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THE CAMBRIDGE ANALYTICA SCANDAL AND ITS IMPACT ON META

Abstract

Facebook Inc now referred to as Meta Platforms, Inc has come to dominate the social media industry through making key mergers and acquisitions (M&A) and now has the most users in the social media industry and gets the most advertising revenue. The platform has thus become a favourite among marketers and marketing agencies like Cambridge Analytica. The purpose of this report is to look at the Cambridge Analytica scandal and its privacy implications. Was the marketing communication strategy of Cambridge Analytica and its CEO Alex Nix appropriate? Were the methods deployed by Cambridge Analytica effective and if they were, where they appropriate? What of the role provided by Meta in facilitating the scandal? Has Meta managed to overcome its ethical and legal challenges? Are the steps undertaken by Meta effective in stemming the abuse of privacy and combatting manipulation through fake news and disinformation.

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1.0 Introduction

Marketing refers to the activities a company undertakes to encourage people to buy or sell a product (Barone , 2021) while digital marketing involves the use of the Internet, mobile devices, social media, search engines, and other channels to reach consumers (Twin, 2021). Digital marketing is increasingly being used to complement traditional marketing which involves the use of print media and television.

Digital advertising continues to make strides against the traditional forms of advertising. In 2018 for instance, digital advertising was 20% of the overall advertising budget in the world behind broadcast TV at 38%.

Although Digital marketing was previously dominated by search engines, social media companies have come to dominate the industry. Because of this trend, digital media in general and social media has become a key platform for marketers of all kinds including politicians. Between 2008 and 2020 the amount spent on advertising by politicians increased from a paltry $22.2 million to a massive $2.8 billion in the U.S (Statista, 2020).

Facebook Inc now referred to as Meta Platforms, Inc has come to dominate the social media industry through making key mergers and acquisitions (M&A) and now has the most users in the social media industry and gets the most advertising revenue. The platform has thus become a favourite among marketers and marketing agencies like Cambridge Analytica. Cambridge Analytica developed a data-driven psychographic profiling algorithms model (Hu, 2020) based on illegally mined data from Meta and become a favourite with politicians becoming involved in 44 political races in 2014 (Pauna and Dan, 2018), the Brexit vote and the ascendency of Donal Trump into the US presidency in 2016.

1.1 Objectives

The purpose of this report is to look at the Cambridge Analytica scandal and its privacy implications. Was the marketing communication strategy of Cambridge Analytica and its CEO Alex Nix appropriate? Were the methods deployed by Cambridge Analytica effective and if they were, where they appropriate? What of the role provided by Meta in facilitating the scandal? Has Meta managed to overcome its ethical and legal challenges because of the privacy scandal that resulted? Are the steps undertaken by Meta effective in stemming the abuse of privacy and combatting manipulation through fake news and disinformation?

1.2 Methods

Data for this report was collected by literature review through searching for keywords related to marketing, digital marketing, marketing communication strategy and branding. The researcher used marketing keywords like consumer behaviour, marketing strategies, market segmentation, social-medial advertising, micro-advertising, and targeted advertising. The researcher searched for academic records of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, Brexit, Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. The search tools used included the UEL library accessed through SharePoint, ProQuest accessed through the VLE and Google. These primary searches led to secondary search libraries such as O'Reilly for Higher Education, Ebscohost.com, ResearchGate and Academia.edu. I made use of Statista.com for additional data.

The main challenge encountered is the lack of verifiable data from independent bodies. For instance, all the data sourced even from the market and consumer data site Statista.com originate

from Meta. Secondly, Meta does not publish its advertisement records to be checked by independent bodies or sources. Thus, it is hard to know the exact number of people who were targeted by micro adverts.

2.0 Social Media Political Advertising

2.1 Digital Marketing

Since time immemorial human beings have traded with each other. Whereas in the past a market was a rudimentary place where groups met to barter goods and services, today the marketplace has evolved and includes virtual spaces. Markets are made up of individuals, institutions and corporate bodies, their needs, resources, habits and preferences (Sherlekar et al., 2010). The evolution of the marketplace has resulted in businesses becoming consumer-centric and marketing strategies knitted around consumers (Rajagopal, 2018). Most consumer-centric companies conduct extensive research on consumer buying decisions to understand what, where, how much, when, and what consumers buy (Rajagopal, 2018).

