

JFS Model United Nations

Friday 8th June



***Cambridge Analytica poisoned Kenya's democracy –
Washington Post***

Help reading this article: This article is about how an organisation was accused of using people's personal data to target advertising at them, which would have influenced their voting choices. In reading this article think about whether this is fair or correct.

No one company should have the power to manipulate the psychology of an entire country. We now know that Cambridge Analytica has done just that — not just in the United States, but also in the fragile political systems of the global south.

What has happened in Kenya? The company mined Kenyan voters' data to help President Uhuru Kenyatta win disputed elections. Over two presidential election cycles, it presided over some of the darkest and most vicious campaigns Kenya has ever seen. Cambridge Analytica confirmed its involvement to an undercover reporter for Britain's Channel 4, which released an exposé on Monday. Executives were taped saying that they ran “just about every element” of Kenyatta's campaign in 2013 and 2017, including rebranding his party twice, and writing the campaign's manifesto and speeches. The firm also did “two rounds of 50,000 surveys.”

What was wrong about the President's actions? In Kenya, Kenyatta (the President) and his deputy William Ruto breathlessly complained about Western imperialism and neo-colonialism* while reportedly paying a Western firm millions of dollars to get them elected. The rich irony of this shameless doublespeak aside, there are still many unanswered questions about how far Cambridge Analytica's work went and what ethical boundaries were breached.

*neo-colonialism – the idea that richer countries continue to control poorer countries.

What did Cambridge Analytica actually do? What we know is that Cambridge Analytica helped hijack Kenya's democracy. It manipulated voters with apocalyptic attack ads and smeared Kenyatta's opponent Raila Odinga as violent, corrupt and dangerous. The two rivals might have since reconciled with a famous handshake, but that cannot erase the fact that innocent lives were lost because of a divisive campaign or that tribal rifts were opened with long-lasting effects. It is infuriating to hear the company's embattled and now-suspended CEO, Alexander Nix, flippantly admit that things “don't necessarily need to be true as long as they are believed.” This is data neocolonialism, the same foreign interference Kenyatta pretended to be against.

What we know is that Cambridge Analytica helped hijack Kenya's democracy. It manipulated voters with apocalyptic attack ads and smeared Kenyatta's opponent Raila Odinga as violent, corrupt and dangerous,” Kenyan journalist Larry Madowo concluded in a furious op-ed for The Washington Post. “The two rivals might have since reconciled with a famous handshake, but that cannot erase the fact that innocent lives were lost because of a divisive campaign or that tribal rifts were opened with long-lasting effects. It is infuriating to hear the company's embattled and now-suspended CEO, Alexander Nix, flippantly admit that things 'don't necessarily need to be true as long as they are believed.' This is data neocolonialism, the same foreign interference Kenyatta pretended to be against.”

The political consulting problem is more complex because the solution lies in changing the political culture around the world. It's about destroying the idea that it's okay to leave moral values behind when flying into developing countries to tilt the balance of political power towards tyranny. It lies in part in enforcing laws that restrict the way political parties in the developing world spend money. It lies in creating a culture that sees African people as more than an inconvenience on the way to power. The rhetoric around the 2017 election in Kenya has damaged lives and livelihoods. Fear of ethnic violence was so high that certain neighbourhoods were emptied out. Personal

JFS Model United Nations

Friday 8th June



relationships have been irreparably damaged. None of this is illegal per se, but it is deeply immoral, and this needs to count for something.

Where else in the world have Cambridge Analytical acted? According to the New York Times, Cambridge Analytica experimented abroad, including in the Caribbean and Africa, where “privacy rules are lax or nonexistent.” Politicians employing its parent company, SCL Group, were “happy to provide government-held data, according to former employees.” Cambridge Analytica proudly touts case studies in Thailand, South Africa, India, Indonesia, and Trinidad and Tobago on its website. A Cambridge Analytica employee said in the Channel 4 exposé that it has also worked in Mexico and Malaysia and was expanding to Brazil and China.

Is it different when this happens in Kenya to when it happens in the USA?: In these developing countries, there has been no word about sanctions or even a demand for answers from Cambridge Analytica. Besides, those who are supposed to penalize the offending companies would likely have the privilege of being the direct beneficiaries of its nefarious operations. Is it illegal in the country for which the activities were undertaken? Bribery and prostitution are, perhaps, but in the absence of a strong data protection laws in Kenya, strictly speaking, data mining is not illegal. In fact, private electronic communications are constantly interfered with - phones are bugged, emails monitored - often by the government itself and with no consequences for perpetrators. LGBT rights organisations have cases where clients are being blackmailed with being outed based on their private communications. Nor is there a culture of responsible data management. Companies using social media for customer service routinely reveal private customer information online without consent.

Late last year it emerged that the treasury could not identify the private company that had been collecting revenue for the e-Citizen platform, which collects millions of terabytes of personal identity information on anyone who needs to get a new driver's license, buy a car, register to vote, or register a business. No one has been charged with any offence in this regard. Coincidentally, the Kenyan parliament is debating the Cyber Crimes bill this week, but typical of the National Assembly in Kenya, even in the shadow of these devastating revelations, the focus of the debates has been only on how data insecurity affects members of parliament and how MPs can be protected from citizens. Kenyan politicians still don't get it. Or maybe they do, and this is wilful ignorance on their part to create a legal framework that allows them to punish their opponents but still facilitate the kind of manipulation that CA is accused of perpetrating over the last six years. After all, the Channel 4's undercover investigation affirms that Kenya is CA's biggest success story - the one they use to lure in politicians who want a shortcut to power. CA twice built Kenya's ruling party in a London boardroom on the back of a legal and moral vacuum and they are proud of it.

What is the role of social media companies? Facebook, Twitter, Google and other technology companies that facilitate or amplify work by outfits such as Cambridge Analytica are complicit in poisoning democracies around the world. In Sri Lanka, Facebook has been accused of fanning hate speech that led to anti-Muslim riots, forcing the country to ban social media after protests left at least two people dead. U.N. officials investigating claims of genocide in Burma, also known as Myanmar, say Facebook was used to spread vitriol against Rohingya Muslims. A political battle in Cambodia between a leading opposition figure and the country's authoritarian prime minister over accusations of counterfeit “likes” on Facebook pages has spilled into a U.S. court. The Somalia-based terrorist group Al-Shabab live-tweeted its attack of the Westgate mall in Nairobi in 2013, leaving Twitter embarrassed and family members in anguish.

Conclusion : While Cambridge Analytica may face sanctions on both sides of the Atlantic, it will likely still get away with mischief and dangerous mind games in Africa, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. Regulators in those countries must step up to hold companies like this accountable or kick them out completely. Kenyans must demand transparency and a full investigation. Sadly though, it is hard to imagine that Cambridge Analytica will ever be unwelcome here, when it helped elect the president twice.