. Rather, the firm's political and military ties allowed it to not only operate as an influential political entity within the anglosphere, but all over the world.

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Introduction

Cambridge Analytica is the model image of a disinformation firm: The ultra-right-wing propaganda it disseminated, behavioral science techniques it abused, and the controversial figures it supported earned the firm international infamy before its very public demise in 2016. The company is most known for its support of Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election, but it operated all over the world in a volume of work unlike anything its predecessors had ever done. A leak of more than 10,000 documents from a defunct Cambridge Analytica (CA) revealed that the firm operated in no less than 68 countries during its time of operation. The sheer scope and secrecy of CA's work allows for any patterns to get overlooked. It would be easy to dismiss Cambridge Analytica as a rogue entity willing to work for controversial clients in the search for money, however the evidence provides quite a contrary picture to this assumption.¹

In this article, I argue that Cambridge Analytica was developed and operated with the primary objective of pushing far-right nationalist leaders who promoted neoliberal policies in favor of economic elites. Its primary funding, origins, and even the techniques CA utilized were the result of its status as a subsidiary of SCL Group, a company already well entrenched into the military industrial complex and right-wing politics. Furthermore, a look back at the legacy and most prominent campaigns that Cambridge Analytica took part in shows a long trail of support for right-wing ideologues.

I argue that CA's origins directly connected its operations to the military industrial complex from the very beginning due to its ties to SCL Group and prominent Republican donor Robert Mercer. I will then elaborate on the techniques used by Cambridge Analytica in its misinformation campaigns. The firm's techniques and use of psychological profiling did not appear out of nowhere. Cambridge Analytica's work was a privatization of already practiced military psy ops techniques that they attained due to their connections to military actors. Lastly, a pattern of consistency emerges when analyzing Cambridge Analytica's clients: The firm's clients were typically right-wing and utilized nationalist rhetoric to advance the interest of rich global elites. Billionaires or politicians associated with American or British industry often hired CA. Cambridge Analytica would consistently collect private information and make use of micro-targeting using behavioral science techniques to push policies and political narratives that had a slant towards nationalist rhetoric, fear-mongering and neoliberal policies that often favored sections of the wealthy ruling class. From Donald Trump to Duterte of the Philippines, Cambridge Analytica consistently advocated an expansion of the military and police as part of a larger set of policies designed to target domestic and foreign "enemies" as the primary cause of national problems. They had a consistent set of policy preferences and clients that the firm wanted to push, and used its existing connections cultivated by parent company SCL Group to attain these clients.

Cambridge Analytica and its politics emerged out of a crisis in neoliberal capitalism. Bell Pottinger was a prominent predecessor of CA and shared many traits in common with them. Like CA, Bell Pottinger emerged out of a crisis in capitalism. However, for BP it was the financial

¹ Cadwalladr, Carole. "Fresh Cambridge Analytica Leak 'Shows Global Manipulation Is out of Control.'" The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, January 4, 2020.

crises of the late 1970s. These crises led to the adoption of neoliberal capitalist policies. Bell Pottinger's origins were directly tied to the rise of neoliberalism, with its founder and prominent clients all having ties to Margaret Thatcher.² Bell Pottinger used its ties to Thatcherism to cultivate prominent clients with ties to British and American industry, including numerous controversial clients such as Pinochet and South Africa's National Party, with a strong preference for supporting neoliberal policies.³ Following the 2008 great recession, however, Bell Pottinger found itself in crisis as well as it found itself struggling to legitimize its support for autocratic leaders that found themselves in the spotlight due to the Arab Spring and the rise of social media.⁴ Unlike Cambridge Analytica, Bell Pottinger was a "legitimate" PR firm that also had prominent non-political clients such as Coca Cola. The public nature of Bell Pottinger contributed to its loss of non-political clients and its indefinite closure as a result of a final wave of controversy from a botched disinformation campaign in South Africa. I argue that Bell Pottinger is Cambridge Analytica's predecessor. Its founding in the 90s by Thatcher-supported political actors directly mirrors Cambridge Analytica's formation by SCL Group and Robert Mercer. While Bell Pottinger sought out clientele all over the world in order to promote neoliberal policies, Cambridge Analytica did the same but behind a veneer of far-right nationalist ideology that often served as a response to the crisis of state legitimacy under neoliberal capitalism. CA even emerged from the very same financial crisis that put Bell Pottinger in such a state of disarray.

Far-right nationalism itself even came to prominence as a result of a crisis to neoliberalism. Neoliberalist policies favored utilizing the state to weaken restrictions on corporations and concentrate profits into the already wealthy. The continued decay of the power of liberal democratic institutions under this power structure, alongside the weakening of support for democracy and its institutions as a result of this phenomenon, has led to the rise of far-right political actors who used nationalist ideology to advance many of the same neoliberal capitalist policies. The era of regulated capitalism came to an end in the 1970s as a result of structural crises that saw profit margins decrease. This led to the adoption of neoliberal policies across the globe as a result of economic elites campaigning for such policies, with one such tool in these campaigns being PR firms like Bell Pottinger. The process would repeat again after 2007 with the great recession, which then created another structural crisis that most have never been able to recover from.⁵ It was this structural crisis from 2008-onwards that led to the loss of legitimacy for many capitalist states, the rise of political leaders advancing nationalist ideology, and the creation of Cambridge Analytica in the midst of a crisis of neoliberal capitalism.⁶ The clients that Cambridge Analytica supported, such as Trump or Duterte, utilized nationalist and fascist rhetoric to gain power during the crisis of neoliberal capitalism, though the policies these leaders embraced were often quite favorable to capitalist interests. Just as fascism emerged in the 1930s as a result of European capitalists aligning with fascist actors in order to maintain their power that had been endangered as a result of the great depression, prominent economic elites of the 2010s chose to align with these far-right nationalists in order to stabilize and consolidate their power that had been endangered as a result of the great recession. Far-right actors like Donald

² Kotz, David. *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism*. Page 62.

³ Influence: 24:00 to 25:30.

⁴ Kotz, David M. *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism*. Pages 2-3

⁵ Kotz, David. *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism*. Page 62.

⁶ Ibid. Pages 2-3.

Trump could rise to power and run amok as a result of the structural weaknesses in the United States' institutions and the weakening of democracy's popularity, but such actors could never reach such prominence without the support of billionaires like Robert Mercer, who not only founded Cambridge Analytica but also assigned the firm to work for Trump in 2016 as one of its many contracts.

Outside of a network support by billionaires created by a crisis in capitalism, another factor also played a part in the rise of Cambridge Analytica: Technology. Prior firms like Bell Pottinger came to power in a pre-digital age, with even their body of 2010 work being mostly relegated to the manipulation of search algorithms and editing of Wikipedia articles. Cambridge Analytica's capabilities were far more technically complex and would not be possible without the rise of Surveillance Capitalism and Computational Propaganda.

Surveillance Capitalism asserts that human experience has been commodified by companies such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google through the collection and sale of user operations on said platforms. Such platforms mainly gain profits from the selling of everything from the profile of their users to their activity. While this is typically done to be sold to advertisers, not only is this a breach of privacy, but it also allows for political actors to get their hands on sensitive information to push their own agendas.⁷ Cambridge Analytica originally collected much of the information it would use through an app on Facebook. This app would eventually allow CA to create a database on millions of users using information collected without their consent. Furthermore, the success of Cambridge Analytica's disinformation campaigns depended upon its ability to micro target potential voters and feed them propaganda dependent upon their specific personality type. This would not be possible without the sale of user data from sites such as Facebook. In this regard, it is important to note that it would be impossible for Cambridge Analytica to reach the level of success that it did without this particular development of monetization from social media companies.

