# Platform Literacy in a Time of Mass Gaslighting

## Or - That Time I Asked Cambridge Analytica for My Data

Autumm Caines

### Editor's Note

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*Image CC0 from Pixabay*

# Digital Citizenship and Curiosity

In the beginning of 2017 I first discovered Cambridge Analytica (CA) through a series of videos that included a Sky News report, some of their own advertising, as well as a presentation by their CEO Alexander Nix. I found myself fascinated by the notion that big data firms, focused on political advertising, were behind those little facebook quizzes; that these data firms were creating profiles on people through harvesting their data from these quizzes and combining it with other information about them like basic demographics, voter and districting information, and who knows what else to create a product for advertisers. I was in the process of refining a syllabus for a class and creating an online community around digital citizenship so this was of particular interest to me.

My broad interest in digital citizenship is around our rights and responsibilities online and I was compelled by the thought that we

could be persuaded to take some dumb quiz and then through taking that quiz our data would be taken and used in other ways that we never expected; in ways that would be outside of our best interests.

I had questions about what we were agreeing to: how much data firms could know about us, what kind of metrics they were running on us, how the data could be shared, and what those messages of influence might look like. I started asking questions but when the answers started coming in I found myself paralyzed under the sheer weight of how much work it took to keep up with all of it not to mention the threats of financial blowback. This paralisis made me wonder about the feasibility of an everyday person to challenge this data collection, request their own data to better understand how they were being marketed to, and of course the security and privacy of the data.

Cambridge Analytica is again in the news with a whistleblower coming forward to give more details – including that the company was harvesting networked data (that is not just you but your friends' data) from facebook itself (reactions, personal messages, etc,) and not just the data entered into the quizzes. Facebook has suspended the Cambridge Analytica's accounts and distanced themselves from the company. Additionally, David Carroll, a professor from the New School Parson's School of Design, filed a legal action this past week against the company in the UK. The story is just going crazy right now and every time I turn around there is something new.

However, much of this conversation is happening from the perspective of advertising technology (adtech), politics, and law. I'm interested in it from the perspective of education so I'd like to intersect the two.

## The Request

A few weeks after I found those videos, featured by and featuring Cambridge Analytica, I came across a Motherboard article that gave

some history of how the company was founded and how they were hired by several high profile political campaigns. Around this time I also found Paul-Olivier Dehaye of personaldata.io who was offering to help people understand how to apply to get a copy of their data from Cambridge Analytica based on the Data Protection Act (DPA), as the data was being processed in the UK.

My interests in digital citizenship and information/media/digital literacy had me wondering just how much data CA was collecting and what they were doing with it. Their own advertising made them sound pretty powerful but I was curious about what they had, how much of it I'd potentially given to them through taking stupid online quizzes, and what was possible if combined with other data and powerful algorithms.

The original request was not to Cambridge Analytica but rather to their parent company SCL Elections. There was a form that I had to fill out and a few days later I got another email stating that I had to submit even more information and GPB £10 payable in these very specific ways.

Next steps in your request  Inbox x  CA Case x

**Data Compliance** <data.compliance@sclgroup.cc>  2/17/17
to me

Dear Sir or Madam,

In order to begin processing your request in accordance with applicable laws and regulations, we require from you:

1) A copy of valid photo ID and two recent bank statements or utility bills to confirm your identity.
2) A GBP £10 fee, payable in one of the following ways.

a. By bank transfer to:

Company name: SCL Elections Ltd.
Bank account number: 86165433
Sort code: 20-67-59
SWIFT: BARCGB22
IBAN: GB82 BARC 20675986165433

b. By check to:

SCL Elections Ltd.
55 New Oxford Street
London, WC1A 1BS
United Kingdom

Note that you are required to submit the £10 fee and proof of ID directly to SCL Elections who is Cambridge Analytica's agent for the purposes of DPA requests.

Please remember to include your name and purpose of the payment.

