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Vito Laterza 1

Cambridge Analytica, independent research and the national interest

Elizabeth Saleh & Adrien Zakar 3

The joke is on us: Irony and community in a Beirut scrapyard

Liana Chua 7

Small acts and personal politics: On helping to save the orangutan via social media

Mikkel Rytter 12

Made in Denmark: Refugees, integration and the self-dependent society

Mubbashir Rizvi 15

From terrorism to dispossession: Pakistan's Anti-Terrorism Act as a means of eviction

Jutathorn Pravattiyagul 19

Male clients of Thai transgender sex workers in Europe

Jonathan Woolley 22

The wires crossed: What dowsing reveals about environmental knowledge in Britain

Felix Ringel 26

On expectations in the aftermath of the 'refugee crisis': Ethnographic prospects from a post-industrial German city

OBITUARY

Pat Caplan 29

Philip Hugh Gulliver, 1921-2018

COMMENT

Luis Angosto-Ferrandez 30

Hugo Chávez as political symbol

NEWS 30 CALENDAR 31 CLASSIFIED 32

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Some of the fresh perspectives brought by social scientists in the public debate on the Cambridge Analytica (CA) scandal pose serious questions over the role of academics in contemporary debates of public interest and the position of independent research vis-à-vis thorny political issues.

In a viral piece published in March, anthropologist Chris Kavanagh (2018) dismissed media reporting on the CA affair as sensationalist and said that CA's claims of winning elections through advanced data analytics and targeted social media campaigns were exaggerated. According to Kavanagh, there is little evidence that the company's activities in the US presidential election and the Brexit referendum had a significant influence on the final results. He also pointed out that CA was just one of many businesses benefiting from the Facebook feature that enabled third parties to use personal data without consent.

Another case in point is an article by political scientists Gabrielle Lynch, Justin Willis and Nic Cheeseman, that downplays CA's role in the Kenyan election (Lynch et al. 2018). It follows revelations by a Channel 4 undercover investigation which highlighted the alarming involvement of the British data analytics company in President Kenyatta's 2013 and 2017 election campaigns.

The scholars narrow their understanding of CA operations to Facebook advertising: their research shows that no targeted advertisements were used on the popular online platform in the 2017 Kenyan presidential election. They also point out that only a minority of Kenyans use Facebook, neglecting to mention that the country has one of the highest Internet and social media penetration rates in Africa.

It is common knowledge that social media can reach far and wide, and community influencers can relay messages to population segments that are not captured by usage statistics. Public interventions by the researcher and activist Nanjala Nyabola (see Nyabola 2018a, 2018b), provide a much-needed corrective to Lynch et al. and her forthcoming book on digital democracy in Kenya is worth keeping an eye on.¹

* * *

In a BBC radio interview, Nic Cheeseman described CA as a company that exaggerates the value of their services 'to get big contracts that are very lucrative with governments that are desperate to stay in power'.² The image that emerges here is of just another public relations (PR) firm gone rogue, dealing with corrupt African politicians.

But Cambridge Analytica is far from that: it operates within the remit of Western states. CA and their parent company SCL have close ties with US and UK government actors and they have been providing services to military and intelligence agencies for some time.³

Their personnel are linked to a bigger PR industry that has spearheaded corporate and political campaigns in Africa for decades. Before landing a job at CA, Mark Turnbull – one of the executives at the centre of the Channel 4 investigation – worked for a long time for the British multinational PR firm, Bell Pottinger. This is the same company that had to stop its activities last year when it emerged that they worked for the disgraced Gupta family in South Africa.

It is surprising that Lynch, Willis and Cheeseman do not consider these connections. They are not alone: their omissions reflect the orientation of most Western academic

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Note: On 2 May 2018 it was announced that Cambridge Analytica would shut down in the wake of the Facebook scandal.

literature on African elections. The focus is on ethnic mobilization, patronage and politicians' wrongdoings. The role of Western states and big business in African politics is glossed over, if not completely ignored.

* * *

Regardless of the shortcomings, the findings by Lynch et al. have a role to play in an in-depth appraisal of CA's role in Kenya. But the positionality of independent researchers working in Africa and funded by Western countries remains contested. Is it really the role of scholars in such a position to reassure the public that CA's influence has been exaggerated and Africa is not 'the victim of European or American schemes'?

