

The Cambridge Analytica scandal, Facebook and deleting your account

 By [Andy Walker](#)

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So people are talking about Facebook a lot this week. You know, that social network that only Baby Boomers seem to use now? It somehow has more than two-billion users at present, and that number for data collection firms is a goldmine just waiting to be ravaged.



Feature image © – [Merneburn](#)

Speaking of which, one particular company through a series of ducks, dips, dives and dodges, has garnered a hefty slice of this information.

Here's what you need to know about the Cambridge Analytica and Facebook data siphoning fiasco.

What is Cambridge Analytica?

Cambridge Analytica is a privately-owned firm based in London, England, but has satellite offices in Malaysia, Brazil, and the US. It was created on the final day of 2013, and focusses on data collection and analytics for companies (doing, uh, data things) and politicians running election campaigns.

It's the latter that has people outraged this week.

"CA Political has redefined the relationship between data and campaigns. By knowing your electorate better, you can achieve greater influence while lowering overall costs," [it writes](#) on its website.

Cambridge Analytica came to prominence in 2015 when it aided the data collection for Ted Cruz's presidential campaign (for which [it was paid US\\$750 000](#)). Cruz, if you remember correctly, still lost. But in 2016, it finally found a winner with then-Republican candidate Donald Trump. It was a force behind his presidential campaign.

The firm also reportedly played a role during the 2016 Brexit referendum, and a number of other campaigns closer to home. But we'll get into those a little later.

Other notables includes its staffers. Steve Bannon, former Chief Strategist of the Trump administration and co-founder of right-wing publication Breitbart, was Cambridge Analytica's vice president.

And in terms of investment, Republican donor Robert Mercer dropped cash into Cambridge Analytica's coffers too.

What did it do, and how was Facebook involved?

On 17 March 2018, the *New York Times* and the UK's *The Observer* published a joint report revealing that Cambridge Analytica collected the data of some 50-million users on Facebook through an app.

Not an Android or iOS app; an app from within Facebook, like those annoying quizzes, games and surveys.

The app dubbed "*thisisyourdigitallife*" was billed as a personality profile, and allowed its creator, Russian Cambridge University professor Aleksandr Kogan, to garner data, and pass it on to Cambridge Analytica through its owner Strategic Communication Laboratories (SCL).

The basis of apps within Facebook was made possible in 2007, when the company launched the Facebook Platform; effectively a framework on which apps can be built and can make use of social information in your profile.

Facebook didn't break the news to the publications, and instead it was whistleblower and former Cambridge Analytica contractor Christopher Wylie who revealed the trail of spilled data on the floor.

"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," Wylie told *The Observer*.

How many users have been affected?

Although the app was only downloaded by 270,000 users according to Facebook, the app could gain data from users' friends if their Facebook privacy settings allowed. Most estimates suggest that 50-million Facebook users have been targeted, and sheds light on how your friends on the social network can also be your worst enemies.

Why was 'this' instance of data collection wrong?

While collecting data through social media activity is nothing new — hell, Facebook does it as it chases you across the web with those advertising offers — this particular collection of data was enabled through an academic license awarded to Kogan.

But it wasn't entirely used for academic purposes.

Facebook in a [statement](#) also resisted calling the scam a "data breach" as referred to by the *New York Times* and *The*

Observer, but failed to suggest that it was in control or aware of the situation prior to the report's surfacing.

Nevertheless, it did say that Kogan violated the firm's Platform Policies by "passing data from an app that was using Facebook Login to SCL/Cambridge Analytica, a firm that does political, government and military work around the globe".

"Although Kogan gained access to this information in a legitimate way and through the proper channels that governed all developers on Facebook at that time, he did not subsequently abide by our rules. By passing information on to a third party, including SCL/Cambridge Analytica and Christopher Wylie of Eunoia Technologies, he violated our platform policies," Facebook continued.

While Cambridge Analytica's role can't be downplayed, Facebook ultimately awarded Kogan the academic license after he requested it from the social network. And it [failed to tell users that their data was at risk](#).

Who is Facebook blaming?

Uh, definitely not Facebook.

Instead, the company is pointing the finger at every other party but itself, including users.

"Aleksandr Kogan requested and gained access to information from users who chose to sign up to his app, and everyone involved gave their consent. People knowingly provided their information, no systems were infiltrated, and no passwords or sensitive pieces of information were stolen or hacked," [it victim blamed](#).

Facebook also called out Kogan, Cambridge Analytica and whistleblower Wylie.

“ Suspended by [@facebook](#). For blowing the whistle. On something they have known privately for 2 years. [pic.twitter.com/iSu6VwqUdG](#)— Christopher Wylie (@chrisinsilico) [March 18, 2018](#) ”

It has since suspended Wylie's Facebook account, and barred Cambridge Analytica and related parties from the social network.

Cambridge Analytica is, however, pleading its innocence.

“ Cambridge Analytica fully complies with Facebook's terms of service. We are in touch with Facebook now and can confirm that we do not hold or use any data from profiles <https://t.co/YD8kFXCFTL>— Cambridge Analytica (@CamAnalytica) [March 17, 2018](#) ”

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What about Mark Zuckerberg?