The vastness of the market and the power of an informed consumer with a myriad of choices has made companies realise that they cannot appeal to all buyers in the market, therefore, opting for market segmentation and target marketing. Market Segmentation refers to a group of people grouped for marketing purposes (Hayes, 2021) while target markets refer to groups of people with similar characteristics that a company identifies as potential customers (Investopedia, 2022). Segmentation can be done by considering five major variables: demographic, geographic, socioeconomic, psychographic, and behavioural (Porral and Stanton, 2018). After segmentation,

differentiated marketing strategies can be developed and implemented for each, including mass marketing, micro-marketing and niche marketing.

The evolution of marketing from the 1950s when consumers were targeted using mass advertising in print and television to today when consumers are targeted using tailor-made adverts has been greatly driven by technology. The advent of the internet has given birth to the rise of digital advertising and the mass adoption of social media. As a result, marketing is increasingly geared towards target marketing and market segmentation (Sherlekar et al., 2010) and the vehicle of choice is digital marketing through mobile devices, social media, search engines, and other digital channels (Barone, 2021).

2.2 Meta Platforms, Inc

Meta started as a Harvard website in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg (Phillips, 2007) meant for friends to connect before expanding to other colleges and eventually it was opened to everyone in 2006. Meta funded its growth by partnering with investors beginning with an initial investment of $500,001 by Peter Thiel in 2004 (Pepitone, 2012), a Series A funding of $12.7 million from Accel Investment (Accel.com, 2012) in 2005, a Series B funding of $27.5 million made by Greylock investment (Archive.org, 2021) in 2006 and lastly a Serie C funding made by Microsoft (Dunlop, 2012) of $240 million in 2007.

The funding enabled Meta to become dominant in the social media space by making strategic M&A's of key social media companies like FriendFeed, Octazen Solutions, Divvyshot, Instagram (Swartz, 2012), Storylane, Onavo, WhatsApp (Dassanayake, 2014) and Oculus (Meta,2014) resulting in Facebook having the most social media users at 2.9 billion, WhatsApp

the third most social media users at 2 billion, Instagram the fourth most users at 1.4 billion and lastly Facebook Messenger the seventh most populous social media platform with 988 million users (DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, 2013).

Meta's business model was and is primarily centred around user growth (Auletta, 2011). In 2008, Sheryl Sandberg a former Google executive was hired, and she developed Meta's current advertising strategy based on targeted markets and clicks (Auletta, 2011; Issie Lapowsky, 2019) and as a result advertisement revenue increased from $1,869 billion in 2010 to $114,934 billion in 2021 (Statista, 2021) making up 98% of the company's revenue (Franek, 2021). In 2019, the company held a 23% market share for ad revenue in the US, behind only Google with a 32% share (Franek, 2021). In essence, the company makes money by auctioning off space for ads within its users' feeds and stories on Facebook and Instagram (Franek, 2021) thus making it very attractive to advertisers like Cambridge Analytica.

2.3 Cambridge Analytica

Cambridge Analytica was founded by James Ashburner Nix as a subsidiary of the SCL Group, a company active in military and political affairs and had the conservative hedge fund billionaire Robert Mercer as its funder (Osborne, 2018). Like its parent company, Cambridge Analytica's services were predominantly to politicians and political parties whom it promised the ability to "change audience behaviour" through data (Cambridge Analytica, 2018; Osborne, 2018).

The scandal erupted in 2018 after the Guardian and the New York Times jointly published a news story entitled "Revealed: 50 million Facebook profiles harvested for Cambridge Analytica in major data breach" (Afriat et al., 2020; Graham-Harrison and Cadwalladr, 2018). The data

was illegally harvested through an app called "This Is Your Digital Life" developed by data scientist Aleksandr Kogan and his company Global Science Research in 2013 (Afriat et al., 2020). Although only 270,000 users consented to the app using their data, the data scientists accessed the information of 87 million Facebook users through their friends' feeds.

