

# Week Round-Up: Scholarly Responses to Facebook & Cambridge Analytica

By The Editors

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This weekend, Carole Cadwalladr and Emma Graham-Harrison broke a story on Cambridge Analytica featuring an interview with former Cambridge Analytica employee Christopher Wylie.

“A whistleblower has revealed to the *Observer* how [Cambridge Analytica](#) - a company owned by the hedge fund billionaire Robert Mercer, and headed at the time by Trump’s key adviser Steve Bannon - used personal information taken without authorisation in early 2014 to build a system that could profile individual US voters, in order to target them with personalised political advertisements.

Christopher Wylie, who worked with a Cambridge University academic to obtain the data, told the *Observer*: “We exploited Facebook to harvest millions of people’s profiles. And built models to exploit what we knew about them and target their inner demons. That was the basis the entire company was built on.”

Source: [Revealed: 50 million Facebook profiles harvested for Cambridge Analytica in major data breach | The Guardian](#)

Journalists and academics, including Michael Wade, Professor of Innovation and Strategy at IMD Business School, pondered if Cambridge Analytica’s psychographics campaign could have impacted the outcome of the 2016 presidential election.

“Cambridge Analytica worked hard to develop dozens of ad variations on different political themes such as immigration, the economy and gun rights, all tailored to different personality profiles. There is no evidence at all that Clinton’s election machine had the same ability.”

Source: [Psychographics: the behavioural analysis that helped Cambridge](#)

Others, like Colin Bennett, Professor of Political Science at the University of Victoria, doubt the electoral impact of Cambridge Analytica's methods.

"There is absolutely no hard evidence that this kind of data profiling and micro-targeting had any impact on the results of the US Presidential election. On the contrary, there is now plenty of serious scholarly analysis suggesting that the value of micro-targeting to the modern campaign is, at best, very minimal and confined."

[Source: Cambridge Analytica Shows the perils of 'voter analytics' industry](#) | iPolitics

Various privacy concerns have been raised, with some arguing that Cambridge Analytica's possession of 50 million Facebook user records violated customer consent-pointing to the need for increased social media regulation.

### **"Sean Illing**

What makes this story so problematic?

### **Sally Hubbard**

The biggest problem about this is not just that people were deceived about apps they were downloading; that is, they didn't fully understand how much of their private data they were exposing. The really egregious part of it is that the Facebook friends of these app users had their data accessed as well, and they never consented to any of it.

It's surprising what's been permitted in terms of privacy regulations, especially in this country. Whether it's a third-party app that's harvesting the data or its Facebook itself, I don't think people have any understanding of the various ways in which their data is being collected. And they almost certainly have no idea how much Facebook knows about them and how their private data can be used in nefarious ways."

[Source: "It's pretty much the Wild West": why we can't trust Facebook to police itself](#) | Vox

Others, like William H. Dutton, Professor of Media and Information Policy, Michigan State University, wonder if runaway academic incentives and research ethics are to blame.

“The idea that governments can regulate their way into protecting citizen privacy is appealing, but I believe it misses the mark.

What happened with Cambridge Analytica wasn’t a breach or a leak. It was a wild violation of academic research ethics. The story is still developing, but [a college researcher has now acknowledged](#) that he harvested Facebook users’ data and gave it to another company.

A scholar and his company failed to protect sensitive research data. A university did not do enough to stop him. Regulating Facebook won’t solve these problems.”

Source: [Regulating Facebook won’t prevent data breaches](#) | The Conversation US

Some additional readings below:

[Was Cambridge Analytica a digital Svengali or snake-oil salesman? | LA Times](#)

[Facebook scandal: I am being used as scapegoat - academic who mined data | Guardian](#)

[Cambridge Analytica, Trump, and the new old fear of manipulating the masses | Nieman Lab](#)