Jessie Eisenberg had Justin Timberlake to lean on in *The Social Network*, but Mark Zuckerberg does what he always does: [he wrote a Facebook post](#).

The founder and CEO however did take full responsibility for the issue, going against the statement mentioned in the previous section, written by Paul Grewal, Facebook's VP and deputy general counsel.

"I started Facebook, and at the end of the day I'm responsible for what happens on our platform. I'm serious about doing what it takes to protect our community," Zuckerberg wrote.

"We have a responsibility to protect your data, and if we can't then we don't deserve to serve you."

How are Facebook users responding?

Even with this heartfelt post published, Facebook users are turning on the social network.

The hashtag [#DeleteFacebook](#) began trending this week on Twitter after the story broke, as users across the world were made aware of the scandal.

Prominent tech figures like WhatsApp co-founder Brian Acton led the call. That's a bold move Cotton, especially considering that WhatsApp is owned by Facebook.

“ It is time. [#deletefacebook](#)— Brian Acton (@brianacton) [March 20, 2018](#) ”

Whistleblower and all-round tech skeptic Edward Snowden called Facebook “accomplices” in a scathing tweet.

“Facebook makes their money by exploiting and selling intimate details about the private lives of millions, far beyond the scant details you voluntarily post. They are not victims. They are accomplices,” he wrote.

“ Facebook makes their money by exploiting and selling intimate details about the private lives of millions, far beyond the scant details you voluntarily post. They are not victims. They are accomplices. <https://t.co/mRkRKxsBcw>— Edward Snowden (@Snowden) [March 17, 2018](#) ”

Others Twitter users called into question Facebook's ability to track users across the web.

“ Ever notice that when you look up something on the internet, let's say cars for sale or hotels, you start getting Facebook ads on the same subject? Facebook tracks you even when you're not on Facebook. [#DeleteFacebook](#)— Viva La Resistance (@TrumpsBrain) [March 22, 2018](#) ”

Some noted that you should delete all Facebook services if you “really and honestly believe in this #DeleteFacebook” hashtag.

“ You should also delete Whatsapp and Instagram if you really and honestly believe in this [#DeleteFacebook](#) movement/trend.— Nayantara Rai (@NayantaraRai) [March 21, 2018](#) ”

Others wondered what good deleting Facebook now, over 13 years since its inception, would do.

Should I delete my Facebook account?

So, should you?

That's a question that could be covered in its own detailed article, but here's what we say.

“If former Facebook executives, including the co-founder of WhatsApp, are saying you should delete Facebook, well... that says it all, doesn't it?” Gearburn editor Hadlee Simons tells me.

“It's given me pause for thought because this misuse of data was so blatant. Our social media profiles are essentially being weaponised and Facebook was apparently okay with it — until negative press occurred.”

Ventureburn's Daniel Mpala shares the same views.

“The whole Cambridge Analytica scandal shows that Facebook does not have control over data that outside developers have access to. What's worrying is Facebook has rules on data but it seems the company is not actively enforcing them. The Cambridge Analytica incident is the only one that's come to the fore, what about the other stuff we don't yet know about?”

"I am going to be taking heed of Brian Acton's comments and will delete my account," he concludes.

For me, I have to agree with my colleagues. But the question then is, what about your other social networks?

Cambridge Analytica has also influenced elections [closer to home](#) in both Nigeria and [Kenya](#).

How long until, say, South Africa is added to the growing list?

How can I delete my Facebook account?

There are two very clear distinctions you need to understand when it comes to deleting your Facebook account. You can either "disable" your account, which leaves it alive for when you feel the urge to post again but removes you from timelines, searches and renders your profile page invisible to others.

And then there's actually deleting your account, which renders your account completely trashed and unrecoverable but only after a "a few days after it's requested".

To delete your account, [visit this link](#).

It will take up to 90 days for Facebook to realise that you're serious, and to scrub its servers of "all of the things you've posted, like your photos, status updates or other data stored in backup systems."

You may want to download a copy of your data before you delete you account. Head over to "Settings", "General Account Settings" and click "Download a copy of your Facebook data".

If I don't want to delete Facebook, how can I stop it from garnering information about me?

If you can't delete your account — perhaps you manage a business page — we suggest you remove all apps from your Facebook account. Yes, that includes Farmville, and any other game you have installed to your profile.

Be sure to remove Facebook's access to your other services as well, including services like Zomato and others.

If you don't want Facebook to track you across the web, log in from the same browser or browser profile every day, and delete the cache and cookies at the end of each session. Don't use this browser for anything else.

Additionally, you may want to run a tracking bug blocker or cookie cleanup extension to prohibit Facebook from suggesting those shoes you really want in advertisements.

Or, hell, if you can just stop using the internet entirely. Throw all your hardware in a dumpster. Set it on fire. And live out the remainder of your life deep the forest armed with a sharp stick.

Even if you can stop Facebook from following you around the internet, it doesn't mean that other companies won't (or don't) take its place.

ABOUT ANDY WALKER

Camper by day, run-and-gunner by night, Andy is editor at Merneburn and prefers his toast like his coffee -- dark and crunchy. Specialising in spotting the next big Instagram cat star, Andy also dabbles in smartphone and game reviews over on Gearburn.

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