

Perspecticide

Description

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The concept of defence is not so far from the idea of architecture. Vitruvius made that clear in his *Ten Books on Architecture*, the last of which is devoted to siege engines and ballistae. Security and defence are amongst the benefits, then and now, that draw people to live together and form cities.

Sound the alarm

Iâ??ve come across the whistleblower genre of non-fiction. To blow the whistle is to breach an organisationâ??s defences from within. Itâ??s an acoustic metaphor â?? sounding an alarm in a way that lets everyone know thereâ??s something wrong. It also draws attention to the person blowing the whistle.

The latest is the book with the unsayable title *Mindf*ck: Inside Cambridge Analyticaâ??s Plot to Break the World* by reformed culture hacker Christopher Wylie. He worked for, then blew the whistle on, Cambridge Analytica (CA) and its political influence campaigns, sources and clients.



Propaganda war

Anyone who thinks about cities is accustomed to the role of kinetic weaponry: bombs, missiles, guns. Wylie reminds the reader of the role of *information* in combat.

> â??the payload, delivery system and targeting system. For a missile, the payload is an explosive, the delivery system is a rocket-propelled fuselage, and the targeting system is a satellite or a

> heat-seeking laser.â?• [quotes taken from audio book: page numbers pending]

Informational weapons fall into similar categories. Propaganda has always been a weapon of war.

> â??the payload is often a story â?? a rumour deployed to trick a general or a cultural narrative intended to pacify a village. And just as the military invests in chemistry to inform bomb building, it also tries to research what kinds of narratives will yield the biggest impact.â?•

Cambridge Analytica (CA) was one such research instrument. It offered its data services to a raft of both legitimate and dubious political and commercial organisations, including Russian oligarchs and Nigerian billionaires.

According to Wylie, one of their earliest testing grounds was the 2015 elections in Nigeria, where CAâ??s campaign aimed to discredit the presidential candidate Muhammadu Buhari via a brutal online influence campaign, though without ultimate success.

Does it work?

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Having read Wylieâ??s book and knowing something about the technology deployed, I remain skeptical of Cambridge Analyticaâ??s claims about the success of its methods. (See a Washington Post article echoing such reservations.) Wylie hints as much in his description of the slimy sales techniques of its CEO.

Never-the-less, bulk data collection constitutes a serious ethical and legal challenge. We also know that a change in the behaviour of a small number of voters can swing an election (about 80,000 across 3 key states in the 2016 US election). Exploiting peopleâ??s personality profiles is alarming either as a current or future reality, as is attempted clandestine political influence with or without foreign interference.

Cambridge Analytica used Facebook and other data sources to target groups and individuals with messaging intended to nudge some of the targets towards a particular action, such as voting for Trump, rejecting Clinton, or voting to leave the EU.

Stealing self

Some influence campaigns serve a social good. They discourage smoking, or promote vaccinations against diseases, or encourage waste recycling. But Cambridge Analyticaâ??s political influence campaigns aimed to destroy a targetâ??s sense of perspective according to Wylie.

Perspecticide refers to the psychological tactics employed by an abuser. By delivering contradictory messages, repetition and persistence, the abuser conditions the victim towards a world view that makes them feel more uncertain, confused and acquiescent. Itâ??s killing the other personâ??s sense of perspective (also called *gaslighting*). Wylie provides a helpful explanation.

> â??The most effective form of perspecticide is one that first mutates the concept of self. In this light, the manipulator attempts to â??stealâ?? the concept of self from his target, replacing it with his own. This usually starts with attempting to smother the opponentâ??s narratives and then dominating the informational environment around the target.â?•

That can be achieved by delivering messages to individuals or groups. Part of that perspective-smashing is to encourage targets to â??begin catastrophising about minor or imagined events.â?• The supposed â??war on Christmasâ?• identified by the US right wing comes to mind.

Disoriented

Another tactic is to present something that is straightforward and already agreed and resolved as if still confusing, e.g. Russia meddled in the 2016 US election â?¦ or was it Ukraine? â??I donâ??t know. Nor do you,â?• said Republican Senator John Kennedy to a recent interviewer.

Itâ??s possible for abusers to deliver â??counternarrativesâ?• to any evidential, accepted and supported proposition if it serves the abusersâ?? interests, and if their victim is sufficiently receptive. Hence the promotion of conspiracy theories.

One of the aims of influence campaigns is to target people according to psychological type, delivering the kind of message for which they are most receptive, or likely to be receptive. According to Wylie,

> â??The ultimate aim is to trigger negative emotions and thought processes associated with impulsive, erratic or compulsive behaviour. This moves a target from mild or passive resistance (e.g., less productivity, taking fewer risks, rumours, etc.) into a realm of more disruptive behaviours (e.g., arguing, insubordination, mutiny, etc.).â?•

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Triggered

According to Wylie *anger* is an effective emotion through which to deliver influence. Angry people are more prepared to take risks. If you can get the mob worked up against a common enemy then they might just be prepared to fight, or at least ignore consequences.

Shrewd influence campaigns work across media: via online hate tweets as well as public rallies. Wylie shows convincingly how influence campaigns work in tandem with benign social media innovations.

> â??What were in effect privately owned surveillance networks became â??communitiesâ??, the people these networks used for profit were â??usersâ??, and addictive design was promoted as â??user experienceâ?? or â??engagementâ??. Peopleâ??s identities began to be profiled from their â??data exhaustâ?? or â??digital breadcrumbsâ??. For thousands of years, dominant economic models had focused on the extraction of natural resources and the conversion of these raw materials into commodities.â?•

Now we have data. See posts: Big data: a non-theory about everything; and Big data metaphysics.

References

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- Wylie, Christopher. 2019. *Mindf*ck: Inside Cambridge Analyticaâ??s Plot to Break the World*. London: Profile Books

Note

For channel 4 sting operation see:

- Anon. 2018. Cambridge Analytica Uncovered: Secret filming reveals election tricks. *Channel 4 News*, 19 March. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpbeOCKZFfQ&feature=youtu.be (accessed 7 December 2019).

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1. Architecture

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1. anger
2. Cambridge Analytica
3. data
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