

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

2321 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6301

(202) 225-6371

[www.science.house.gov](http://www.science.house.gov)

April 3, 2018

The Honorable Lamar Smith  
Chairman  
House Committee on Science, Space and Technology  
2321 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Smith:

We previously requested that you hold hearings on the cyberattacks against our election infrastructure by the Russian government during the 2016 U.S. elections and the tactics used by them to influence the American public through social media. In light of the recent news that British-based Cambridge Analytica acquired the private data of 50 million Facebook users for political purposes, we are now also requesting a hearing specifically on the unauthorized use of this private data, and the role that it may have played in our 2016 election cycle.

The acquisition and misuse of data on the online behavior of American citizens poses a potential serious threat to their privacy rights and even to our democracy. In this new social media age, we need to ensure that individual privacy is well protected and not misused by digital political influence campaigns or others without their knowledge. It is part of this Committee's responsibility to discern how new digital tools and technologies, including social media platforms, are being used to exploit cyber-privacy issues. We believe examining the recent case involving Facebook and Cambridge Analytica would be a good start.

Cambridge Analytica, a commercial consulting company with ties to Russian interests, improperly used the data of 50 million Facebook users as part of voter-targeting campaigns possibly over the course of multiple federal election cycles.<sup>1</sup> The consulting company obtained and accessed the private information of these users without any of the users' permission via what appears to be intentionally deceptive means. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has opened an investigation into Facebook's privacy practices related to this incident.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Danny Hakim and Matthew Rosenberg, "Data Firm Tied to Trump Campaign Talked Business With Russians," *New York Times*, March 17, 2018, accessed here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/17/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-russia.html> (Cambridge Analytica has claimed to have done extensive work with Russia and Ukraine in the past and it has sought to gain business from Lukoil, a Russian oil company.)

<sup>2</sup> See: Roger Cheng and Brian Bennett, "Facebook under FTC microscope over Cambridge Analytica breach," *CNET Magazine*, March 26, 2018, accessed here: <https://www.cnet.com/news/ftc-confirms-its-investigating-facebook/> and Tony Romm and Craig Timberg, "FTC opens investigation into Facebook after Cambridge Analytica scrapes millions of users' personal information," *The Washington Post*, March 20, 2018, accessed here:

After the 2016 Election, Cambridge Analytica bragged that it was decisive in Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 Presidential Election. While this may be an overblown claim, this Committee should, among other objectives, investigate the breach of the personal information of over 50 million Facebook users and how Facebook safeguards user information.

The facts we know so far are already quite alarming:

- Professor Aleksandr Kogan, a Russian-American researcher at the University of Cambridge and associate professor at St. Petersburg University in Russia, received permission from Facebook to gather profile information from users for strictly academic and not commercial purposes.<sup>3</sup>
- Prof. Kogan used an app for information gathering. The app asked users to consent to give access to their profiles and their friends' Facebook profiles, for academic and not commercial use.
- More than 270,000 people used the app, and with the access to friends' profiles as well, Prof. Kogan collected data from nearly 50 million profiles.
- Cambridge Analytica apparently funded Prof. Kogan's efforts and the company used the gathered information—without the knowledge of the users, and counter to the researcher's permission from Facebook.
- In 2015, Facebook claimed it learned about this breach and it then required that Prof. Kogan and Cambridge Analytica delete the collected data. Apparently, Facebook simply asked for assurances of the data deletion and made no efforts to verify the deletion. Facebook also failed to inform its users of the unauthorized use of their data by Cambridge Analytica for political purposes. A former Cambridge Analytica employee has stated that he recently saw “hundreds of gigabytes [of Facebook data] on Cambridge servers, and that the files were not encrypted.”<sup>4</sup>
- On March 16, 2018, Facebook suspended Professor Kogan and Cambridge Analytica from the platform. Facebook later claimed that this incident was not a data breach because “no systems were infiltrated, and no passwords or sensitive pieces of information were stolen or hacked.”<sup>5</sup>

