Midterm:

Cambridge Analytica

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Introduction

If someone told you they would give you five bucks to see your social media profile and everything on your Facebook account, would you let them? What if they told you that, for five bucks, they would not only look at your information but also feed you content to see if they could change your mind set about your political views? When put in those clear terms, most people might say no. But what if those terms were not as clear, and you later found out that a survey you completed not only influenced how you might vote or protest but also affected those around you and even their friends? The money was paid to the people taking the survey, while Cambridge Analytica funded the data collection. You might think that five dollars was not enough.

That is what happened with Cambridge Analytica. A survey offering five bucks made it easy for users to log in using their Facebook profiles (Amer & Noujaim, 2019). This allowed Cambridge Analytica to access information and build psychological profiles that could be used to feed users targeted content and potentially influence what they stood for, how they voted, and what they fought for. This paper will discuss the Cambridge Analytica scandal and how it became a scandal in the first place. It will explain what it was, how it started, how personal data was used and handled, and whether people are safe from other privacy incidents like this or if there is more to come.

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Incident Summary

Facebook, in 2010, used Cambridge Analytica for political advertising without informed consent. Cambridge Analytica created a quiz where they would ask people to volunteer, and they were able to connect using their Facebook accounts. Well, by doing so, users agreed to hand over their data, and they were offered $5 to complete this survey. Facebook also allowed personal information to be collected from their Facebook accounts, as well as information from their friends and their responses. They were able to collect their friends' information, too.

In 2015, Cambridge Analytica then helped with Ted Cruz's campaign using the data harvested from millions of people. He went from being the lowest-rated candidate to winning with 99% of the votes by using psychological data and analytics for his success (Amer & Noujaim, 2019). They were able to get hundreds of profiles from this survey that then had about five thousand data points, and they could predict the personality of every adult in the United States. Those same personalities then drove behavior, which could influence how people voted.

They then used it for the 2016 presidential candidate, and they were able to win. Trump's 2016 digital campaign director claimed to have run 5.9 million visual ads on Facebook, in contrast to Hillary Clinton's 66,000. Mark Zuckerberg then had to testify in front of Congress to answer these questions (Amer & Noujaim, 2019). However, it later did not really work because they said the Obama campaign also used the same data to "have their supporters contact their most persuadable friends" rather than using this data for highly targeted digital ads on websites such as Facebook.

Legal Ramifications

The United Kingdom's Information Commissioner's Office announced that it was going to fine Facebook $663,000. The reason for this was that it was the maximum fine allowed at the time of the data breach. In 2019, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) voted 3–2 to approve fining Facebook for $5 billion to settle the investigation into the breach. This was the largest penalty ever imposed by the U.S. government for any violation.

Ethical Ramifications

Ethically, there are a few. Facebook did not protect user data at all. They also didn't vet third parties and didn't see how the third-party companies would use the data they had. Facebook, even if it is a free platform, has and should have the right to protect every user's data, especially from third-party companies. Section 8 of Facebook's Code of Conduct pertains to the "Protection of User Data and Personal Data" (NBC News, 2018). This means that Facebook and its engineers must protect and keep all information and data confidential. The fact that they didn't follow their own policy when it came to Cambridge Analytica means they didn't keep their end of their own policy.

Privacy Policies/Notices

Summary

There were 87 million users who might have had their data shared with Cambridge Analytica. Notices were sent to those users, along with the rest of Facebook's users, and were

going to appear on their news feeds under the title “Protecting Your Information.” This was going to be sent to everyone, not just those 87 million users (NBC News, 2018).

They do have a feature called Privacy Checkup. It is unclear when this became available to users. There are features that allow users to delete their profiles from third-party sites. Facebook has toggles that make it easier to use Privacy Checkup rather than looking around Facebook’s profile privacy section.

In this section, users can update who can see what they share, how people can find them on Facebook, their data settings on Facebook, how to keep their accounts secure, and their ad preferences on Facebook. It also explains in a very clean way how and when these settings were last updated.