Before the well documented rise of private firms that could buy this data, however, there was computational propaganda. Computational propaganda refers to political campaigns used to promote narratives online meant to push a political agenda; often utilizing misinformation, bot networks, and specialized algorithms necessary to spread propaganda across the largest audience possible.⁸ In the Oxford Internet Institute's 2020 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation, one of the key findings was a worrying increase of private companies taking part in computational propaganda campaigns.⁹ By this point, the Cambridge Analytica case was already well known among a general audience. However, this finding goes to show that CA was not an isolated case so much as a cog in an ecosystem that would only grow after its own demise. The Oxford study also expressed concerns that private firms were taking part in disinformation campaigns in such large numbers in the first place. This is because the study of such campaigns has often been focused on their use by governments, especially autocratic states. Computational propaganda was a kind of psychological warfare tactic, a means for governments to go after

⁷ Zuboff, Shoshana. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight For a Human Future at The New Frontier of Power*. Page vii.

⁸ Woolley, Samuel C., and Philip N. Howard, eds. *Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media*. Page 4.

⁹ Oxford Internet Institute. "2020 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation" Page i.

political opponents both domestically and abroad, or a tool for autocratic actors to stay in power. The further the internet and social media engrained itself into society across the globe, the more prominent such tactics would become.

The typical client of infamy Cambridge Analytica represented was that of a far-right nationalist. Upon initial inspection, their clients are somewhat different in nature from the pre-digital disinformation firms such as Bell Pottinger, who primarily worked as tools for the promotion of neoliberal policies. CA's support for more militaristic clients could be seen as a reflection of its ties to the military-industrial complex via its parent company SCL Group. Further investigation leads to something more complicated. While CA's clients were often more hawkish and militaristic, they still often promoted the same core economic policies of neoliberalism. Due to the polarization of economic elites following the 2008 great recession, a rise of right-wing support for a nationalist-populist movement emerged. This new bloc, which includes economic elites on both a national and transnational level, sought to preserve elements such as neoliberalism's accumulation strategies while stripping away elements such as individual rights.¹⁰ While at face value, what these nationalists and international neoliberals preach should be at odds with one another, these nationalist movements manage to sway the support of powerful groups of business elites due to their commitment to maintaining the accumulation strategies used by neoliberalism in order to maintain the same power structures and status quo.¹¹ With this in mind, the right-wing nationalism we see CA promoting in this article is not so much a different set of policies from what other disinformation firms have supported, but rather a new combination of far-right nationalist rhetoric combined with support for many of the same neoliberal capitalist policies.¹²

In reality, Cambridge Analytica did not just emerge from the rise of Facebook profits. Rather, its origins come from the privatization of military psychological warfare. Cambridge Analytica's parent company is SCL Group, a firm with deep ties to the military-industrial complex. Long before Cambridge Analytica had even been formed, SCL Group was already taking part in psychological and information warfare campaigns. A former employee claims to have supported the Ukrainian Orange coalition in 2004 during the color revolutions in East Europe. It is known that SCL Group was attached to several clandestine psychological warfare campaigns and had worked for the Pentagon, British intelligence, and several other European national security entities long before Cambridge Analytica was created. SCL Group spent years cultivating contacts with military and security actors across the globe while cultivating techniques that would give Cambridge Analytica an edge. In the next session, I will cover Cambridge Analytica's ties to SCL Group and its founding by Robert Mercer and Steve Bannon, both prominent figures in the rise of the far-right.

¹⁰Scheiring, Gábor. 2022. "The National-Populist Mutation of Neoliberalism in Dependent Economies: The Case of Viktor Orbán's Hungary." *Socio-Economic Review*. Page 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.* Page 9.

¹² *Ibid.* Page 26.

The Origins of Cambridge Analytica

Cambridge Analytica's origins, stemming from SCL Group, once again push against the narrative that disinformation firms are fringe actors operating as mercenaries for the highest bidders. The firm cultivated clients through an ecosystem of inheritance. Bell Pottinger leveraged its prior connections with British conservatives to gain an advantage in acquiring lucrative contracts, building on the foundations established by founder Tim Bell while working for Margaret Thatcher.¹³ Cambridge Analytica followed similar, if even grander, origins than the British company. The disinformation firm's parent company SCL Group had been lending its services to various defense actors well before Cambridge Analytica's established the infamous contract with Donald Trump that had made so many headlines. Cambridge Analytica adopted political warfare techniques that had been battle-tested in relation to literal war zones. For years, SCL Group had acquired secretive contracts from various defense actors, including the Pentagon and DARPA, with the mission to fight terrorism.¹⁴

SCL Group stands for "Strategic Communications Laboratories." Much of the contracts SCL Group took on are to this day very secretive. We know that SCL Group has had contacts with both the United States and the United Kingdom's departments of defense. They were on a contract relating to Afghanistan in 2010. Much of their work was related to behavioral research, essentially acting as a privately contracted propaganda wing for its clients.¹⁵

SCL Group's operations were often concerned with using communications technology and behavioral science to locate and combat extremism. Their tools would see great use by the world's governments during the War on Terror. The company's list of clientele is impressive: the British Foreign Office, multiple US agencies, Saudi Arabia, the Norwegian Government Defense Research Agency, and the British Army's Psychological Operations Group. Pentagon research and development partners like Sandia National Laboratories were also clients of SCL. As mentioned prior, many of their actual contracts, and thus what they actually did, is kept secretive. Documentation showed that a collaboration between SCL Group and Sandia involved: "an in-depth behavior change study in relation to violent extremism in South and Southeast Asia." Much of their work involved psychological warfare, propaganda, and political campaigning. Research by scholars such as Emma Briant have also revealed that tactics innovated by SCL Group would later be used during domestic political campaigns to foment division and discourage voting among citizens. This would prove to be quite a background to allow Cambridge Analytica to succeed, as all operations described so far occurred before the disinformation firm was later established.¹⁶

In 2013, data scientist Aleksandr Kogan and various other scientists related to Cambridge University set up a company called "Global Market Research" in an effort to market an app known as "thisisyourdigitallife." The app gathered personal information by tricking participants into thinking they were taking a personality test when in fact they were using the app to collect

¹³ Influence: 28:30 to 29:30.

¹⁴ Pasternack, Alex. "Before Trump, Cambridge Analytica Quietly Built 'Psyops' for Militaries." Fast Company.

¹⁵ Ramsay, Adam. "Cambridge Analytica Is What Happens When You Privatise Military Propaganda." openDemocracy.

¹⁶ Pasternack, Alex. "Before Trump, Cambridge Analytica Quietly Built 'Psyops' for Militaries." Fast Company.

politically relevant information. The app was said to have gathered information from 50 million individuals. This information would then be bought by none other than SCL Group, the very same personal information that would allow Cambridge Analytica to operate with much success during the 2016 American presidential elections.¹⁷

Cambridge Analytica was founded in 2013 as subsidiary for SCL Group. It was backed by billionaire Robert Mercer and led by Alexander Nix and Steve Bannon. With a strong background of lucrative contracts and connections with defense officials, Cambridge Analytica was instead focused on domestic affairs.¹⁸ Almost immediately upon being founded, Cambridge Analytica acquired a contract to operate for John Bolton's Super PAC. Bolton's history in national security indicates that Cambridge Analytica's prior history working for defense agencies was being well used in acquiring lucrative contracts.¹⁹ Before further scrutiny is put on the techniques and operations that the disinformation firm undertook, further focus should be put on the influential personnel behind it.

