

Unedited transcript with Brent Mittelstadt of the Oxford Internet Institute

WikiTribune: Okay. Great. So Brent, as you know, I'm writing a piece on the whole debacle with Cambridge Analytica. The first question that I'm interested to know is: obviously profiling is a very widespread practise, but why is Cambridge Analytica so under fire, and when did it cross the ethical line for you?

Brent: It's a very good question, actually. And I think you're right. Because profiling, at least in my field, we worry about. But knowing exactly how widespread it is, what the effects of it are, how it's shaped the opportunities that you have, the information that you're seeing, the ads that you're getting, how you're being perceived by other people and companies and so forth. Quite often, that's really hard to know. I think where this one is different is that ... I can't remember the term they used, psycho-analytics?

WikiTribune Psychometrics?

Brent: Psychometric. Yeah, that's the term. The scary term that they're using. I suppose where it's different is that ... Profiling would be quite often to just ... It's sort of a shortcut to know what sort of person you are, what person you're being perceived as. To know something about your interests, your history, your behaviours, your social connections, that sort of thing. And it can be used for showing you friend information, showing you advertisements. Basically giving you these opportunities to engage with things. Whereas with this, it's definitely that, but it seems to be going a step further, in the sense of: we are going to actively try to change your behaviour for a very, very specific end.

And for the most part, we don't see targeted advertising as having this huge negative impact on a person. The worst it does is convince you or make you more likely to buy something in the future. And don't get me wrong, there can be huge problems with targeted advertising, in the sense of, if certain groups are not being shown advertisements consistently, or you're not getting advertisements for certain types of jobs or products, that can be a huge problem. But the action that you're being pushed towards is to purchase something.

Whereas this, it's pushing you to take an action that would undermine one of your fundamental rights as a citizen to elect who represents you. And so I think it's what you're trying to push you towards, what it is they're trying to influence, that makes this distinct from just normal profiling.

WikiTribune: I see. So, a lot of this blame, as well, is shifting to Facebook. And Facebook is getting a lot of the heat. What do you think of that? Do you think it's fair? Do you think Facebook deserves to get a lot of the blame?

Brent: Of course, the story's developing all the time. More details are coming out. And by the way, if there's something relevant that has come out recently that you think I'm missing in my answer, please let me know. Because I'm as up to date as I can be on this story. I'm sure

there's more details and things. But from what I know right now, I think the blame should be shared by Facebook, by Cambridge Analytica, the researcher at Cambridge, Alexander Keegan, is that right?

WikiTribune::Yeah.

Brent: Yeah. There's blame to be shared across all of those actors. The researcher at Cambridge, he said that he had no idea how Cambridge Analytica was going to use the data that he was giving them access to. He had this side company, I think that's where the app was based. I'm still not really clear what the agreement was with Facebook. Because of course Facebook quite rightly gives access to their platform, or used to give really give access to their platform, to researchers. But in this case, the researcher was a side company, and the app seems to be located in a side company.

So I'm not clear if that was a commercial agreement that he had with them. It seemed to be a research agreement. And how you have a research agreement that is based on a commercial company is odd, to say the least. There's a very interesting question there to ask on the side, if it's Facebook doing this sort of research themselves, or other companies doing things that are research but they don't have to call it research. There's a question over how that's governed and the exceptions that universities would get in data protection law to engage in research without having to go through the normal governance procedures, ethics review and that sort of thing.

But anyway. So, there's definitely blame, to be sure, there, in the sense of there's this question around the side company. But even that aside, if I'm a researcher and I have privileged access to a platform, and that's very important to me, and a commercial partner comes to me and says, we would like access to this data, we want to expand your data collection, the first question I'd be asking them is, what are you going to use this data for? And maybe he did ask that question, maybe they gave him a very convincing non-answer. But I think there's definitely blame to be shared there, in the sense that the researcher has responsibilities because he's a custodian of the data at that point.

With Cambridge Analytica, obviously, there's blame there. They found a way to get access to the data; I'm not going to comment on the legality of that, because that's hugely complicated. I'm not qualified to comment on it. But they developed this system to target voters. And if we have a problem with that sort of system existing in the first place - which is what I was getting at before - then, by definition, they'd have to be blamed in this.

