Silicon Valley Exposed - The Social-Media Panic

By MICHAEL BRENDAN DOUGHERTY

CEO of Cambridge Analytica, Alexander Nix, speaks during the Web Summit, Europe's biggest tech conference, in Lisbon, Portugal on November 9, 2017. (Pedro Nunes/Reuters)

All that matters to the center-Left is whether Silicon Valley will keep them in power.

‘Make no mistake: 2016 will never happen again.” Historians are not always reliable predictors of the future, but Niall Ferguson’s analysis of how Silicon Valley and the center-Left would react to the successive and surprise victories of Brexit and Donald Trump is proving correct. Conservatives and populists will not be allowed to use the same tools as Democrats and liberals again, or at least not use them effectively.

Silicon Valley is working with its media and governmental critics to limit the damage to the center-Left going forward. You can see the dynamic in the way that the media generates a moral panic out of stories about how Brexit and the Trump election happened, and the way Silicon Valley responds. Fake news becomes a problem, and Silicon Valley responds by hiring progressive journalists as censors. I mean “fact-checkers.” You can see it in the demonetization of YouTube videos. Or in the new sets of regulation being imposed in European countries that deputize the social-media networks themselves as an all seeing social censor.

The latest moral panic is about Cambridge Analytica, a data and media consultancy run by the Mercer family that did a little work with the Trump campaign, after it had done work with the Ted Cruz campaign. A former employee came forward to reveal what the *Guardian* called “Steve Bannon’s psychological warfare tool.” The article explains that “Facebook was hijacked, repurposed to become a

theatre of war," that "it became a launchpad for what seems to be an extraordinary attack on the U.S.'s democratic process." Chris Wylie, the whistleblower, said he "broke" Facebook.

Cambridge Analytica has been accused of misrepresenting the purpose of some of its data mining, which yielded something like 30 million Facebook profiles it could comb for data. It is alleged not to have deleted data on Facebook's request. It was promptly kicked off Facebook after the *Guardian* and *New York Time*s stories.

Mashable ran an editorial arguing that it was time to protect yourself and your friends, who were made vulnerable to manipulation. In a think piece for *The Atlantic*, Alexis Madrigal writes, "If Cambridge Analytica's targeted advertising works, people worry they could be manipulated with information — or even thoughts — that they did not consent to giving anyone."

Where were these worries four years ago for the much larger and arguably more manipulative effort by the Obama campaign?

Instead of using a personality quiz, the Obama campaign merely got a portion of its core supporters to use their Facebook profiles to log into a campaign site. Then they used well-tested techniques of gaining consent from that user to harvest all their friends' data. Sasha Issenberg gushed about how the Obama campaign used the same permissions structure of Facebook to extract the data of scores of millions of Facebook users who were unaware of what was happening to them. Combining Facebook data with other sources such as voter-registration rolls, Issenberg wrote, generated "a new political currency that predicted the behavior of individual humans. The campaign didn't just know who you were; it knew exactly how it could turn you into the type of person it wanted you to be."

The level of data sophistication was so intense that Issenberg could describe it this way:

> Obama's campaign began the election year confident it knew the name of every one of the 69,456,897 Americans whose votes had put him in the White House. They may have cast those votes by secret ballot, but Obama's analysts could look at the Democrats' vote totals in each precinct and identify the people most likely to have backed him. Pundits talked in the abstract about reassembling Obama's 2008 coalition. But within the campaign, the goal was literal. They would reassemble the coalition, one by one, through personal contacts.

Today's Cambridge Analytica scandal causes our tech chin-strokers to worry about "information" you did not consent to share, but the Obama team created social interactions you wouldn't have had. They didn't just build a psychological profile of persuadable voters, and algorithmically determine ways of persuading them, but actually encouraged particular friends — ones the campaign had profiled as influencers — to reach out to them personally. In a post-election interview, the campaign's digital director Teddy Goff explained the strategy: "People don't trust campaigns. They don't even trust media organizations," he told *Time*'s Michael Sherer, "Who do they trust? Their friends?" This level of manipulation was celebrated in the press.

How did Facebook react to the much larger data harvesting of the Obama campaign? The *New York Times* reported itout, in a feature hailing Obama's digital masterminds:

> The campaign's exhaustive use of Facebook triggered the site's internal safeguards. "It was more like we blew through an alarm that their engineers hadn't planned for or knew about," said [Will] St. Clair, who had been working at a small firm in Chicago and joined the campaign at the suggestion of a friend. "They'd sigh and say, 'You can do this as long as you stop doing it on Nov. 7.' "

In other words, Silicon Valley is just making up the rules as they go along. Some large-scale data harvesting and social manipulation is okay until the election. Some of it becomes not okay in retrospect. They sigh and say okay so long as Obama wins. When Clinton loses, they effectively call a code red.

> The efforts to criminalize conservative groups who use social media are an attempt to put the new class filter back on.

At the macro level, mass broadcast media was a boon to the Left and center-Left. It allowed a new class of people to shape public opinion as never before. But the appearance of social media represented the return of the repressed. It allowed common conservatives and populists to broadcast their own views, and in some sense legitimate them within their social circle. The efforts to criminalize conservative groups who use social media, and legally suppress citizens' openly sharing unapproved views, are an attempt to put the new class filter back on.

Conservative activists and publishers need to think long and hard about how to reach their audience when the tech giants are proving themselves willing to filter out their content, and

when they've come up with tools for alternately repressing speech and enabling political manipulation, so long as it goes the right way.

If I can add my own prediction to Ferguson's it would be this. To the center-Left, it doesn't matter how much Silicon Valley's tools enable extremists in the Third World, or how much wealth they extract from the public treasuries through their tax-sheltering arrangements. All that matters is that the new tools continue to keep the center-Left in power, and make them look glamorous and smart. This is a deal that Silicon Valley will take.

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