The most important financial backer to Cambridge Analytica is Robert Mercer, a former computer scientist at IBM and owner of numerous hedge funds that have acquired him and his entire family a large fortune. With these funds, the Mercer family have funded many infamous enterprises including Bannon's Breitbart news. The Mercers are also one of the biggest donors to conservative politicians in the US, having donated to politicians such as Ted Cruz, Ben Carson, and most infamously Donald Trump.²⁰ Together they form a vast network, including other billionaires, who exist solely for the purpose of the accumulation of political and financial capital. CA doesn't so much have ties to this network as it was made for the sole purpose of serving it.

Robert Mercer's influence on the mainstream politics of the United States is undeniable, as he is single-handedly one of the most influential individuals in the US thanks to his massive backing of Republican politicians. He is a huge funder of climate change denial actors, such as the thinktank the Heartland Institute. Mercer primarily funds the Media Research Center, a highly influential organization aimed at correcting the "liberal bias in mainstream media." From 2010 to 2017, Mercer also donated around 50 million dollars to various non-profit right-wing organizations. A continued narrative throughout much of his beneficiaries is a criticism of the "mainstream media" to the point where if you are reading an article or listening to a politician spreading such rhetoric, you can most likely track their funding back to Mercer.²¹ Within this context, it would come as no surprise that Mercer was the primary backer of Cambridge Analytica.

Steve Bannon is another beneficiary of Mercer's money, and a highly influential figure in the Conservative media ecosystem of the United States. Bannon is the CEO of Breitbart News, a former advisor to Donald Trump, and was of course a co-founder of Cambridge Analytica.

¹⁷ Berghel, Hal. "Malice Domestic: The Cambridge Analytica Dystopia." *Computer* 51.

¹⁸ Russo, Mike. "Cambridge Analytica: What Is It? How Did It Start, and Where Is It Going?" *Owlcation*.

¹⁹ Goodman, Amy, Emma Briant, and Britany Kaiser. "Propaganda Machine: The Military Roots of Cambridge Analytica's Psychological Manipulation of Voters." *Democracy Now!*

²⁰ Russo, Mike. "Cambridge Analytica: What Is It? How Did It Start, and Where Is It Going?" *Owlcation*.

²¹ Cadwalladr, Carole. "Robert Mercer: The Big Data Billionaire Waging War on Mainstream Media." *The Guardian*.

Thanks to the Mercer Family's funding, Bannon became a popular figure who managed to spread numerous political narratives that Republican politicians often use today.²² Bannon can generally be given credit with the rise of the "alt-right." He not only advised Trump at the White House but during the Presidential campaign as well. His connections to Trump even allowed him to be appointed to the National Security Council, although he would later be removed from the NSC and even largely fall out of Trump's favor.²³

Although he falls under the radar compared to Robert Mercer and Steve Bannon, Alexander Nix is equally important to Cambridge Analytica's founding. Although not as well-known and infamous as the prior two men, he seemed to have played a large part in the day-to-day operations of the disinformation firm. Much of the information about Cambridge Analytica's capabilities come from Nix's own public appearances, including a prominent YouTube video where Nix in detail explains the techniques Cambridge Analytica employs in its operations. Alexander Nix is also the only high-profile individual we know of who worked at SCL Group prior to Cambridge Analytica.²⁴

Outside of the three men who were most prominent in Cambridge Analytica's founding, we know of a few more important personnel to Cambridge Analytica's operations. Mark Turnbull, a former Bell Pottinger employee who took part in that firm's operations in Iraq, was also employed at Cambridge Analytica.²⁵ Christopher Wylie was the Director of Research at Cambridge Analytica, and ultimately the whistleblower who revealed much of the information we now know to the public. Nigel and Alexander Oakes were both founders of SCL Group, linked to prominent Conservative politicians themselves, and thus should be given credit for Cambridge Analytica as well. Lastly, Michael Kosinski and David Stillwell's research in psychometric testing, first developed while at Cambridge university, provided the backbone for much of the work Cambridge Analytica would conduct.²⁶

Cambridge Analytica's Techniques

The scope of Cambridge Analytica's actions eclipsed many of the operations that its predecessors such as Bell Pottinger would conduct. While Bell Pottinger had a background in marketing, Cambridge Analytica had a far more technically proficient set of expertise developed by years of conducting Psyops for defense agencies. Furthermore, the techniques that Cambridge Analytica used were, and still are, innovative, making use of social media, behavioral analysis, and big data unlike anything done before. Cambridge Analytica sets the bar for what a disinformation firm is capable of. It is the measuring stick by which all firms should be analyzed.

Cambridge Analytica's techniques were based upon a combination of three elements: Behavioral science, big data analysis, and ad targeting. This process is referred to as psychometric

²² Russo, Mike. "Cambridge Analytica: What Is It? How Did It Start, and Where Is It Going?" Owlcation.

²³ Hornor, Anders L. "Stephen K. Bannon, Chief Strategist of the Whitehouse and Former Media Mogul." Page 7.

²⁴ Russo, Mike. "Cambridge Analytica: What Is It? How Did It Start, and Where Is It Going?" Owlcation.

²⁵ Caesar, Ed, William Finnegan, and Charlayne Hunter-Gault. "The Reputation-Laundering Firm That Ruined Its Own Reputation." The New Yorker.

²⁶ Russo, Mike. "Cambridge Analytica: What Is It? How Did It Start, and Where Is It Going?" Owlcation.

marketing. Cambridge Analytica's behavioral science techniques were based upon the work of Doctors Kosinski and Stillwell. Their research found that Facebook Likes, an easily accessible and recordable track of behavior, could be used to accurately predict one's personal traits. These traits ranged from age and gender to religious and political views. Their research had accurately been able to identify the difference between Republicans and Democrats in 85% of cases and was similarly effective in identifying other traits such as race or sexuality. The model these two behavioral scientists developed was known as the OCEAN or "Big Five" model, and it was also the model used for the information sold to Cambridge Analytica.²⁷ While before one would require the use of questionnaires or surveys to collect the information needed to use this model, the rise of the internet and social media made the collection of this information far easier.

These behavioral science techniques have been in play since at least the 1980s. However, the scope of raw data necessary to match Cambridge Analytica's efforts could not be possible until the digital era. Cambridge Analytica used psychometric marketing. This would require huge amounts of personal information that would typically only be available through surveys taken in person or over phone calls. The manpower and funding necessary to properly utilize such techniques meant that such information was only available on a smaller scale. The advent of social media sides such as Facebook solved this conundrum, however. The presence of surveys and personal information delivered through social media platforms made it far easier to capture and compile greater amounts of data at a level of detail that only interviews and surveys could once capture.

