



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on March 22, 2018

Facebook CEO Issues “Apology” for Data Breach as Legislators Consider Regulation

Following the news that a company called Cambridge Analytica managed to manipulate votes in favor of Donald Trump in the 2016 election by using leaked Facebook data of at least 50 million people, and coming just as there are new calls for legislation to regulate social media, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg issued a statement apologizing for the data breach. Sort of. Mostly, he blamed others.



Zuckerberg’s Thursday morning statement — in the form of a Facebook post — addresses how the data breach that allowed the manipulation of millions of votes happened in the first place. And while he admits that the folks at Facebook “have a responsibility to protect your data” and that “if we can’t then we don’t deserve to serve you,” Zuckerberg — whose company has seen plummeting stocks in the wake of the revelation — seems intent on turning this scandal into a public relations gain.

Part of that is obvious by the fact that while Zuckerberg promises to “work through this and build a better service over the long term” and to “tell everyone affected by” data breaches,” he admits that his social media Goliath knew all about this data breach in 2015. Of course, the company did not tell anyone about it until after news reports made it impossible to ignore. That is not a mark of integrity.

So, what exactly happened?

As *The New American* reported Tuesday, in 2014, a 24-year-old self-described “gay Canadian vegan” named Christopher Wylie created what he calls “Steve Bannon’s psychological warfare mindf**k tool.” That psychological warfare tool was a complex data-mining/analysis/manipulation program used “to bring big data and social media to an established military methodology — ‘information operations’ — then turn it on the US electorate,” [according](#) to Wylie’s interview with *The Guardian*. The company he built is Cambridge Analytica, and it is owned by a company called SCL.

According to *The Guardian* and the *New York Times*, Cambridge Analytica really got started when Steve Bannon (who at the time was still executive chairman at Breitbart) was Wylie’s boss, and Robert Mercer (the hedge-fund billionaire and heavy Republican donor) was Cambridge Analytica’s sugar daddy investor.

During the 2014 midterms, the company had wooed Mercer with the idea of bringing big data and social media to an established military methodology — “information operations” — then turning it on the U.S. electorate. Mercer had invested \$15 million and expected results. The only problem was that while the company had created the weapon (in the form of a program to analyze data and create manipulative ads to target those users with), they had no ammunition (in the form of data on those users).

That is where Facebook comes in. As this writer wrote Tuesday:

So, Wylie had built the weapon, but didn’t have the ammunition. The simplest answer was to get it



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from the platform that has data on almost every millennial and most boomers: Facebook. According to former employees of the company, Cambridge Analytica paid a third party researcher to acquire the data from Facebook. The pricetag was over \$1 million. Facebook says that researcher told the social-media giant that the data was for an academic study. In that one breach alone, Cambridge Analytica mined the data of more than 50 million Facebook users.

Zuckerberg's [statement](#) adds some detail to how the breach was able to happen:

In 2007, we launched the Facebook Platform with the vision that more apps should be social. Your calendar should be able to show your friends' birthdays, your maps should show where your friends live, and your address book should show their pictures. To do this, we enabled people to log into apps and share who their friends were and some information about them.

In 2013, a Cambridge University researcher named Aleksandr Kogan created a personality quiz app. It was installed by around 300,000 people who shared their data as well as some of their friends' data. Given the way our platform worked at the time this meant Kogan was able to access tens of millions of their friends' data.

In 2014, to prevent abusive apps, we announced that we were changing the entire platform to dramatically limit the data apps could access. Most importantly, apps like Kogan's could no longer ask for data about a person's friends unless their friends had also authorized the app. We also required developers to get approval from us before they could request any sensitive data from people. These actions would prevent any app like Kogan's from being able to access so much data today.

So, the daddy of all social-media platforms somehow missed the obvious fact that allowing apps to harvest data on users — even those who don't install those apps, but merely have "friends" who do — was a recipe for mass data-mining? Of course the real issue is that Facebook was able to collect that data in the first place. If Cambridge Analytica was able to harvest enough of that data to do what they did, imagine the power Facebook wields with *all* of the data it has on nearly every millennial and most boomers.

Because, while the debate right now seems to be about whether or not Team Trump was wrong to do what the Right has justly condemned Clinton and Obama for doing (and the only principled answer to that question is "yes") the real issue here is that Internet platforms — including most social media — routinely harvest data about users and aggregate that data to create startlingly accurate psychological profiles.

As for Zuckerberg's "apology," he sounds a little too much like Hillary Clinton in the midst of the e-mail scandal. He "takes responsibility" while dodging the blame. He writes, "This was a breach of trust between Kogan, Cambridge Analytica and Facebook. But it was also a breach of trust between Facebook and the people who share their data with us and expect us to protect it. We need to fix that," and then adds, "In this case, we already took the most important steps a few years ago in 2014 to prevent bad actors from accessing people's information in this way."

Someone should tell Zuckerberg never to ruin an apology by following it up with factoids trying to diminish one's culpability.

As a result of Facebook's collection and sloppy handling of users' data, legislators are beginning to hear (and make) calls for regulating social media. This is a classic example of *Uncle Remus'* "[briar patch](#)." It will likely be that the very people responsible for creating this situation will be the ones who help create



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the guidelines for that regulation. They win by creating the problem and the solution in the same laboratory.

A far better approach would be to let the free market handle this problem: Users who do not want their data harvested and used to target them for either advertising or manipulative politics should consider abandoning the platforms that practice that data-mining. Thankfully, there are solid alternatives. One such alternative is the new [Oneway](#) social media platform this writer reported on in a [previous article](#). Oneway does not harvest users' data — in fact, it is possible to have an anonymous account by accessing the platform via the Tor network. And as an added bonus, Oneway does not censor free speech. This writer can be found there under the user name [Radix_Libertatem](#).

With the well-deserved beating Facebook is taking right now, free market competition is a very welcome prospect. It certainly beats turning the federal government lose to regulate any part of the Internet.



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