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[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2018/03/20/ftc-opens-investigation-into-facebook-after-cambridge-analytica-scrapes-millions-of-users-personal-information/?utm\\_term=.e245eaff7f7e](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2018/03/20/ftc-opens-investigation-into-facebook-after-cambridge-analytica-scrapes-millions-of-users-personal-information/?utm_term=.e245eaff7f7e)

<sup>3</sup> Carole Cadwalladr, “The Cambridge Analytica files: ‘I made Steve Bannon’s psychological warfare tool’: meet the data war whistleblower,” *The Guardian*, March 17, 2018, accessed here:

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/data-war-whistleblower-christopher-wylie-faceook-nix-bannon-trump>

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Rosenberg, Nicholas Confessore and Carole Cadwalladr, “How Trump Consultants Exploited the Facebook Data of Millions,” *New York Times*, March 17, 2018, accessed here:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/17/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-trump-campaign.html>

<sup>5</sup> Paul Grewal, VP & Deputy General Counsel, “Suspending Cambridge Analytica and SCL Group from Facebook,” Facebook, March 16, 2018, accessed here: <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/03/suspending-cambridge-analytica/>



- Channel 4 News, in the United Kingdom, recently released hidden camera videos of interactions with Cambridge Analytica executives, where the executives intimated that their consulting activities included potential bribery and sexual blackmail.<sup>6</sup>

Social media platforms, in order to maximize user engagement and enhance targeted advertising, catalog copious amounts of user data. The Committee should take this occasion—the misuse of 50 million Facebook users’ information—to ask questions about the protection of user information on that platform and others. The Committee should also explore how foreign actors have previously sought to use social media user information. Finally, this should be the impetus for exposing Internet privacy failures and for public debate about potential solutions.

Under your leadership, the Science Committee has aggressively investigated information security incidents at the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), the U.S. Federal Reserve, and Equifax. These investigations have focused on both the cybersecurity and the privacy issues involved in these data breaches. Additionally, this Committee has investigated the private server management of a former Secretary of State, and the Russian government’s efforts to influence the U.S. energy market by exploiting Facebook and other social media platforms.

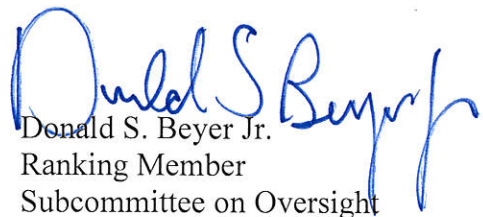
Protecting personally identifiable information in the digital age is an immense task and a tremendous burden on both government agencies and commercial enterprises. Nevertheless, the U.S. Congress must hold both government agencies and commercial entities accountable when the public trust is breached. The Science Committee should take a leading role in investigating these sorts of cases whether the intended use of the data is for financial, political or other purposes.

We believe that the troubling information about the alleged inappropriate use of private data from 50 million Facebook users by Cambridge Analytica necessitates a vigorous inquiry. We stand ready, once again, to work with you in a constructive and nonpartisan way to fulfill the Committee’s oversight obligation regarding this critical issue.

Sincerely,



Eddie Bernice Johnson  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Science, Space & Technology



Donald S. Beyer Jr.  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Oversight

<sup>6</sup> See: “Revealed: Trump’s election consultants filmed saying they use bribes and sex workers to entrap politicians,” Channel 4 News, March 19, 2018, accessed here: <https://www.channel4.com/news/cambridge-analytica-revealed-trumps-election-consultants-filmed-saying-they-use-bribes-and-sex-workers-to-entrap-politicians-investigation> and “Exposed: Undercover secrets of Trump’s data firm,” Channel 4 News, March 20, 2018, accessed here: <https://www.channel4.com/news/exposed-undercover-secrets-of-donald-trump-data-firm-cambridge-analytica>