Typically, one could attempt to target an audience based on demographics. If someone lived in a particular area or were part of a demographic that had been identified, their group characteristics could be isolated as such. Psychometric marketing can specifically target individuals based on their personality traits collected from the behavioral surveys just described. The data needed to specifically target someone using this method is much more complex. These demographics are then used to send certain "narratives", typically a framing of a particular political issue, an association of a certain identity with a politician or political identity, or the explanation of a political agenda through an ad. Narratives are used to appeal to audience members based on their psychological profile. The particular narrative pushed to the audience member is based on the psychological profile assigned to them. Cambridge Analytica had the funding and infrastructure to construct complex algorithms to predict these traits. Using its big data analysis capabilities, the firm had the means of identifying how a voter felt about certain political issues and how they would best respond to potential policy suggestions and thus could be specifically targeted with ads that personally appealed to them the most. A voter assigned a more paranoid psychological profile would be given ads promising security or warning of danger in regard to immigration, for instance. Meanwhile, someone assigned a more agreeable psychological profile would be shown ads associating a conservative politician with traditional family values and American pride.²⁸

A misunderstanding many have about big data is that it is a term that refers to a certain scope of information rather than a process. Not only is big data defined by its size, it also incorporates a

²⁷ Kosinski, M., Stillwell, D., & Graepel, T. (2013). "Private Traits and Attributes are Predictable From Digital Records of Human Behavior." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*. Page 5802.

²⁸ "Psychometric Profiling: Persuasion by Personality in Elections." *Our Data Our Selves*.

series of steps needed to accumulate and properly utilize the information in question. Big data requires research design in order for the collected information to be relevant, the information then needs to be collected before it is then fed through the proper software to be utilized, special expertise and an analysis process is then needed to understand what this data actually means, and even then, a political campaign including the proper use of political narratives, ads, and a campaign platform are needed to properly use big data. It is true that scope is important to the definition, as computers are often used in such projects to analyze vast amounts of information that would not be costly if done manually. However, Cambridge Analytica's campaigns such as their actions in the 2016 presidential elections show that fast and adaptive analysis and project design were just as important to ensure the efficiency of the propaganda and disinformation produced.²⁹

Micro-targeting is the last component of Cambridge Analytica's techniques that must be analyzed. While psychometric marketing is the act of designing propaganda and how to present it as a project, micro-targeting is the process of actually sending it to the proper audience members. Micro-targeting requires the use of big data. After all, psychometric marketing only allows for the propaganda manufacturer to design content made for specific psychological profiles. Without micro-targeting, they would not be able to actually get these ads to the proper audience members. While before one could target an audience with particular narratives based on their geographic location or their demographic, micro-targeting allows one to specifically send a narrative related to one's specific traits. As an example, while before a political campaign would need to produce political ads relating to issues that voters most cared about and could at most make sure that specific demographics saw specific ads, micro-targeting allows a political campaign to send an ad specifically tailored to a specific personality type or a particular political topic that that voter cares most about. So, if a voter was found to care the most about gun rights, they could be sent ads relating to the 2nd amendment. If they cared more about national security, a voter would be sent ads relating to national security topics. This is of course a massive threat to one's own personal privacy, particularly concerning the information collected to micro-target someone, let alone if they consented to that information being given away in the first place.³⁰

These techniques have become more common in political campaigns over time. Combined with the kinds of misinformation spread by the likes of the Mercer Family, Bannon, and Breitbart, Cambridge Analytica had the capabilities to spread misinformation like never before. The firm also had the benefit of an in-house research group called Behavioral Dynamics Institute, founded by Nigel Oakes. As part of SCL Group, the firm had worked on psychologically profiling and combating potential extremism when under contract to various defense agencies. These techniques were then used by Cambridge Analytica for domestic electoral engineering.³¹

The target audience were ultimately put into particular archetypes based on the OCEAN method: Such as open, agreeable, extroverted, neurotic, etc. before they were then targeted with

²⁹ Henrikson, Ellen E., "Big data, microtargeting, and governmentality in cybertimes. The case of the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica." University of Oslo. Page 10-11.

³⁰ Henrikson, Ellen E., "Big data, microtargeting, and governmentality in cybertimes. The case of the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica." University of Oslo. Page 3.

³¹ Pasternack, Alex. "Before Trump, Cambridge Analytica Quietly Built 'Psyops' for Militaries." Fast Company. Fast Company.

specific ads over specific online platforms such as Facebook or YouTube. The content of these ads would depend on their psychological profile and what political topics they most gravitated towards based on the data collected. These would be designed in such a way that every minute detail from the music to the imagery used in the ad would be tailored to impact the viewer to the highest degree possible.³² Suddenly, disinformation wouldn't need to be constructed by marketing specialists tailoring ads to appeal to broad demographics. Now, a disinformation firm could build a product made specifically for its audience based on their very personality traits using information gathered through the raw data collected from activity on social media.

Cambridge Analytica's Domestic Affairs

Unlike Bell Pottinger, which had been active for decades, Cambridge Analytica was only officially active from 2013 to 2018. However, due to the expansion of digital communications technology, the firm was able to accomplish much more than its predecessors in a much shorter time frame. Robert Mercer's firm had managed to gather a list of some of the most lucrative conservative clients in the United States, largely due to the connections that had already been cultivated before its founding. These included John Bolton, Thom Tillis, Ted Cruz, Ben Carson, and Donald Trump, among others. The main nexus of operation for the firm's domestic affairs were the United States' 2014 and 2016 elections, as CA was already collapsing by 2018.

Cambridge Analytica's first major contract was with John Bolton's Super PAC. The contract was one of the first arenas for testing CA's methods. The firm created psychological profiles on many of its voters using Facebook data. In addition, it created numerous political commercials meant to appeal to different kinds of voters. Most were online, although some were generally delivered over television. This was in many ways a test run for CA's capabilities. Bolton's Super PAC used the firm's expertise to assist in the campaigns of Thom Tillis of North Carolina, Tom Cotton of Arkansas, and Scott Brown of New Hampshire. Of the three campaigns, only Scott Brown would lose his election. The content of the videos produced largely reflected the orientation of the client: They were focused mainly on the national security stances of each candidate, primarily campaigning on hot-button national defense topics such as ISIS, illegal immigration, and a perceived weakness in the Democrats' foreign policy towards rivals such as Russia and China.³³

Right out of the gate, Cambridge Analytica's content reflected its origins and already cemented ties to the military industrial complex. As has been documented, the firm emerged from the privatization of Psy Ops techniques already used by defense and national security organizations. Bolton had been active since Reagan's administration and always described as a "military hawk" by his contemporaries. It would come to no surprise that their first client would be a political figure who already had deep ties with the military-industrial complex. The main goal of the ads produced for the political actors affiliated with Bolton was to convince the viewer that national security was the most important topic in politics. From there, they needed to argue that each respective conservative actor Cambridge Analytica was representing was the best candidate to

³² Goodman, Amy, Emma Briant, and Britany Kaiser. "Propaganda Machine: The Military Roots of Cambridge Analytica's Psychological Manipulation of Voters." *Democracy Now!*

³³ Kaye, Kate. "Much-Hyped Data Firm's Promise Could Be Tested in Iowa." *Ad Age*.

handle these issues. Results found that these ads were successful. One particular ad titled “White Flags” was found to have 36% more engagement than prior ads already run for their candidate. In this respect, there is no better example of how Cambridge Analytica’s origins reflect in its operations than its first major contract.³⁴

A good case study of the success of these campaigns can be found in Thom Tillis’ North Carolina senatorial campaign. While running against democrat Kay Hagan, Tillis managed to use Cambridge Analytica’s ads to specifically target voters who cared primarily about national security to begin to frame the general conversation of his campaign around security policies. Up until then, Tillis’ Democrat opponent had managed to frame the campaign around a set of educational policies from which Tillis was struggling. CA devised ads that managed to convince conservative voters that Hagan was soft on ISIS, successfully shifting the focus of the campaign away from domestic affairs. This activated large amounts of voters and is believed to have created turnout that helped Tillis win his election.³⁵ The scale of the operation was large. As would be revealed by a whistleblower that worked for the company, CA had utilized dozens of foreign agents that had not been properly registered by the Foreign Agents Registration Act. Many of these experts were British, further cementing the firm’s relations to parent company SCL Group.³⁶