Thank you for your continuing cooperation,

Data Compliance Team

Response from SCL asking for more information from me before they would process my Subject Access Request

[/caption]Out of all of this, I actually found the hardest part to be

paying the £10. My bank would only wire transfer a minimum of £50 and SCL told me that my $USD check would have to match £10 exactly after factoring in the exchange rate the day they recieved it. I approached friends in the UK to see if they would write a check for me and I could pay them back. I had a trip to London planned and I considered dropping by their offices to give them cash, even though that was not one of the options listed. It seemed like silly barrier, that a large and powerful data firm could not accept a PayPal payment or something and would instead force me into overpayment or deny my request due to changes in the exchange rate. In the end, PersonalData.io paid for my request and I sent along the other information that SCL wanted.

**Autumm Caines** <autumm393@gmail.com> 3/18/17
to Data, bcc: Paul-Olivier

Dear Data Compliance Team at SCL Group,

Under the purview of EU Data Protection Directive 95/46/EC and Data Protection Act 1998, I wish to:

1. Know whether your company or any of its processors hold any of my personal data (this includes Cambridge Analytica and other companies in the SCL Group);
2. Know the legal basis of such processing, for each of those companies holding my data (if you rely on consent, please be specific on when I might have given consent and how);
3. Know how you classify this data into the different categories recognized by applicable data protection regimes;
4. Know for what purposes you process this data;
5. Know the legal bases of potential transfers of such personal data to the United States, for each vendor;
6. For each vendor, obtain my own identifiers within that vendor's systems;
7. For each data point, obtain full information as to its source;
8. Get an explanation on the "logic of the processing" of my personal data;
9. Get a list of recipients of my personal data;
10. Obtain a copy of all my personal data.

I am attaching a copy of my electric bill and gas bill as well as a copy of my Ohio drivers license. I have found it very difficult to get a £10 payment to you via wire transfer from here in Columbus Ohio. My bank has a $50 minimum and other wire transfer services such as Western Union would not allow payment without a person designated as a recipient. I have made many financial transactions to the UK in the past and I am disheartened by the laborious process of processing this payment. Because of this you will receive a separate email from Paul-Olivier Dehaye who will be processing payment for me. It has now been a long time since I initially asked for my data. I trust that you will do your best to respond promptly to my request. Given undue delays incurred so far, a response time below a week seems reasonable.

I particularly wish to attract your attention to the "General provisions relating to offences" articles in the Data Protection Act 1988, as they pertain to liabilities by body corporates, but also the personal liability of any officer in such body.

Thank you,

# Response

After I got the £10 worked out with Paul I heard from SCL pretty quickly saying that they were processing my request and then a few days later I got a letter and an excel spreadsheet from Cambridge Analytica that listed some of the data that they had on me.

It was not a lot of data, but I have administered several small learning platforms and one of the things that you learn after running a platform for awhile is that you don't really need a lot of data on someone to make certain inferences about them. I also found the last

tab of the spreadsheet to be disconcerting as this was the breakdown of my political beliefs. This ranking showed how important on a scale of 1-10 various political issues were to me but there was nothing that told me how that ranking was obtained.

Are these results on the last tab from a quiz that I took; when I just wanted to know my personality type or what Harry Potter Character I most resemble? Is this a ranking based on a collection and analysis of my own Facebook reactions (thumbs up, love, wow, sad, or anger) on my friend's postings? Is this a collection and analysis of my own postings? I really have no way of knowing. According to the communication from CA it is these mysterious "third parties" who must be protected more than my data.

**THE RECIPIENTS OR CLASSES OF RECIPIENTS OF PERSONAL DATA TO WHOM THE DATA WAS OR MAY HAVE BEEN DISCLOSED:**

| Clients | Service providers |
|---|---|
| Political campaigns | Digital marketing platforms |
| Independent expenditure groups | Mail vendors |
| Non-profit organizations | Call centers |
| Commercial entities | Research partners |
| | Affiliated data processors |
| | Legal counsel |

Some names and identifying particulars are not being disclosed to protect the identity of third parties.

Excerpt from the original response to the Subject Access request from Cambridge Analytica

In looking to find answers to these questions Paul put me in touch with a Ravi Naik of ITN Solicitors who helped me to issue a response to CA asking for the rest of my data and more information about how these results were garnered about me. We never got a response that I can share and in considering my options and the potential for huge costs I could face it was just too overwhelming.