2.4 James Ashburner Nix

According to Dragilev, companies or individuals use marketing communications strategies to reach their target markets through a variety of communication methods and it includes what is to be said, where it is to be said, and to whom it is reaching. A good communication strategy according to Leonard can be summarized in four tenets which includes understanding your demographics, defining your unique selling proposition, being consistent in messaging and using the right marketing avenues.

James Ashburner Nix the CEO of CA seemed to be doing the right thing initially because before the scandal he was named as one of the “25 Geniuses Who are Actually Making the Future Happen Now” by Wired magazine and he scored three Republican presidential campaigns including Donald Trumps, Ted Cruz and neurosurgeon Ben Carson (Schechner, 2018). Cambridge Analytica paid a massive amount of $52 million in 2015 and 2016 to its UK subsidiary SCL Elections Ltd indicating that it was reaping the financial rewards of its happy clientele (Schechner, 2018). The crux of Nix's sales pitch, according to Schechner, was two key points: 1) Cambridge Analytica has a way to use publicly available data on demographics, purchases, and voting history to predict an individual's personality; and 2) Cambridge Analytica can adjust ads to appeal to specific personality types. In essence, he claimed Cambridge

Analytica could use targeted ads to persuade voters to vote for a candidate. Nic Cheeseman, Professor of Democracy at the University of Birmingham describes the company as being a rogue PR firm that exaggerates its services to get lucrative contracts from governments seeking to stay in power (Lynch, Willis and Cheeseman, 2018; Laterza, 2018).

The exaggerations and claims eventually proved to be Nix's and Cambridge Analytica's underdoing. Ted Cruz's campaign was for example disappointed that the modelling was less than 60% accurate (Schechner, 2018). In the 2016 presidential campaign of Donald Trump, Cambridge Analytica used $5 million of the $9 million it was paid for television adverts as opposed to micro-targeted social media adverts to the displeasure of some within Trumps' campaign team (Schechner, 2018). Cambridge Analytica's reputation was finally destroyed by the airing of recordings in which Nix boasted about using people for information and entrapping political opponents with bribes and sex (Ballhaus, 2018; The Economist, 2018).

In conclusion, despite the exaggerations, as long as Nix could deliver part of his promises to his clientele who seemed to be a compromised bunch of politicians without drawing attention to himself, his company Cambridge Analytica and his political clientele, his company could have continued generating income and stayed afloat. The Cambridge Analytica scandal brought attention to Nix and his company resulting in his suspension, the shunning of his company as a result of the negative public attention, and scrutiny from policymakers, regulatory bodies and politicians alike.

2.5 Cambridge Analytica and Trump's 2016 Presidential Campaign

Although social media advertising only makes up 3% of Meta's total advertising revenue (The Economist, 2018) its impact cannot be underestimated considering the thin margins needed to win elections in the United States and the current trend of fewer Americans relying on Cable and Local TV for news vis a vis an increased reliance on social media for news (OpenMind, 2019). In 2016, 57% of the public got news from television, compared with 38% from online sources while in 2017, television's regular audience dropped to 50%, as opposed to online news audiences reaching 43% of the public (OpenMind, 2019). According to Pew Research Center research, 68% of American adults got news occasionally via social media, and 20% received news frequently through social media in 2018 (Shearer and Matsa, cited in OpenMind, 2019).

In 2008, Barack Obama's social media strategy changed the structure of campaigning by introducing social media for the first-time movement (OpenMind, 2019) with strong digital grassroots mobilization (Bimber, cited in OpenMind, 2019). By 2014 the power of social media campaigning was fully being harnessed by Cambridge Analytica becoming involved in as many as 44 political campaigns (Pauna and Dan, 2018). In 2015 Cambridge Analytica was involved with Ted Cruz who paid $5.8 million in services after being assured that the data used was collected legally (Samsel and Svitek, 2018).