While Cambridge Analytica is perhaps most infamous for its support of Donald Trump, it would first support the 2016 Presidential campaign of Ted Cruz. Cruz was Robert Mercer’s preferred candidate, and he supported Cruz’ campaign both directly and indirectly through CA. The tactics used in Cruz’ campaign were generally the same, with the same techniques and technology used by the firm while promoting Bolton’s candidates. In an analysis of Cambridge Analytica’s work for Cruz, experts were able to analyze the differences between the firm’s different ads fit for different psychological profiles. As an example, when pushing Cruz’ anti-gun control stance, targets who were identified with the “high neuroticism and conscientiousness” profiles were given ads intended to remind the viewer that guns could be used to protect oneself. These ads would depict a hand breaking through glass reaching for the viewer. Meanwhile, targets who were identified as “closed and agreeable” were given ads depicting a father and son hunting together. Through the use of CA’s tactics and technologies, the firm could promote the exact same policy in a completely different manner depending on psychological profile of the target.³⁷ Cambridge Analytica’s campaign for Cruz was largely seen as successful after they were credited for securing the politician’s victory in the Iowa Caucuses, leading to Cruz’ campaign spending more money on CA’s services.³⁸

Cambridge Analytica also secured a contract with Ben Carson in 2016. Carson only spent around \$222, 000 for their services, relatively little compared to the millions Cruz’ campaign spent. The

³⁴ Goodman, Amy, Emma Briant, and Britany Kaiser. “Propaganda Machine: The Military Roots of Cambridge Analytica’s Psychological Manipulation of Voters.” Democracy Now!

³⁵ Issenberg, Sasha. “Cruz-Connected Data Miner Aims to Get Inside U.S. Voters’ Heads.” Bloomberg.com.

³⁶ Timberg, Craig, and Tom Hamburger. “Former Cambridge Analytica Workers Say Firm Sent Foreigners to Advise U.S. Campaigns.” The Washington Post.

³⁷ Rathi, Rahul. “Effect of Cambridge Analytica’s Facebook Ads on the 2016 US Presidential Election.” Medium.

³⁸ Issenberg, Sasha. “How Ted Cruz Engineered His Iowa Triumph.” Bloomberg.com.

techniques used in Carson's campaign were the same as in prior cases.³⁹ Ultimately, however, neither Cruz nor Carson would secure victory in the Republican primaries. Donald Trump would secure his victory and Robert Mercer would promptly shift his support over to the preferred candidate. In addition to the usual direct support a billionaire would provide, Mercer also convinced Trump's campaign to use Cambridge Analytica's services. Mercer quickly became Trump's biggest donor. The scope of this campaign would be far larger than anything else Cambridge Analytica had done before. In addition to the usual targeted ads, CA also equipped canvassers with the psychological information gathered to better convince voters. Using their psychological profiling, the firm managed to locate which of Trump's phrases best struck with voters, such as "Drain the swamp, deep state, and make American great again." Cambridge Analytica was able to work with the Trump campaign in detail, in part due to the fact that one of Cambridge Analytica's founders, Steve Bannon, was also Trump's chief strategist. The campaign also managed to take big data into the real world: Door-to-door canvassers were equipped with the psychological profile of voters so that they could utilize the proper narratives and arguments necessary to best reach voters in person as well. Micro-targeting moved out from the space of mere Facebook ads into traditional campaign footwork.⁴⁰

It would be extremely hasty to overestimate the effect a single disinformation firm had on Trump's election. After all, their initial candidate Ted Cruz had lost against Trump in the primaries using the same techniques though many employees of CA would go on to claim that their strategies and targeting were essential in helping Trump get elected. Cambridge Analytica focused some of their resources on swing states and other electoral arenas that were targeted as vulnerable for Democrats. These efforts were attempts to activate certain voters who many Conservatives believed would otherwise be less likely to vote. The use of micro-targeting and psychometric marketing were attempts to convince these previously inactive individuals to not just buy into Trump's ultra-right wing, militaristic agenda but also get them to vote.⁴¹ While a lot of conversation has been focused on the possible support the Russian Federation provided to Trump's campaign, it has also been found that Cambridge Analytica had collaborated with and used intelligence gathered by British and Israeli private firms, with Alexander Nix once even claiming that the company had secured the support of ex-Israeli spies for intelligence gathering.⁴²

The firm's use of micro-targeting was designed to trigger positive voting behavior based on propaganda tied to specific psychological profiles. The firm's clients reported that these techniques delivered increased engagement with candidates' ads. The Tillis' campaign credited Cambridge Analytica for changing the conversation of their elections from education to national security, providing more favorable terrain for the campaign. Cruz' campaign credited CA's work for helping them secure a caucus victory in Iowa. We are not analyzing these firms to determine their effectiveness, however. We want to understand where they come from and what their place is in a larger political apparatus. In this endeavor, the evidence is clear.

³⁹ Sellers, Frances Stead. "Cruz Campaign Paid \$750,000 to 'Psychographic Profiling' Company." *The Washington Post*.

⁴⁰ Russo, Mike. "Cambridge Analytica: What Is It? How Did It Start, and Where Is It Going?" *Owlcation*.

⁴¹ Stahl, Lesley. "Parscale: TV News 'Thought I Was a Joke.'" *CBS News*.

⁴² TOI Staff, AP. "Trump campaign mined Facebook user data using Israeli 'intelligence gathering'." *The Times of Israel*.

Cambridge Analytica was founded by SCL Group, an organization deeply engrained in the military-industrial complex, and Robert Mercer, an individual with ties to American Conservative politicians. Throughout each of Cambridge Analytica's domestic campaigns, we can see this foundation reflecting in their operations. Their first major client was Bolton's Super PAC. Their operations largely revolved around convincing voters that national security was the most important topic in American politics. Ted Cruz, their next client, was Robert Mercer's preferred candidate during the primaries. Then when Trump won the primaries and Mercer shifted his support, so did Cambridge Analytica. CA was credited with successfully increasing turnout in conservative voters in swing states, largely using their micro-targeting to sell them on Trump's far-right agenda. This agenda highlights the marriage of SCL Group's history with the military-industrial complex with the prior traditions set by disinformation firms like Bell Pottinger. While Trump and the far-right nationalists that Cambridge Analytica uplifted made use of "militarist" rhetoric, much of this hawkish posturing was used to push neoliberal policies. This falls in line with prior research on the rise of far-right nationalists as of late, which links the polarization of economic elites with the adoption of far-right nationalism among advocates of neoliberalism. Key clients of Cambridge Analytica such as Trump, the Brexit movement, and Modi all fall under the label of advocating for right-wing policies that strip back on many of the secondary traits of neoliberalism in favor of defending its core economic tenets using the rhetoric of fascism.⁴³

From the very beginning, Cambridge Analytica was always the privatization of the military's psychological warfare strategies, and everything from the firm's practices themselves to the clients they secured shows this. They were military propaganda let loose in the world of domestic politics, and although Cambridge Analytica is no longer in operation, it opened the flood gates for numerous other splinter firms and copycats. The firm did not just operate domestically, however. It also ran operations all across the globe. So then one must ask: Do Cambridge Analytica's international campaigns look similar to its domestic operations? Or are they more mercenary in nature?

