

# SHIFTING POLITICAL DISCOURSE: A POST-STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF POWER AND BIG DATA

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## Abstract

In March 2018, it was revealed that Cambridge Analytica (CA), a former United Kingdom-based data company used data from several million Facebook users to specifically target individuals with political ads. CA's data mining operation can be argued to have engaged in restructuring power through the online discourse between people and groups, granting certain actors and their movements increased power. This reflects a shift to the 5<sup>th</sup> generation of warfare. 5G warfare, as it's colloquially known, is the assumption that groups vie for power against other groups, and not necessarily the state. Furthermore, 5G warfare is enabled by shifts of political and social loyalties to causes rather than nations (Kelshall, 2018). Indeed, warfare has become virtual and seeks to influence people, and not states. Through CA's use of psychographic research and its ability to reshape the opinions of the public, power has shifted from the physical to the digital, and from the state to the people. Therefore, the question this essay presents is "How did Cambridge Analytica make power available to those who did not otherwise have it?"

**Keywords:** Cambridge Analytica, data, power

The following analysis answers the research question through a poststructuralist lens and argues that Cambridge Analytica made power available to those who did not have it by controlling and manipulating the discourse surrounding a certain political movement (Hough et al., 2015; Hoffman, 2013; Cadwalladr, 2018). For this paper, the power of Donald Trump's movement will be analyzed. This paper uses the term power as the ability to influence or control the behaviour of someone or something. This is not to be confused with authority, because through a post-structural lens, there is no central authority, much less one that gives power (Cook, 2011). The thesis is argued in three sections. First, the paper examines the role of language in political discourse and how CA controlled the means by which the public communicated during the 2016 Presidential election (Poblete, 2015, p. 203). Second, this paper explores the shift in the distribution of power from state-centric to people-centric by analyzing a post-structuralist approach to power (Hoffman, 2013; Cook, 2012). Finally, this paper argues that CA made power available to those who did not have it by knowing the individual units of culture and waging a culture war by fragmenting the society through

targeted political ads, therefore inflaming tensions and empowering one side (Cadwalladr, 2018). After presenting these arguments, counter arguments and evidence will be provided to substantiate and strengthen the thesis of this essay.

### **Use of Theory and Methods**

This essay uses a post-structuralist analysis to identify how power can change political discourse. Therefore, it is necessary to explain what post-structuralism entails and the motivation for using it in this essay. Post-structuralism is a critical theory used to critique “structuralism”, which holds that “societies are organized in accordance with certain pre-determined structures and patterns” by which we can analyze the world with a positivist, and therefore scientific methodology (Hough et al., 2015, p. 39). Because post-structuralism is a critique of the previous notion, it posits that nothing can be known for certain, and rejects the “rigidity imposed by structuralist notions” such as Realism and Liberalism and makes sense of the world by questioning the *means* by which knowledge and power is gained (Hough et al., 2015, p. 40). The motivation for using post-structuralism in this essay is to view power as something that does not *emanate* from somewhere, but rather as something that is transferred through the social relations of actors. Therefore, traditional conceptions and theories of power are not used in this essay, as they assume that the state *holds* power, whereas post-structuralism does not even assume that power is held at all.

### **The Role of Language in Political Discourse**

In the context of political discourse, Cambridge Analytica specialized in shaping opinions on candidates and ideas by mining data from Facebook accounts and using it to create targeted political ads (Bunch, 2018; Cadwalladr, 2018). CA’s “signature products” were based on “psychographic” research. It gauges openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism with reasonable accuracy (Gonzalez, 2017, p. 10). According to social psychologists, knowing these five traits can give a researcher (Cambridge Analytica) or data scientist a good metric of someone’s personality. Therefore, CA could control the way we use language because it knew what messages people were most likely to believe and respond to.

During the 2016 US Presidential campaign, CA used psychographic research to empower the population of the Rust Belt. Indeed, underlying terms of speech create the positions people think in (McLeod, 1999; Poblete, 2015). Therefore, CA created political ads with inflammatory language to stir discontent with the

opposition. CA empowered the Rust Belt, a large population in the mid-western US who are perceivably disenfranchised, by creating political ads which demonized certain presidential candidates. CA did not create these slogans, but it is possible that it perpetuated them because CA claims they knew who would be partial to the messaging. Therefore, CA made power available to the Rust Belt by normalizing inflammatory language and bringing minority viewpoints into the public eye, thus resulting in a larger cohort coming out to vote (Confessore & Hakim, 2017).

A critique of CA's use of language to empower the people is the feelings of people before CA's alleged role in the 2016 election. It is conceivable that voters who watched political ads with inflammatory language would have voted the way they did despite any ad they saw. Therefore, CA's use of language possibly had no effect (Wakefield, 2018). Indeed, polls show that the majority of Trump's base were least likely to use a computer due to age (Statista, 2016), so the claim that CA's manipulation of public discourse through Facebook ads gave power to Trump's base is not supported by the evidence (Rubin, 2017). However, this refutation is irrelevant because CA's use of language migrated from Facebook into public discourse. Newscasts, rallies, and speeches from political figures all used inflammatory language akin to the ads on Facebook, therefore indicating that CA's inflammatory ads influenced public discourse beyond the internet.