Is it okay to say I got scared here? Is it okay to say I chickened out and stepped away? Cause that is what I did. There are others who are more brave than me and I commend them. David Carroll, who I mentioned earlier just filed legal papers against CA, followed the same process that I did is still trying to crowdfund resources. I just didn't have it in me.  Sorry democracy.

It kills me. I hope to find another way to contribute.

## Platform Literacy and Gaslighting

So now it is a year later and the Cambridge Analytica story has hit and everyone is talking about it. I backed away from this case and asked Ravi to not file anything under my name months ago and yet here I am now releasing a bunch of it on my blog. What gives? Basically, I don't have it in me to take on the financial risk but I still think that there is something to be learned from the process that I went through in terms of education. This story is huge right now but the dominant narrative is approaching it from the point of view of advertising, politics, and the law. I'm interested in this from the perspective of what I do – educational technology.

About a week ago educational researcher and social media scholar danah boyd delivered a keynote at the South by Southwest Education (SXSW Edu) conference where she was pushed back on the way we approach media literacy with a focus on critical thinking – specifically in teaching but this also has implications for scholarship. This talk drew a body of compelling criticism from several other prominent educators including Benjamin Doxtdator, Renee Hobbs, and Maha Bali which inspired boyd to counter with another post responding to the criticisms.

The part of boyd's talk (and her response) that I find particularly compelling in terms of overlap with this Cambridge Analytica story is in the construct of gaslighting in media literacy.  boyd is not the first

to use the term gaslighting in relation to our current situation with media but, again, often I see this presented from the perspective of adtech, law, or politics and not so much from the perspective of education.

If you don't know what gaslighting is you can take a moment to look into it but basically it is a form of psychological abuse between people who are in close relationships or friendships. It involves an abuser who twists facts and manipulates another person by drawing on that close proximity and the knowledge that they hold about the victim's personality and other intimate details. The abuser uses the personal knowledge that they have of the person to manipulate them by playing on their fears, wants, and attractions.

One of the criticisms of boyd's talk, one that I'm sympathetic to, is around the lack of blame that she places on platforms. Often people underestimate what platforms are capable of and I don't think that most people understand the potential of platforms to track, extract, collect, and report on your behaviour.

In her rebuttal to these criticisms, to which I am equally sympathetic, boyd states that she is well aware of the part that platforms play in this problem and that she has addressed that elsewhere. She states that is not the focus of this particular talk to address platforms and I'm okay with that – to a point. Too often we attack a critic (for some reason more often critics of technology) who is talking about a complex problem for not addressing every facet of that problem all at once. It is often just not possible to address every angle at the same time and sometimes we need to break it up into more digestible parts. I can give this one to boyd – that is until we start talking about gaslighting.

It is exactly this principle of platforms employing this idea of personalization, or intimate knowledge of who a person is, which makes the gaslighting metaphor work. We are taking this thing that is

a description of a very personal kind of abuse and using it to describe a problem at mass scale. It is the idea that the platform has data which tells it bits about who you are and that there are customers (most often advertisers) out there who will pay for that knowledge. If we are going to bring gaslighting into the conversation then we have to address the ability of a platform to know what makes you like, love, laugh, wow, sad, and angry and use that knowledge against you.

We don't give enough weight to what platforms take from us and how they often hide or own data from us and then sell it to third parties (users don't want to see all that messy metadata…. Right?). I'm not sure you even glimpse the possibilities if you are not in the admin position – and who gets that kind of opportunity?

It would be a stretch to call me a data scientist but I've built some kind of "platform literacy" after a little more than a decade of overseeing learning management systems (LMS) at small colleges but most people interact with platforms as a user not as an admin so they never get that. I'm not sure how to quantify my level of platform literacy but please understand that I'm no wiz kid – an LMS is no Facebook and in my case we are only talking about a few thousand users. I'm more concerned with making the thing work for professors and students than anything, however, in doing even a small amount of admin work you get a feel for what it means to consider and care about things on a different level: how accounts are created, how they interact with content and with other accounts, the way accounts leave traces through the content they contribute but also through their metadata, and how the platform is always monitoring this and how as an administrator you have access to that monitoring when the user (person) often does not.