Cambridge Analytica's Global Affairs

To claim that Cambridge Analytica's scope was massive would be an understatement. It would be impossible to properly describe each and every one of the disinformation firm's campaigns around the world. This is not the work of prior disinformation firm's such as Bell Pottinger, who would win contracts with individuals and craft marketing campaigns for their chosen clients. This was disinformation on an "industrial scale." In this regard, Cambridge Analytica's operations should not be seen as a series of independent contracts around the world but rather a global misinformation campaign that saw collaboration between governments, political parties, security agencies, and private entities. The leaks even indicate that Cambridge Analytica made use of shell companies to funnel dark money into political campaigns abroad. If Cambridge Analytica was making efforts to influence politics on a global scale, however, then what were the politics of this international campaign? Did they use the same tactics abroad? What kinds of

⁴³ Scheiring, Gábor. 2022. "The National-Populist Mutation of Neoliberalism in Dependent Economies: The Case of Viktor Orbán's Hungary." *Socio-Economic Review*. Page 1.

organizations and politicians received support from Cambridge Analytica? Little evidence shows that these were mercenary efforts.⁴⁴

According to some reports by Cambridge Analytica itself, the firm took part in around 100 elections in Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. SCL Group and CA were believed to have operated in the Czech Republic, Romania, Ukraine, Britain and Italy, among various other examples including Lithuania and Latvia. Many of these campaigns were highly secretive and difficult to keep track of due to their deletion of content after campaigns were completed.⁴⁵ In 2016, it was believed that a political advisor to Czech Republic president Miloš Zeman, a right-wing pro-Russian leader, was on SCL Group's payroll and possibly received assistance from CA.⁴⁶ A British public relations consultant claims that he was approached by Cambridge Analytica in relation to the 2016 Romanian elections in support of the Romanian Social Democratic Party.⁴⁷ The SDP has been accused of being a puppet of the Russian Federation, with the party at least enjoying favorable relations with Russia.⁴⁸ Around 2014, the SDP was beginning to develop a new set of policies built around conservative nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and security. SDP politicians have also been accused of antisemitism. It also has its roots in the Romanian Communist Party, which was infamous for being both anti-Semitic and generally anti-minority.⁴⁹

There have also been accusations that Cambridge Analytica had been active at some point in Ukraine. At the very least, it is known that SCL Group had assisted the Ukrainian Orange coalition in 2004.⁵⁰ In 2019, the Italian government sued Cambridge Analytica for one million euros for infringing upon EU privacy laws. This was due to the collection of information on 214'077 Italians, although there was no confirmation that the information was used.⁵¹ There have also been accusations that Cambridge Analytica interfered in Italian politics in 2012 by an Italian personal security professional, Antonelle Soro.⁵²

Perhaps save for their work for Trump, Cambridge Analytica's most infamous operations were in regard to Brexit. Cambridge Analytica largely used the same microtargeting and behavioral science work in the United Kingdom as they used in the United States.⁵³ Cambridge Analytica worked on behalf of the Leave Campaign and used Robert Mercer's "AggregateIQ" firm to operate in the UK. 3.9 million pounds were paid by the Leave Campaign to CA through Robert Mercer's company. The disinformation firm was used to micro-target potential voters and operate on a similar level to prior and later campaigns. The Oxford Internet Institute also

⁴⁴ Cadwalladr, Carole. "Fresh Cambridge Analytica Leak 'Shows Global Manipulation Is out of Control.'" *The Guardian*.

⁴⁵ BBC. "Cambridge Analytica: The Data Firm's Global Influence." *BBC News*.

⁴⁶ Cadwalladr, Carole. "I created Steve Bannon's psychological warfare tool': Meet the data war whistleblower." *The Guardian* 17 (2018).

⁴⁷ Turp-Balazs, Craig. "Cambridge Analytica Had Sights on 2016 Romanian Election." *Emerging Europe*.

⁴⁸ Savin, Mircea. "Felul În Care PSD a Făcut Jocurile Rusiei Din 1989 Încoace, Reflectat De Un Expert În Securitate Națională: 10 August 2018 Parte Din Planul Ex-Pcr-Ului Care NE Conduce." *Podul*.

⁴⁹ Bird, Michael, and Stefan Candea. "Romania's Ruling Party Revives Nationalism Ahead of Presidential Election." *EUobserver*.

⁵⁰ Textifire, Textifire. "SCL Group's Eurasian Vacation." *Medium*.

⁵¹ AFP. "Italy Fines Facebook over Cambridge Analytica Case." *The Local Italy*.

⁵² PRP Channel. "Cambridge Analytica May Have Also Acted in Italy." *PRP Channel*.

⁵³ Risso, Linda. "Harvesting your soul? Cambridge Analytica and brexit." *Brexit Means Brexit 2018*. Page 75.

discovered a very heavy use of bots on Twitter in connection with this campaign. Of the tweets made on Twitter related to Brexit, 54% of tweets were pro-leave. A third of those tweets came from less than 1% of the accounts in question, a feat largely assumed to be possible through the use of bots. The content of these bots, and the campaign in general, was anti-immigrant and pro-security.⁵⁴ While it is unknown if there is a direct link between CA and the bots, the Oxford Internet Institute believes that at the very least that private information collected by the firm was then used to conduct a computational propaganda campaign.⁵⁵ These operations quickly led to scrutiny by officials in the UK, both in regard to a breach of privacy laws, electoral funding laws, and the spread of disinformation. The public backlash against Cambridge Analytica as a result of their work on Brexit, alongside their campaign for Trump, were major controversies that allowed for the firm to come into the public eye and eventually face enough scrutiny to disband it.⁵⁶

In Latin America, it has been reported that Cambridge Analytica collaborated with a phone app in Colombia and Mexico, *Pig.gi*, to likely collect private information via surveys. Cambridge Analytica then used the information collected to operate in the 2018 Mexican presidential elections.⁵⁷ In the October of 2017, it was reported that they were recruiting workers for operations in Mexico City through an ad on Facebook. The Mexican conservative National Action Party was accused of using Cambridge Analytica's services, although they denied these claims.⁵⁸ Leaked documents also confirmed that CA did work for a candidate in Brazil in 2018, with the candidate in question likely being far-right president Bolsonaro.⁵⁹ Bolsonaro, much like Donald Trump, could only successfully emerge to push his far-right policies with the support of as a result of support from deeply entrenched and efficient corporate lobbies in Brazil.⁶⁰ When it became clear that Geraldo Ackmin of the Party of Brazilian Social Democracy was not going to win the election of 2018, Brazil's Finance and large domestic capital began to throw their support behind Bolsonaro. He not only enjoyed the support of the fossil fuels industry, which has a long history of supporting far-right politicians, but also big agribusiness, who would largely benefit from Bolsonaro's support for an open license for the deforestation of Brazil's rainforests.⁶¹ These accusations continue a thread of Cambridge Analytica supporting right-wing nationalists backed by corporate actors, showcasing the prevalence of neoliberal policies even in these populist actors.

Cambridge Analytica was also highly active in Africa. It worked for right-wing Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta in both 2013 and 2017. Mark Turnbull claimed that their work for Kenyatta's National Alliance and Jubilee was massive, with CA actually writing Kenyatta's political manifestos and rebranding his party both times.⁶² The firm's operations in Kenya are consistent with prior cases: Personal data collection from a third party app, the use of micro-

⁵⁴ Ibid. Page 80.

⁵⁵ Ibid. Page 81.

⁵⁶ Ibid. Page 85.

⁵⁷ Cattan, Nacha. "Trump's Big-Data Gurus Scout Presidential Candidate in Mexico." Bloomberg.com.