And Facebook is interesting, because they're trying to present this as not a data breach. And they may very well, legally, be correct. That this is not a data breach. Because normally we think of data breaches as some sort of cyber attack or cyber security issue, where data is leaking because of a security flaw. Whereas this, essentially what they did is they set up an environment in which this sort of repurposing of data for commercial purposes could happen.

Now, they're insisting that this was very much against the agreement they had with the researcher from Cambridge, which could very well be true. But the simple fact is, they had very weak privacy by design principles in their environment. Because they created an environment where this sort of passive data gathering about people's friends ... And being able to even extract that data from the platform in the first place, they have to share the blame here. Because they are the business that collected the data in the first place. They made this whole thing possible.

So yeah, everybody has some blame. I think Facebook is the most interesting one, because I think they're going to keep trying to say, this is a case of somebody violating their terms of service and terms of app permissions, and them not having the best privacy standards at the time in their environment.

Just one other quick aside. This might get to a question that you would ask later anyway. But one of the really bad things here is ... so they've tightened up the privacy standards, in a sense of there would be less people that would have default privacy settings that would allow for this data collection to happen, where you get access to one person's information and you're able to collect information from their friends. The problem with that is Facebook has really shut down their API access to researchers that would do research on social networks. I think those two things are related. And it's a shame, because there's actually very valuable research to be done on social networks and just behaviour in general that's put at risk by this sort of thing. I think you're really going to see clamping down on access to researchers as a result of this. _**

WikiTribune: So, just bouncing off your comments about Facebook, what do you think Facebook's real attitude towards privacy is, then?

Brent: Can you repeat that? You broke up a little bit.

WikiTribune: I just wanted to know what you think Facebook's real attitude towards privacy is.

Brent: That's a tough question to answer, because it's a huge company. I think it's changed over time. I think they had much more lax internal privacy standards previously, in the sense that the default privacy settings you would get as a user would allow for a much more public sharing of data or the content that you're putting on your page. That wouldn't be the case now, I know they've made changes to that.

Looking at the top down, Mark Zuckerberg, in the past, has made comments that were very dismissive of privacy concerns. He's very much pushing towards more open data and data sharing and that it would be great if we were all just willing to share much more information about ourselves. So if you look at the company from the top down, obviously it's going to be in Facebook's best interests if they get their users to share more information about themselves and to engage with the platform more. So from that perspective, you can see an alignment of

interests there. Where you'd think less privacy would be a good thing in terms of the company's business interests.

But again, I would reiterate: it's a huge company, so you can only really infer your attitude towards privacy from the actions they're taking and the statements being made by different people in the company.

WikiTribune: Here's something that I'm really interested in. Because I've been seeing a lot of 'delete Facebook' hashtags on Twitter. And I just wanted to know, from your opinion, if deleting Facebook is the right way to go about it.

When you say the right way to go about it, you mean the right way to deal with this sort of problem?

Brent: Yeah, exactly. Because it seems like this is just the tip of the iceberg, right? That's my impression of it.

Brent: Yeah. Of course, we can assume that it's the tip of the iceberg. Because this environment exists, what you can say is other similar misuses or repurposing of data ... you can imagine that they are, hypothetically, possible. But of course, we don't know. Maybe more stories will come out, we don't know.

The 'delete Facebook' thing, it's one solution for a certain type of user. If you are somebody like myself, for example, I've probably been using Facebook for 10 years now. Using it increasingly less over time. It was originally a way to just connect with friends; more and more friends have been going off Facebook or just using the platform less. So I use it very little now, maybe two or three times a week, just to message people. So if you're that sort of user, then it's a very easy thing. Delete Facebook and don't add any new content. Take out the data that they already have about you or get a copy of it yourself, at least. Request that the data be erased. Which I know you'll be able to do under the general data protection regulations. I'm sure you can do something. It makes sense, because if they don't have the data, then that's one way to deal with privacy concerns.

What's interesting, though, is I've seen that they built their shadow profiles about people that aren't users of the platform. So if you're friends with people that use the platform, and they're uploading content about you, or you're engaging with them on other websites where there's a Facebook link, either through cookies or the website uses the Facebook login,

WikiTribune: When did they build this?