I don't think that most LMS admins (at least as LMSs are currently configured) at small colleges are incentivised to go digging for nuanced details in that monitoring unprompted. I do think that platform owners who have customers willing to pay large sums for

advertising contracts have more of a motivation to analyze such things.

Educational researchers are incentivised to show greater returns on learning outcomes and the drum beat of personalized learning is ever present. But I gotta ask if can we pause for a second and think… is there something to be learned from all this Cambridge Analytica, Facebook, personalization, microtargeting, of advertising story for education? Look at everything that I went through to try to better understand the data trails that I'm leaving behind and I still don't have the answers. Look at the consequences that we are now seeing from Facebook and Cambridge Analytica. The platforms that we use in education for learning are not exempt from this issue.

My mind goes back to all the times I've heard utopian dreams about making a learning system that is like a social media platform. All the times I've seen students who were told to use Facebook itself as a learning tool. So many times I've sat through vendor presentations around learning analytics and then during Q&A asked "where is the student interface – you know, so the student can see all of this for themselves" only to be told that was not a feature. All the times I've brainstormed the "next generation digital learning environment" only to hear someone say "can we build something like Facebook?" or "I use this other system because it is so much like Facebook". I get it. Facebook gives you what you want and it feels good – and oh how powerful learning would be if it felt good. But I'm not sure that is learning is the thing.

In her rebuttal boyd says that one of the outstanding questions that she has after listening to the critics (and thanking them for their input) is how to teach across gaslighting. So, it is here where I will suggest that we have to bring platforms back into the conversation. I'm not sure how we talk about gaslighting in media without looking at how platforms manipulate the frequency and context with which media are presented to us – especially when that frequency and

context is “personalized” and based on intimate knowledge of what makes us like, love, wow, sad, grrrr.

Teaching and learning around this is not about validating the truthfulness of a source or considering bias in the story. Teaching and learning around this is about understanding the how and why of the thing, the platform, that brings you the message. The how and why it is bringing it to you right now. The how and why of the message looking the way that it does. The how and why of a different message that might be coming to someone else at the same time. It is about the medium more than the message.

And if we are going to talk about how platforms can manipulate us through media we need to talk about how platforms can manipulate us and how some will call it learning. Because there is a lot of overlap here and personalization is attractive – no really, I mean it is really really pretty and it makes you want more. I have had people tell me that they want personalization because they want to see advertising for the things that they “need”. I tried to make the case that if they really needed it then advertising would not be necessary, but this fell flat.

Personalization in learning and advertising is enabled by platforms. Just as there are deep problems with personalization of advertising, we will find it is multiplied by tens of thousands when we apply it to learning. Utopian views that ignore the problems of platforms and personalization are only going to end up looking like what we are seeing now with Facebook and CA. The thing that I can’t shake is this feeling that the platform itself is the thing that we need more people to understand.

What if instead of building platforms that personalized pathways or personalized content we found a way to teach platform’s themselves so that students really understood what platforms were capable of collecting, producing, and contextualizing? What if we could find a

way to build platform literacy within our learning systems so that students understood what platforms are capable of doing? Perhaps then when inside of social platforms people would not so easily give away their data and when they did they would have a better understanding of the scope. What if we were really transparent with the data that learning systems have about students and focused on making the student aware of the existence of their data and emphasised their ownership over their data? What if we taught data literacy to the student with their own data? If decades ago we would have focused on student agency and ownership over platforms and analytics I wonder if Cambridge Analytica would have even had a product to sell to political campaigns let alone ever been a big news story.

I'm not saying this would be a fail safe solution – solutions come with their own set of problems – but I think it could be a start. It would mean a change in the interfaces and structures of these systems but it would mean other things too. Changes in the way we make business decisions when choosing systems and changes in the way we design learning would have to be there too. But we have to start thinking and talking about platforms to even get started – because the way they are currently configured has consequences.

Caines, A. (2019). Platform Literacy in a Time of Mass Gaslighting: Or - That Time I Asked Cambridge Analytica for My Data. In R. Kimmons (Ed.), *EdTech in the Wild*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from https://edtechbooks.org/wild/mass_gaslighting

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