⁵⁸ Kahn, Carrie. "In Mexico, Candidates Move Away from Cambridge Analytica." NPR.

⁵⁹ Newsroom, TBR. "Cambridge Analytica Leak Points to Involvement in Brazilian Elections." The Brazilian Report.

⁶⁰ Cox, Ronald W., and Daniel Skidmore-Hess. "How Neofascism Emerges from Neoliberal Capitalism." *New Political Science*. Page 14.

⁶¹ Ibid. Page 15.

⁶² BBC. "Cambridge Analytica: The Data Firm's Global Influence." BBC News.

targeting, and the spread of misinformation. In a nation that has experienced political violence several times, Cambridge Analytica attracted a great amount of scrutiny for their misleading ads and campaigns playing on fears in regard to increased violence if the wrong candidate got elected. This led to a great amount of criticism from political opposition, accusing the firm and Kenyatta of spreading misinformation regarding prior violence while also playing upon the fears of further violence to spur fearful voters.⁶³ In Nigeria, Cambridge Analytica was hired by an undisclosed Nigerian billionaire to work on Goodluck Jonathan's presidential campaign in 2015. The firm supposedly searched for incriminating material on the political opposition.⁶⁴ Those connected to the campaign claimed that they had worked with Israeli hackers to collect political information. In addition, Cambridge Analytica released ads accusing the left-wing political accusation of using violence and theft if successfully elected. Once again, these ads were criticized for playing upon prior divisions in Nigerian society in a politically unstable time. Those working on the campaign in CA also claimed that Israeli officials were averse to the idea of the political opposition winning and assisted them in their campaign. Although the connections to right-wing politicians were clear, the strategies described in accounts of this campaign were different. In addition to Cambridge Analytica searching for incriminating evidence of their opposition, their ads were more so aimed at scaring opposition voters out of actually turning out for elections.⁶⁵

Lastly, Cambridge Analytica was accused of operating in Asia in nations such as India, Malaysia, and most infamously The Philippines. It has been leaked that CA worked on at least 4 Indian political campaigns. Particularly, CA was credited with working with the right-wing nationalist Narendra Modi.⁶⁶ While seen as a far-right nationalist leader, Modi's Gujarat Model makes use of not just the strongman politics and religious (Hindu) identity typically found in populism, but also makes use of Indian big capital as a sort of "solidifying glue" that keeps this form of nationalism together.⁶⁷ Modi primarily promised economic growth through the use of a centralized, top-down, business-friendly economic platform with its focus on Hindi identity being used as a means of associating these neoliberal practices with the identity of the common Indian voter, at the exclusion of those already disenfranchised in India.⁶⁸ SCL Group and Alexander Nix had both conducted operations in India before Modi's election in 2014.⁶⁹ Modi's opposition, the National Congress Party, has also been accused of using Cambridge Analytica.⁷⁰ It should be noted that the National Congress Party has also been accused of associating heavily with Indian big business.⁷¹ The disinformation firm also supported Najib Razak and his party in 2013, once

⁶³ Crabtree, Justina. "Here's How Cambridge Analytica Played a Dominant Role in Kenya's Chaotic 2017 Elections." CNBC.

⁶⁴ BBC. "Cambridge Analytica: The Data Firm's Global Influence." BBC News.

⁶⁵ Cadwalladr, Carole. "Cambridge Analytica's Ruthless Bid to Sway the Vote in Nigeria." The Guardian.

⁶⁶ BBC. "Cambridge Analytica: The Data Firm's Global Influence." BBC News.

⁶⁷ Sud, Nikita. "The actual Gujarat model: Authoritarianism, Capitalism, Hindu nationalism and Populism in the time of Modi." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 52. Page 121.

⁶⁸ Ibid. Page 103.

⁶⁹ Vij, Shivam, Jaithirh Rao, Zainab Sikander, and Srijay Raj. "Exclusive: The inside Story of What Cambridge Analytica Actually Did in India." ThePrint.

⁷⁰ Samanta, Pranab D. "Tell Us Who All in India Have Used Your Services: Modi Government Issues Notice to Cambridge Analytica." The Economic Times.

⁷¹ Sud, Nikita. "The actual Gujarat model: Authoritarianism, capitalism, Hindu Nationalism and Populism in the time of Modi." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 52. Page 122.

again using micro-targeting with a focus on Razak's educational reforms.⁷² It would later be leaked that Razak used CA and SCL Group for 2016 elections as well. Razak was criticized for his economic reforms and called a "neo-colonialist" by the opposition. He has been criticized for his ties to private British businesses.⁷³

The last case that should be brought up is Cambridge Analytica's contract with Rodrigo Duterte in 2016. Duterte, a far-right nationalist, contracted SCL Group to assist with electoral efforts and rebranding for an upcoming election. Much of Cambridge Analytica's work in this case was once again consistent with prior campaigns. The firm micro-targeted voters and assisted in rebranding Duterte into a more tough, militaristic leader in order to appeal to more voters. The Filipino president, who would later be known for his warm relations with Donald Trump, would deny accusations of using the firm.⁷⁴ However, it was later found that the Facebook data of over 1 million Filipino citizens had been used by Cambridge Analytica for their electoral efforts.⁷⁵ A former employee of CA, Brittany Kaiser, also claimed that Ferdinand Marcos Jr., son of former Filipino dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. and future president of The Philippines, had sought out Cambridge Analytica to assist in cleaning up not just his image but the image of his late father's dictatorship.⁷⁶

The sheer volume of Cambridge Analytica and SCL Group's operations abroad alongside the lack of information in regard to certain operations make it extremely difficult to narrow its campaigns down to a single theme. Despite this, the narratives, political actors, and operations involved are relatively consistent with CA's domestic operations. We see a repeated use of the same private data collection and micro-targeting. The misinformation firm's clients are typically right-wing and/or nationalist. Both their clients and the propaganda they spread indicates a preference for nationalism and national security. Cambridge Analytica consistently aligns with elites, being hired out by billionaires or politicians with deep connections with British or American industries. Their parent company's ties to the military-industrial complex are showcased by their support for militaristic leaders like Duterte and their association with the Israeli and American intelligence community. In this regard, it is clear that Cambridge Analytica acted the same globally as it did in the United States: It was not a mercenary unit for hire by anyone. Rather, it specifically had a set of political preferences and policies it wished to promote, and it successfully managed to acquire its clients mostly through already existing connections its parent company SCL Group had already cultivated.

The Downfall of Cambridge Analytica

In 2018, the *New York Times* and the *Guardian* revealed that the personal data of 87 million users had been taken from Facebook for use by CA. This information led to widespread public backlash that impacted how social media was perceived. In 2020, whistleblower Brittany Kaiser

⁷² BBC. "Cambridge Analytica: The Data Firm's Global Influence." BBC News.

⁷³ Report, Sarawak. "Najib 'Lied' about UMNO Links to SCL/Cambridge Analytica!" Sarawak Report.

⁷⁴ Robles, Raissa. "How Cambridge Analytica's Parent Helped Duterte Win 2016 Election." South China Morning Post.

⁷⁵ Gutierrez, Natashya. "Did Cambridge Analytica Use Filipinos' Facebook Data to Help Duterte Win?" Rappler.