Cambridge Analytica's campaign for Donald Trump was based on six personality profiles neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness, extraversion and conscientiousness (Merrill and Goldhill, 2020) and delivered through targeted ads. Cambridge Analytica displayed ads depicting the need for strength and stability in US leadership in contrast to the threat of chaos abroad, based on neuroticism, a measure of one's tendency to worry (Merrill and Goldhill, 2020).

Ads promoting national security were shown to people who value community and societal needs depicting the agreeableness profile (Merrill and Goldhill, 2020). Since people with high levels of openness tend to gravitate toward new ideas and change and have an interest in the wider world, ads depicting national security and military funding were shown to them (Merrill and Goldhill, 2020). Ads about Syrian refugees in need of protection were shown to people with high extraversion scores who admire energetic, decisive actions (Merrill and Goldhill, 2020). Lastly, conscientious people are courteous, orderly, and traditional, and they admire those qualities in their leaders, and they were thus shown ads depicting those qualities (Merrill and Goldhill, 2020).

Whereas the above profiling looks like an advertising breakthrough, critics contend that digital political marketing tools are also used for deceptive and coercive ends through targeted ads that only appear to select individuals (Bakir, 2020). The preferred method of deceptive and coercive ads is through Fake News articles and videos. According to Silverman, most popular fake news stories were more widely shared on Facebook than most popular mainstream and verifiable news stories. He also argued that most people who see fake news stories report that they believe them and that most fake news stories tended to favour Trump over Clinton (Silverman, Cited in Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). In an analysis of fake news stories, researchers Allcott and Gentzkow found that they were widely shared and heavily inclined in favour of Trump with 115 pro-Trump stories shared on Facebook a total of 30 million times and 41 pro-Clinton stories shared a total of 7.6 million times.

Critics have argued that it is almost impossible to quantify the accuracy of Cambridge Analytica's claims and the success of their psychographic profiling methods and the extent to

which they influenced the 2016 elections in favour of Trump. This is because Individuals may have distorted views of their characteristics, or they may misrepresent themselves when completing personality questionnaires meaning that the ad tailored towards an individual wouldn't be accurate (Stone et al, cited in Hinds, Williams and Joinson, 2020). It is also possible that the data collected by the app was not representative of a person's attributes as his preferences may have changed with time (Hinds, Williams and Joinson, 2020).

In the 2020 presidential race, Trump spent more on Digital advertising (47.30%) as opposed to Broadcast TV (41%) in contrast to current president Joe Biden who spent 44.20% on Broadcast TV and only 29.40% on Digital advertising (Wesleyan Media Project, 2020). Indeed, Donald Trump outspent Joe Biden on Facebook and Google by a massive $37 million (Wesleyan Media Project, 2020). This appears to prove that the work Cambridge Analytica undertook for him in 2016 paid off.

In conclusion, although it was within the company's rights to provide work for the Trump 2016 presidential campaign, its means appear to be the problem. Without Cambridge Analytica availing all their adverts and the corresponding data available to independent researchers to independently verify their profiling methods and psychographic profiling algorithms models then it is safe to conclude that they might have used people's fears through fake news and deception to manipulate voters.

2.6 Meta and Privacy

The ethical violations of privacy by Cambridge Analytica cannot be ignored, even if its targeted ads were based on profiling and its psychographic profiling algorithms were not manipulated.

The company abused privacy by collecting data without consent by manipulating the loopholes of Meta's privacy policy (Revell, 2018).

Meta has always branded itself as a company whose "mission is to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together" (Fb.com, 2016) and was described by Sandberg when she joined the company from Google as primarily being developed as a cool site whose users considered their pages to be private (Auletta, 2011). This image was raptured by the Cambridge Analytica scandal resulting in Meta's shares plummeting by 8.5% erasing $45 billion of the company's value (The Economist, 2018). The Ponemon Institute found out that the company's trust levels plummeted by 66% compared to the previous year to only 27% (The Economist, 2018). The resultant backlash was also political, with Mark Zuckerberg the CEO being dragged before senate committees and ultimately Facebook being fined $5bn by the Federal Trade Commission in 2019 (Franek, 2021).