### **Shifting Power from the State to the People**

Cambridge Analytica made power available by shifting the distribution of power in a society to movements which otherwise did not have access to it. Instead of power emanating from a structure in society, such as the state, CA succeeded in *destructuring* power (Antliff, 2007). CA's perceived manipulation of power can be seen through a post-structuralist lens which posits that power is manifested in the relationships and therefore discourses between people (Poblete, 2015, p. 203). A post-structuralist example of how power is manifested in society is changes in political discourse (Cook, 2011; Hough et al., 2015, p. 39). As more people begin to talk about and join new movements, the distribution of power in society shifts from being state-centric and party-centric to populist and people-centric. This is because CA created ads which encouraged and enabled people to join these new movements. CA created a society where people, and not political parties controlled political discourse. Trump voters claimed they voted for him because of a movement, and not because of party identity. Indeed, they voted for Trump precisely because of anti-establishment views (Johnson, 2017). The dichotomy of social movements and states is evidenced by Raschke (1991, in Baumgarten

& Ullrich 2016) who argues that social movements are by definition a challenge to traditional forms of power. Therefore, if CA in fact targeted individual units of society with the purpose of gaining power, a larger social movement would ensue, thus creating a situation wherein power is shifted from the state to groups.

A critique of the above conception of political power through a poststructuralist lens is CA's lack of power to shift discourse from state-centric to people-centric. The argument that CA was able to sway public opinion is speculative. Indeed, CA claimed that their research and ads were the breakthroughs of Trump's victory. However, Gonzalez (2017, p. 11) argues the opposite, claiming that CA's psychographic research played no part in the Trump campaign, and that power dynamics shifted before CA's involvement. Therefore, CA's role in the decentralization of power through post-structuralist discourse is refuted. However, this counter-argument is unconvincing. Anderson & Horvath (2017) argue that even though psychographic research wasn't employed by the Trump campaign, it was still used by CA to shift the discourse from the state to a movement. Indeed, the chairman of Trump's election campaign, Steven Bannon stated in 2013 that his goal was to bring down the state and remake the global order (Anderson & Horvath, 2017).

### **Revolutionizing Society by Destroying and Reshaping its Units of Culture**

Cambridge Analytica's ability to know the units of culture within society and how to manipulate them is the final argument in answering the question of how CA made power available to those who did not have it. To revolutionize society, or to change the dynamics of power, the former system must be destroyed. The starting point is state-centric power. The state is the locus of control in traditional security paradigms such as realism or liberalism (Hough et al., 2015, p. 16; Singh & Nunes, 2016, p. 104). To destroy this paradigm and give power to non-state actors and groups, CA waged a cultural war (Rosenberg et al., 2018). It is conceivable that CA knew the individual units of culture, therefore knowing what hot-button issues would stir dissent. Chris Wiley argues that fragmenting these individual units of culture and piecing them back together according to a new social vision would create a powerful movement which could influence and manipulate national political discourse (Cadwalladr, 2018). Therefore, starting a culture war and tipping the scale one way would cause a breakdown of social relations with opposition groups. This would then galvanize one side, thus giving them access to power. Therefore, the vision behind Cambridge Analytica was to change perceptions. To do this, individual units of culture had to be broken down

and reshaped to make people more open to an alternative vision (Cadwalladr, 2018; CNN, 2018).

A counter-argument to the above is a simple refutation. CA arguably took power away from all groups when it broke down individual units of culture and manipulated them. CA also took away political agency by manipulating would-be voters and their Facebook friends, instead using them as units of analysis. Indeed, by *using* the units of culture in a society for political gain, CA became the holder of power, and gave it, rather than made it available. However, this counter-argument is unconvincing because it assumes that CA was the authority that gave and took agency or power. Through a post-structural analysis, CA is merely an interlocutor of power, or a medium through which power is facilitated or expressed. Therefore, the argument still holds that CA could manipulate, but not create a new social vision or movement.

### Evidence

The literature is clear on the power dynamics presented in this paper. Cook (2011) uses Foucault's argument that power is manifested in (political) discourse. When something or someone can manipulate discourse, they can manipulate where and through which mechanism power is manifested. This is because states no longer have a monopoly on power, as evidenced by CA's ability to control political discourse in 2016 (Cadwalladr, 2018). By using psychographic research, CA could know someone more intimately than their spouse (Anderson & Horvath, 2017). This allowed CA to manipulate the views and opinions of their target and change their perception of a movement or social vision, therefore strengthening it.

Dover et al. (2015, p. 250) argue that "intelligence agencies do not have the configuration, manpower, funds, or even authorities to observe directly the multitude of urban settings and globalised infrastructures". Arguably, this inability of state-based intelligence agencies to harness the power of data has led to a shift in the international system. Indeed, Tucker (2014, p.17) argues that when confronted with mountains of data, traditional intelligence agencies couldn't recognize its significance. Whereas, CA's sophisticated methods could bypass "rational minds" and use data and political messaging to predict people's personalities and swing the vote accordingly (Monbiot, 2018). Therefore, CA's use of data and manipulation of political discourse is how it made power available to groups and not the state.

## Conclusion

Through a post-structural lens, this essay lends significance to the notion that power is ever-changing and does not reside with an institution or government. Governments and scholars operating under traditional notions of power will fall by the wayside, because today, power is effectively manipulated through discourse, and not from institutions. Cambridge Analytica made power available to those who did not have access to it. It does so by swaying votes and manipulating people's thinking toward social movements thereby further empowering them. Second, by distorting language and the way people use it, CA influenced sympathies for a movement or social vision that is aligned with such discourse. Third, CA facilitated a power shift from a state-centric paradigm to a group-centric and individualistic paradigm by changing political discourse. Finally, CA's ability to gain access to the individual units of culture, destroying them, and reshaping them to wage a cultural war against opposition groups, nods to the 5<sup>th</sup> generation of war, where groups and non-state actors vie for power.

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