⁷⁶ Ressa, Maria. "Rappler Talk: Brittany Kaiser on Protecting Your Data." RAPPLER.

released documents detailing the scope of information Cambridge Analytica had access to, alongside documents detailing the relationship between CA and Facebook. Through this leak, it was discovered that Cambridge Analytica had retrieved personal information from Facebook in an illegal manner. Facebook immediately pointed towards the fact that it had accused CA of misconduct in these leaked documents and began to frame the firm as illegal actors misusing their platform. The backlash from this very widespread debacle essentially framed how the public perceives data privacy and political misinformation. Social media sites such as Facebook faced major scrutiny from both the general public and the government, forcing companies to add more further regulation. Some states such as California passed the California Consumer Privacy Act in order to protect from data mishandling at this scale. Google would announce in the aftermath of this debacle that it would end 3rd party cookie access on its websites. Most importantly, however, the controversy surrounding Cambridge Analytica brought the acts of such disinformation firms into the public light.⁷⁷

The change promised by many of the platforms guilty of selling this data to firms like CA in the first place was hollow, however. In the wake of these controversies, Facebook promised changes to avoid such problems ever happening again. These promises never truly materialized. Facebook faced a large data breach once more in October of 2018, the same year the Cambridge Analytica discourse had taken place. Actors spreading misinformation and propaganda on the platform continue to operate. Meaningful change did not flourish, because Cambridge Analytica was not a data leak. It was Facebook acting as intended. Data was collected, sold, and then exploited. The only thing unusual about the case of Cambridge Analytica was that its actions had attracted scrutiny to Facebook for once. Just like with the case of Bell Pottinger, Cambridge Analytica was framed as a fringe, rogue actor who had taken advantage of the platform rather than a firm who had simply taken advantage of the data Facebook was taking advantage of itself.⁷⁸

Following the reveal of the extent of personal information gathered in 2018, Cambridge Analytica was already seeing the writing on the wall. CA and SCL Group would face intense public scrutiny as a response to this information. To make matters worse for them, the negative press this had attracted for Facebook meant that the tech firm quickly rallied against them as well. With the public, the government, and Facebook all lining up against the firm, Cambridge Analytica would find itself unable to get clients and with increasing legal fees. By May of 2018, only a few months after the initial report against them was released, Cambridge Analytica and SCL Group announced their closure. A government investigation, the threat of constant legal action, and one of their main sources of data turning on them left CA with no choice other than to close itself down.⁷⁹

What occurred to Cambridge Analytica is the same as what happened to Bell Pottinger: A reputational crisis forced the firm to close. Like with Bell Pottinger, this did not mean that everyone involved face any meaningful punishment. Facebook had left the crisis managing to mostly place the blame on CA. Although the firm and SCL Group were both closed, much of its

⁷⁷ Otlowski, Acadia. "Two Years Later: Cambridge Analytica and Its Impact on Data Privacy." HIPB2B.

⁷⁸ Wong, Julia Carri. "The Cambridge Analytica Scandal Changed the World – but It Didn't Change Facebook." The Guardian.

⁷⁹ Solon, Olivia. "Cambridge Analytica Closing after Facebook Data Harvesting Scandal." The Guardian.

personnel went on to form new splinter projects of similar ilk. Steve Bannon, who in many ways was the brains behind the company, would not face meaningful consequences until 2020. However, these would be in response to accusations of fraud rather than anything to do with the disinformation campaigns he led.⁸⁰ Political actors that Cambridge Analytica represented such as Trump, Cruz, and Bolsonaro are all still active in their respective political battlefields. Alexander Nix, co-founder, went on to found Emerdata, a firm with the exact same tactics and mission statement as Cambridge Analytica. He would be CEO of Emerdata in January of 2018 but resign by March. Emerdata is still active. Mark Turnbull, who had also worked for Bell Pottinger, once again moved jobs and currently works for Auspex International. Auspex is made up of former-CA employees and operates in the Middle East and Africa. The Mercer family today still remains active and continues to fund right-wing politics.⁸¹ Like in the case of Bell Pottinger, Cambridge Analytica may have fallen but its personnel simply rebranded and continued their work under different names.

Conclusion

The case of Cambridge Analytica has several significant implications. The firm's connections to SCL Group, much like Bell Pottinger's pre-digital activities, frame the current digital disinformation crisis as a perennial political issue rather than a newborn problem. As Bell Pottinger had inherited the connections of its Thatcherist founders to secure clients, Cambridge Analytica benefited from the connections to military and security actors that its parent SCL Group had cultivated for years as part of the military-industrial complex. This points to disinformation firms not being fringe actors so much as they are formed from establishment political actors seeking to carry out succinct policy goals. For Cambridge Analytica, it was to push the right-wing policies that the Mercer family and Steve Bannon wanted to promote. CA's military and defense ties allowed it to not only influence politics in the anglosphere but also let it operate all over the world, allowing it to shape policies from Latin America to Asia.

This does not go to say that CA followed the same trajectory as the firms that came before it. It revolutionized several marketing and data collection techniques and used new technology that would shape the future of computational propaganda. Psychometric marketing and micro-targeting were not used to the degree they had been before, as prior firms lacked the technology, institutions, and raw funding to carry out similar campaigns. It is because of this that the role technology and social media platforms carry out the proliferation of computational propaganda must be further examined. Even after the promises made in the aftermath of this controversy, Facebook and other similar social media websites have experienced some of the same problems. Data breaches and disinformation are still rampant. Social media companies continue to successfully frame this issue as a matter of fringe actors managing to wiggle through the cracks of their security rather than as a natural consequence of the surveillance capitalist model they profit from.

⁸⁰ BBC News. "The Downfall of Steve Bannon." BBC News.

⁸¹ Paytoncular, Celen Ebru. "Cambridge Analytica Main Players: Where Are They Now?" Women of Silicon Roundabout Conference 2022.

This self-serving framing of how disinformation firms consolidated their power has contributed to misunderstanding about the nature of where their disinformation comes from. Facebook had managed to survive the controversy by simply framing Cambridge Analytica as the irresponsible actor rather than themselves. They had essentially emerged from their troubles with nothing more than a slap on the wrist and a promise that they would increase their security. The issue being, of course, that this was never really an issue of security, but rather a side effect of their model which profits from collecting personal information. Regardless of whether or not the information was collected illegally, as Facebook claimed, it was only possible due to their platform commodifying personal data in the first place.

While the name “Cambridge Analytica” was destroyed by this controversy, its personnel were not. The founders and clients of the firm are still active today. Many of its employees went on to join other similar successor firms such as Emerdata and Auspex International. Although both companies appear to be smaller in scale, it remains clear that the masterminds behind one of the biggest political controversies of the 2010s survived relatively unscathed and continue to do their work in the same field under a different name. Similarly, other misinformation firms such as Archimedes Group, Harris Media, Bravo-Idea continue to be active on platforms such as Facebook, proving that the “increased security” Facebook put into place in the aftermath of its troubles were not as effective as they promised.

Reputational crises seem to be the best means of providing setbacks for these firms. Both Bell Pottinger and Cambridge Analytica were directly harmed through a persistent reputational crisis that they suffered from. However, it is important to note that while these crises set them back, and even if the firm is shut down, most of its key players, policies, and the institutional issues that created these actors remain. Key players like Mark Turnbull always shift to another firm. Financial backers such as the Mercers simply shift funds to the next iteration of the same project. The political actors that CA supported remain active or at least prominent. The institutional issues of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter remain an issue: So long as these companies profit from the commodification of behavioral activity, some form of companies such as Cambridge Analytica will always exist to buy that information to push their political agendas. Most importantly, CA seems to be a success, based off of their financial backer’s continued support for similar firms. Cambridge Analytica was just the beginning, as even in its closure a glut of disinformation firms remain to fill its space.

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