Although Meta eventually banned Cambridge Analytica from the platform, their initial responses drew in a lot of criticism as they attempted to muzzle The Guardian from reporting about the scandal. Mark Zuckerberg apologised for the scandal and promised to audit third-party organisations. Spam busting features were launched on Facebook advertising putting restraints in place to clamp down on "spam ads" on the platform (The Economist, 2018). Meta partnered with news agencies and fact-checking organisations to stem the tide of fake news by labelling articles as false or misleading. The project was first launched in December 2016 with five American fact-checkers (Funke, 2019) but has expanded to 88 fact-checking organisations in every continent in 86 languages (Meta, 2016). Other features introduced include allowing users to report articles they considered false, spam or insensitive (Meta, 2016). Meta claims the fact-

checking features and branding of news items as fake or misleading leads to 80% fewer impressions suggesting that the interventions work (Meta, 2016).

The fact that the partnership with fact-checking organisations seems to be gathering pace suggests that the program works and is beneficial to both parties. The number of people who logged into Meta's online platforms at least once a month jumped 9% to 2.32 billion people after the scandal (BBC, 2019). Indeed, Meta's Monthly Active Users (MAU) numbers increased by a whopping 55% between 2016 and 2021 from 1.8 billion users to 2.8 billion users (Statista, 2021). Moreover, the firm's scandals failed to deter advertisers with annual revenues increased by 30% following the scandal (The Economist, 2018). Between 2016 and 2020, Meta's advertising revenue increased by 210% from $26.885 billion to $84.169 billion (Statista, 2020).

Researchers have been baffled by this trend and have attempted to explain it as privacy fatigue a phenomenon that occurs when privacy controls are complex or too difficult to keep track (Duggan and Smith, cited in Hinds, Williams and Joinson, 2020), and *privacy paradox* which results after users' privacy concerns fail to match their behaviour (Barnes, cited in Hinds, Williams and Joinson, 2020; Norberg et al., cited in Hinds, Williams and Joinson, 2020). Whereas this may be the case, it could also happen to be that the self-corrective measures that Meta put in place work and users have forgiven the company. Additionally, it might also be that users and advertisers find the brand too appealing and are therefore more inclined to forget and forgive its faults.

3.0 Conclusion

The report was made to look Cambridge Analytica scandal and its privacy implications by looking at the marketing communication strategy of Cambridge Analytica and its CEO Alex Nix and determine whether they were appropriate. It was also made to look at the threat posed on Meta's brand by the scandal and whether the company addressed the concerns of the public and reversed the damages to its brand.

3.1 Findings

1. The marketing communication strategy of Cambridge Analytica through its CEO Alex Nix was initially successful. However, with time the communication strategy was revealed to be dishonest and based on deception. Alex Nix's methods bordered on criminality and operated within the boundaries of ethics and this may have not been a problem with his clients until the public got wind of them. A company's marketing communication strategy should, therefore, be law-abiding to reap the most benefits.

2. Although the work provided for the Trump 2016 presidential campaign appears to be groundbreaking based on the six profiling methods that informed their targeted ads and the psychographic profiling algorithms models that were used, it has to be treated with suspicion unless the data is availed to the public and the adverts scrutinised. This is because the targeted ads could have been based on stocking up people's fears and prejudices and fake news and deception to manipulate voters.

3. Meta's user numbers continue to increase based on the MAU numbers. Its advertising revenue likewise continues to increase despite the new privacy policies and restrictions

suggesting that the self-corrective measures put in place have worked in reversing the damages to the company's brand and image.

3.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions in this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Companies should base their marketing communication strategy on truth and not deception. It pays for a company to be more ethical and law-abiding than unethical.
2. Privacy laws should be strengthened to address digital marketing.
3. New laws should be made to address big data and to prevent companies from abusing and manipulating the public
4. Partnerships should be encouraged across industries when it pertains to new disrupt entrants and technologies.

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