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Counterterrorism & Security
Tony Broadbent Sat, 17 Aug 2019 12:58 GMT



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When I was a lad, if you had an irritating tickle in your throat you took a packet of Hacks out of your pocket and sucked on one or more of the marvellous little menthol lozenge thingies to help cool your irritation and stop you from coughing.

How the world has turned.

Because if you don't want to end up spluttering and coughing your heart out, or simply screaming at the top of your lungs in pained disbelief, you best not even think about taking time out of your busy day to see the new documentary film 'The Great Hack' now playing on screens, of all sizes, here in the US, and in the UK, courtesy of the subscription-based streaming service Netflix.

Although, even with all that 'Polite Warning' on the outside of the tin, I think everyone should make a real effort to see it. As regardless of whatever political party you support, or whichever side of the Atlantic you live on, it's very much "Must See TV." And not seeing it would be akin to burying your head in the nearest fire bucket.

The film's promotional line says it all: "They took your data. Then they took control."

'The Great Hack' attempts to lift the lid on the trillion-dollar-a-year 'data exploitation' industry. The all but invisible world of data mining, data brokerage, and data analysis that views your personal data, as its very own and very valuable commodity.

Which is why the film's main purpose is to shine as much light as possible on Cambridge Analytica Ltd, the UK-based political consulting firm that, prior to the 2016 US election, professed to have as many as 5,000 data points on 230 million American voters. Truly, astounding, if true.

But a sound choice, as it happens, for as Christopher Wiley, the young data-scientist who not only helped set up Cambridge Analytica, in 2016, but who was also one of the first to blow the whistle on the nefarious doings of his former employers admitted to the prestigious UK Sunday newspaper 'The Observer' in March 2018: "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."

Blimey. A massive dataset of people's personal profiles amassed from tens of millions of Facebook users, as well as data pulled from their unwitting network of friends, and all of their friends' data points, too. And all of it, effectively, harvested without anyone's prior knowledge or permission. That even included Mark Zuckerberg, Founder and CEO of Facebook, or so we're told. Now there's a story in itself. Lean in? I should cocoa.

The US and the UK, apparently, not the only countries to have benefitted from the surreptitious attentions of Cambridge Analytica. As it appears the company, in constant pursuit of ever-larger datasets and ever more refined algorithms, had already used the same tactic of wave after wave of micro-targeted, psychographic-derived social media content and ads, in any number of state and/or national electoral campaigns, in a dozen or more countries. All and everything specifically designed to subtly reshape or change audience behaviour. So are you beginning to splutter yet?

The questions 'The Great Hack' seeks to answer: How did Cambridge Analytica get hold of such a massive dataset? What effect did all personal data harvested from Facebook have on the 2016 US presidential election? How much influence did Robert Mercer, hedge fund billionaire and major funder of both Cambridge Analytica and Donald Trump's electoral campaign, and Steve Bannon, former editor of Breitbart, one time Cambridge Analytica board member, and key political advisor to Trump actually have on the final result? A lot? A little? Marginal?

The main question, then, as now, for British voters: To what extent did Cambridge Analytica and its purportedly separate, Canadian-based, sister company, AggregateIQ, influence the outcome of the UK 2016 'Brexit' referendum? Would the 'Vote Leave' campaign have won without them? Or had twenty plus years of Euro-scepticism already swung the balance?

The answers to any and all of the above made all the more perplexing, nay, vexing, because, as 'The Great Hack' makes all too clear, we still don't really know. And, what's more, we likely never will. And even if more information were to come to light, would everyone believe it? Or would it be dismissed as yet more "Fake News!"

Which begs the question: What are the implications for our forthcoming elections if the widespread application of such dark digital data arts; all the data mining, data brokerage, and data analysis; the data hacking and the data breaches; are left unchecked, unregulated?

And so given the complexity of the whole sad and sorry business, how did the documentary's acclaimed award winning director and producer duo, Karim Amer and Jehane Noujaim, manage to get any kind of grip on it all? By cleverly employing twin, narrative "personal story" arcs to frame and give human scale to the issue. And very nicely done, too.

One: Brittany Kaiser, the young, former Cambridge Analytica executive turned 'whistle-blower' who quickly turns out to be the principal figure of the film. The other: David Carroll, an associate professor at the New School, in New York, alarmed by the spectre of wholesale online data exposure. Especially in regard to his own personal data profile and those of his children, and the likely adverse effects it could have on all their futures.

Carroll, like a hero straight out of a Hitchcock movie; an ordinary man thrust into extraordinary circumstances; beset by unknown dark forces, threatened, hunted, and preyed upon. The sort of man usually played by James Stewart or Henry Fonda or, better yet, Cary Grant. I became an instant fan. Though, it's true, as yet, I haven't registered the fact on any social network. So, for now, it'll just have to remain a secret between us.

Perhaps, the scariest revelation of the film: That as much as we think we know, we end up knowing that we know very little. As even, now, three years later, there's still no clear picture as to what Cambridge Analytica actually managed to achieve in the 2016 US election.

Is 'The Great Hack' a perfect film? No. Given there's so much more about this extraordinarily complex data scandal that still needs to come to light, but it is a nigh on perfect film for today and kudos to Netflix for supporting and showcasing it. The data-analytics genie has been let out of the proverbial black box and in every which way will become a permanent feature in all our future political elections. And the film will become a much sought after primer for anyone seeking to understand a little more of the digital shenanigans going on in some short-let back room, somewhere.

As the renowned, much missed American film critic Roger Ebert once said: “I don’t think that people often go to the movies and have their ideas change. But I think people can go to movies and have their feelings change. And those feelings can lead to new ideas.”

I can only hope that that is the case with ‘The Great Hack.’

Although, I suspect, that ‘The Great Hack’; rather like “The Great War” so named until people found they had to start numbering them; will be but the first of many movies that will attempt to tackle the issue.

Even so ‘The Great Hack’ should be seen by everyone that intends to vote in the coming 2019 UK election or 2020 US election, regardless of whichever political party or candidate they support. And if not already Netflix subscribers, hopefully, then, they’ll be able to see it on YouTube, once the streaming service has recouped its production costs, balanced its books, and begins to think in terms of the larger public good.

One key takeaway: “What goes online, stays online.” Which is more than reason, enough, to see ‘The Great Hack’ if you possibly can, as soon as you can, for I assure you, you’ll never be quite so blasé about your online comments or postings ever again.

Only, if you do get to see the film, do remember to keep a packet of Hacks close to hand, or whatever it is you need to suck on to “keep your cool.”

Just sayin’

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