Brent: Sorry?

WikiTribune: When did they build this shadow profile?

Brent: I don't know. It was just something I saw as a throwaway in one of the Guardian stories on the Cambridge Analytica thing. I can't tell you any more about what those would contain. It makes sense, though, in the sense that Facebook is able to collect data from lots of different websites that aren't Facebook or aren't owned by them in any way, because they have tie-ins through cookies or through the website using their login as an authentication mechanism. So it would make sense that if you're connected with people on those sites that don't have Facebook profiles or at least don't link to their Facebook profile, then there would be this data about people that aren't Facebook users that Facebook would be holding. Just a very simple example would be, if you upload a picture, and there are people in that picture that aren't Facebook users, then Facebook does, by definition, have some of your data.

So it's not a solution to the problem; it's a step that can be taken. For people that are very concerned about their privacy, it can very much be a step in the right direction. But this is also ignoring the fact that, in a lot of countries, Facebook is essentially the internet. What you have to have if you want to access the internet. So not really helpful in those contexts.

WikiTribune: Yeah, that's a good point. You mentioned GDPR as well. I was also thinking, can we really expect politicians to crack down on companies like Facebook and Google when they themselves rely on such data to get ahead?

Brent: I wouldn't lump all politicians in with what we know about the Cambridge Analytica case here. Of course, political campaigning will be much more data-driven now. That doesn't mean that the politicians will be directly reliant on Facebook, for example, to help with their decision-making or their campaign strategy or anything.

There's also the question of just what is the stand that is taken by governments and politicians towards big tech companies. It seems that once a bad story comes out about a tech company, then everybody's happy to jump on the bandwagon and vilify them. But it's not a planned, concerted approach to reigning the power of the companies in.

On the GDPR, I think it is very much a step in the right direction. If all this had happened after the GDPR had taken those steps, then it would be a much more interesting conversation about what could supervisory authorities in Europe actually do in terms of fining Facebook for, essentially, letting users' data be repurposed for something that the users would not have explicitly consented to. And you have much larger fines or much stronger powers given to the national supervisory authorities. So, for example, they could fine Facebook for 4% of their worldwide turnover if this happens in the future.

Whether those powers will actually be used is a very interesting question, too. We just don't know yet. I know there are some politicians that are very happy that they exist, and see them, really, as a very strong tool to reign in the power of tech companies. But that doesn't necessarily mean that we're going to see these huge fines, at least in the short term.

WikiTribune: My final question to you, Brent, is: do you think people will change their online behaviour because of revelations like this?

Brent: That's a difficult question.

WikiTribune: Or rather, how much do people actually care about privacy?

BrentL Oh, the answer I would have to that is: people don't care about privacy until they do. Or, they don't care about it until they have a reason to. _**

WikiTribune: Okay. And this a reason, then? Cambridge Analytica?

BrentL Oh, yeah. I absolutely think so. There will definitely be people that are fine with ... And there's terminology being thrown around here. Whether this was manipulation or persuasion. And if it's presented as persuasion, that comes off as much more acceptable in the sense that, yeah, people are trying to persuade you to do things all the time. Whereas if it's manipulation, there's a psychological component to it, where it's like something about you is being exploited in order to get you to take a preferred action.

So I think it depends on how people will perceive this sort of profiling and pushing towards voting in a certain way. I think there will, of course, be a subset of people whose behaviour changes for the sake of privacy. I mean, the people that are deleting their Facebook accounts, for example.

I think the more interesting response to it, though, is that people just end up engaging less and less with the platform over time, or sharing less and less information about themselves. And, again, just to go back to my own Facebook usage: I used to post photos all the time; I'd put updates of what I was doing and how I was feeling; I would comment on other people's stuff. And over time, just because I've become less and less comfortable with the platform, I just started using it literally as a way to message people. It's essentially just an instant messaging programme for me, now.

**_And that sort of engagement, that change in how a user's engaging with the platform, that's the stuff that's really interesting. It's really important changes, the non-binary changes, which are much more difficult to measure, but I would guess ... I won't speculate about how much it will actually happen.

WikiTribune: Cool. Thank you so much. Bye-bye.

BrentL Yeah. Thanks. Bye.