The discussion points to broader issues that need to be tackled with urgency by the academic community. The convergence of funding priorities, research agendas and the national interest across Western countries is a well-known fact. Many academics are finding themselves in a dangerous embrace with obscure and undemocratic projects linked to military and security agencies.

CA whistle-blower Chris Wylie was recently heard by a British parliamentary committee.⁴ He claimed that several academics at the University of Cambridge, especially from the Department of Psychology and the Psychometrics Centre, helped CA to develop its online psychometric techniques. In Wylie's words:

Cambridge has an amazing psychology department. It's one of the top, if not *the* top in the world for psychology, so it was a real resource to have that very close to us. So, we did work with several professors at the psychology department on developing psychometric inventories and also looking more broadly at the research that was coming out of the university in psychological profiling using online data exhaust. So, a lot of the papers that eventually became the foundation of the methods that we then used on the Ripon project, that all came out of research that was being done at the University of Cambridge, some of which was funded in part by DARPA, for example, which is the US military research agency.⁵

When asked about whether CA had a formal relationship with the university, Wylie replied:

We definitely talked to some of the more senior professors, but it was all ... there was no ... there was nothing formalized with the university itself, so it was all done, you know, professor to professor to professor, but, you know, it sort of sat in a grey area. When Ripon was happening, we had a lot of people who we were engaging at Cambridge to provide us, you know ... who played a pivotal role in actually getting that project going.

Cambridge academic psychologist and data scientist Aleksandr Kogan has made headlines due to his company's involvement with the Facebook data used by CA, but we are yet to see any substantial scrutiny of the role played by broader academic networks and practices in driving the science behind CA's operations.

* * *

Early career researchers on temporary contracts might be particularly vulnerable to co-option. Their success is often dependent on their ability to secure external funding. But it would be wrong to make a clear-cut distinction between temporary and tenured staff. Many established professors are willing to align their research to government-oriented security concerns, if it helps secure large-scale grants that enhance their influence and prestige.

Knowledge from disciplines such as anthropology has long been used for military and intelligence purposes, regardless of researchers' intentions and engagements.⁶ Yet, there is little to no discussion on the topic among colleagues. We suffer from a lack of clear and rigorous ethical procedures to protect research participants – but also ourselves, as the horrific murder of Cambridge researcher Giulio Regeni painfully reminds us.

European universities are endangering the principles of academic freedom and public criticism by casualizing the majority of their younger workforce and uncritically seeking external funds conditioned by state security agendas. Secretive government interests find fertile ground for directing academic production in ways that are often informal and mediated and that do not easily fit with conventional images of formally recruited security agents.

This coincides with the increasing securitization of European states, and their involvement in causing the suffering of thousands of African, Middle Eastern and Asian migrants and refugees. This is justified as an inevitable result of the legitimate right to protect 'Europe's borders', a Europe of nations defined in nativist terms and reminiscent of our fascist and colonial past.

European countries cannot survive without fossil fuels and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East. While they fortify their borders and police diversity at home, they push for more exploitative arrangements abroad to ensure the continuous flow of resources – giving little, if anything, in return to citizens living in sites of extraction.

* * *

What does it mean to carry out independent research funded by Western governments engaged in these forms of exclusion? What responsibility do we have to accurately scrutinize our governments' interests and their destructive effects? What role do our biases and omissions play in perpetuating messages and narratives used by right-wing nativist propaganda?

The dismissals and silences around the Cambridge Analytica case are symptomatic of a broader malaise of the European social sciences. We need to rediscover the spirit of independence and social justice that has characterized so many anthropological interventions in the early post-colonial period. In such troubled times, we have a scientific and ethical duty to challenge the pursuit of national interests where these are causing suffering and conflict around the world. If we want to have credibility abroad, we need to take a deeper look at what happens in our own back yard. ●

1. *Digital democracy, analogue politics: How the Internet era is transforming Kenya*, Zed Books.

2. Clip available online at: <http://democracyinafrica.org/cambridge-analytica-africa-bravura-bravado/>.

3. See the SCL website at: <https://sclgroup.cc/customers> and Ahmed (2017, 2018).

4. The full video of Christopher Wylie's hearing is available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5g6Jm7YJQ>.

5. Ripon is CA's technology platform, using psychometric techniques to influence voters' behaviour. 'Data exhaust' refers to the trails of data left by Internet users during their online activities.

6. See for instance, Price (2016).

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