Readability

When investigating whether this was true, it was very complex. When landing in the section about how to handle privacy, it was readable in a sense, but as of now, there is not a section labeled “Protecting Your Information.” Rather, there are sections explaining how to export your data or find out what happens to it.

Years ago, it was more complex. In a way, it still is. When users go through the regular process, they can become overwhelmed with lots of jargon about how to update or change something.

When users go into the privacy policy section, there are many questions with answers. In some sections, the answers are very long, but users can use the AI summary feature to summarize what is included in each section. In some parts, it is very clear what the privacy issues are. In other parts, they are very muddy, meaning they are confusing.

Significant Privacy Issues

For example, there is a section called “What information do we collect?” They even have a video explaining how they collect users’ data. The way the video is presented makes it seem like they collect information to help users. For example, a user may be shopping for a mattress and found the one they want, so they no longer need to look for one. Users can change that preference under their ad preferences. However, when checking which ads were set for my profile, there were no specific ads listed. There was only a general section saying that users could stop them, but it did not show which ads were set for the profile. The only control available was whether people could see which companies a user liked or did not like, but the user would not know which list of ads was set for that person’s profile.

Other Incidents

In October 2026, Meta was fined $25 billion for “lies” over data privacy (Hays, 2026). A judge in New Mexico ordered the company to pay $25 billion for misleading the public about how it handled Facebook users’ data. The lawsuit stemmed from the Cambridge Analytica issue. New Mexico also sued Meta for $1 billion for misleading the public about the safety of social media for children (Hays, 2026). The amount of money keeps changing, but the issue is still the same. Meta feels like it is being sued by this state, and these lawsuits are making it harder for Meta to work with New Mexico.

Incident Continuance Question

Overall, these issues will keep happening because data is now worth more than a barrel of oil. Companies want people's data (Amer & Noujaim, 2019). This will continue because social media companies will continue to use their users' data to get what their advertisers want, which is money. With the data they collect, they will be able to target users and get them to buy something, or they can target them to move them toward voting for someone. Recently, in the news about the midterms, billions of dollars are being spent on ads and campaigning to get elected officials voted in or stay in power.

Conclusion

In closing, the Cambridge Analytica scandal happened during my seven-year break from all social media. School and social media posts were causing lots of anxiety for me. Interestingly, this was also when COVID happened, and the break was really nice. After returning, everything had changed. Currently, only Instagram is used, and there is a Facebook account, but there is nothing on it. The Facebook account only exists because, every day for the past year, every post and picture has been deleted. It is insane how much work goes into that. Snapchat and Instagram are also used, but they have nothing on them. Posts are not commented on or liked other than friends' posts, and people who are not known in real life are not added.

From the start, the mission was to make sure everything was gone. There is no trust that deleting a profile means everything is gone. Watching *The Great Hack* documentary on Netflix was a great way to see how this all came about. Data is what allows Facebook to target users and create almost a digital avatar based on their likes and dislikes. Facebook acts almost like a concierge that specifically tailors everything and feeds users' content just for them and only for them. They want to make sure they have over 5,000 data points on every person on their platform. If users have children, by the time those children turn 18, they will have about 70,000 data points defining them (Amer & Noujaim, 2019). There are no rights and no control, and this will continue. It will not stop.

In an interview, Christopher Wylie, co-founder of Cambridge Analytica, said there was no way of knowing whether Facebook data had been purged because of the legal threats (NBC News, 2018a). This is true because Facebook did not send a direct message to apologize to

those 87 million users. Instead, it sent notices to every user (NBC News, 2018b). Facebook did not say anything about why or how this would have affected them or about any other issues that came from this. This continued to the point where Facebook asked the Supreme Court to dismiss the Cambridge Analytica lawsuit (Vijayan, 2024). In Facebook's eyes, it felt that it had cleared the issue because it spoke in front of Congress and told everyone to be careful about what they signed up for.

In the documentary, it sounds like everyone was pointing at everyone else instead of themselves. Overall, this will continue, and it appears that they will continue until they push what they want or elect the people they want into office. In a TED Talk, Carole Cadwalladr said, "Privacy is power" and "Data rights are human rights." We need to remember this moving forward (Cadwalladr, 2025).

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