

Book Review: *Mindf*ck, Cambridge Analytica and The Plot To Break America*

*Mindf*ck, Cambridge Analytica and The Plot To Break America* by Chris Wylie. Random House, 2019. ISBN 978-1-9848-5463. 269 pp., \$28 (US).

The top topics across today's cable news scoreboard routinely feature impeachment, data breaches, sex scandals, or crimes by politicians, all creating fertile ground for profitable crops from publishing insider perspectives. *Mindf*ck* follows the recent trend paved by volumes like *Fire and Fury* [Trump], *A Warning* [Trump], *Targeted* [Cambridge Analytica], or *Holding the Line* [Secretary of Defense], which all race to prove their worth through distinct viewpoints away from the mainstream media's cameras. Christopher Wylie succeeds in delivering his viewpoint, only his viewpoint, and nothing but his viewpoint throughout the entire piece. Although departing two years before becoming a whistleblower, Wylie helped found Cambridge Analytica (CA) despite publicizing UK campaign finance and US Foreign Agent Registration Act violations. *Mindf*ck* depicts Wylie's journey from a young Canadian political staffer to morally compromised data analyst. The guilt arises from his creating the methods used to scrape and analyze personal data from social media sites, only to realize he lacked any authoritative say on data usage. An interesting perspective on how data analysis techniques can bite the wielder shows modern networks as not working with simple tools, but behaving more like snake handling. Lacking any reference sources other than the author, *Mindf*ck* reads quickly and should be a staple for anyone working with big data platforms who does not understand their potential impacts.

As a memoir, Wylie does not present any central thesis and splits the work roughly chronologically into three parts: before, during, and after CA. A bifurcated central theme addresses the importance of standing out as an individual and the tendency for events to happen to Wylie rather than because of him. The earliest section describes Wylie's physical handicaps and early analytical ambitions. After a 2011 Parliamentary election, Wylie leaves his Canadian Parliament staffer job to pursue a fashion design PhD at the London School of Economics. While in the UK, he works with the Liberal Democratic party, but after a massive 2013 loss accepts contract work with the defense-based Strategic Communication Laboratory (SCL), which specializes in information operations. SCL births CA as their US subsidiary and joins with their associated analytical missteps, which leads to Wylie's 2014 departure. The book's remainder focuses on Wylie being "desperate to find something to do where I knew I would be contributing good to the world" and his resentment towards a lifetime Facebook and Instagram ban.

Wylie's journey begins with his difficulties adjusting to Canadian primary and secondary schools due to a wheelchair-confining handicap and his complete disregard for any dress code. The analytical skills leading toward CA began first through his association with the Canadian Liberal Democrat Party and later as a 2008 Obama campaign data consultant. Afterwards, having discovered how micro-targeting data can yield massive election returns, he returned to Canada to find the traditional party structures uninterested. In 2011, he moved to England and intended to study law at the London School of Economics, later changing to a fashion design PhD. Originally, only Wylie's side job was in politics and assisting the UK's Liberal party. Wylie leaves the UK Lib party when they fail to implement his ideas, like the Canadian Liberal Party. The opportunity opens for the position at SCL as a data analyst. His first SCL task is to use micro-targeting to influence African elections. Wylie's own personal prejudices emerge early and continue throughout. "Suddenly, I was surrounded by a team of impeccably dressed, blazingly smart, impossibly quirky individuals. And Nix was the ringleader, the grinning, soulless salesman who didn't understand anything we were doing" (51). Alexander Nix was the SCL director who paid for data, delivered contracts, and launched CA as the CEO.

From Wylie's perspective, CA's indiscretions began with Trinidad and Tobago government research contracts that allowed social media scraping from unsuspecting citizens. Steve Bannon enters the narrative from stage right, hiring SCL for work similar to their African success with different data during several minor US political races. SCL's early success leads to a \$20M payment if they can continue to produce results. Money in their pockets leads to procuring data from individuals like Dr. Aleksandr Kogan. Dr. Kogan was a Cambridge University professor researching Facebook who provided data for social networking studies under an agreement that stated individuals who approved Kogan's app allowed access to their connections' data simultaneously. An average Facebook user has 150-300 friends, so if only 1,000 people agree to usage, on average, 150,000 profiles will be provided. The \$20M advance allowed CA to create an survey app that paid users \$1, estimating that if one million people signed up, detailed information on up to 300,000,000 people would be available.

CA's 2013 founding was followed by their 2014 app launch, which collected massive amounts of Facebook data. All collected data was technically approved through user agreements and a Facebook contract with no constraints on how the data could be used. As CA sped up, Wylie's problem appeared not in data procurement, but to whom the analyzed results were sold. He describes the numerous customers who fell below his personal standards as "a revolving door of foreign politicians, fixers, security agencies, and businessmen with their scantily clad private secretaries in tow" (133). Wylie's 2014 CA departure appears to have occurred before the more egregious and illegal acts were committed by CA. CA's 2018 downfall leading to bankruptcy and dissolution was not about privacy vio-

lations through data collection, but about a failure to obey UK campaign finance laws limiting party contributions to £100,000. In the US, CA's legal downfall was because they failed to disclose foreign associations under the Foreign Agents Registration Act. After Wylie's departure from CA, the book's remaining 100+ pages address his thoughts about society, data, and integration philosophies and can be skipped by most readers. The post-CA time mainly features attempts to monetize personal CA experiences without sacrificing his own integrity or violating their comprehensive Non-Disclosure Agreement.

*Mindf*ck*'s most glaring omission was the complete lack of any referenced source other than Wylie. Wylie extensively quotes people, describes meetings, and relates events, all without a footnote, endnote, or any other attribution. The only thing preventing this from being shelved as fiction is Wylie's word is the other CA whistleblower, Britney Kaiser, who used extensive endnotes for *Targeted*.¹ The second problem emerges from Wylie disparaging those he dislikes based on their fashion sense and sexual preferences. For example, Wylie describes a first meeting with Steve Bannon as "unshaven, with greasy hair and that layer of grime you get from a transatlantic flight. His eyes showed flecks of bright red that matched the web of rosacea on his skin" (59). Those receiving favorable reviews included Matt Rosenberg from the *New York Times*, whose descriptions are more positive. "Completely bald, slight beefy, and apparently divorced, he was quite fetching" (197). These fashion comparisons are then matched to extensive conversations about sexuality from "in his full homosexual plumage" (163) to "businessmen with their scantily clad private secretaries in tow" (133). After gathering the world's personal data through CA's actions, Wylie commits to offending everyone else during his revelations.

*Mindf*ck* offers an interesting, if unsupported, read into a previously headline topping issue. Skipping this work might be preferred, but reading alternative viewpoints can help provide healthy analytical perspectives. Wylie insights are repetitive, his rants pedantic, and the only area routinely addressed is why straight, white men with bad fashion sense are successful. Understanding social media data and analytic solutions may be the most critical field for the next twenty years and everyone should comprehend the potential implications. Microtargeting's success due to marketing and elections via social media should be understood viscerally and intellectually by every intelligence professional. If you cannot find a way to another book on this subject, Wylie's *Mindf*ck* might be an acceptable substitution.

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1 Britany Kaiser, *Targeted* (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 2019).