# THE PRICE OF FREE

**Facebook and Cambridge Analytica**

-------------------------------------------------

## *"Data is the new oil"*

There are 7 billion people on this planet.

2.2 billion of them are on Facebook

## What information does Facebook collect?

*"We collect the content and other information you provide when you use our Services…. This can include information in or about the content you provide, such as the location of a photo or the date a file was created. We also collect information about how you use our Services, such as the types of content you view or engage with or the frequency and duration of your activities."*

**In other words, Facebook knows;**

…..Who your friends are,

……What information you provide about them,

…….What they say about you,

…….What other sites you

…….What you bought,

…….What device you used to access Facebook,

……And much, much more

# Why should we care?

# THE PRICE OF FREE

## Facebook and Cambridge Analytica

In 2008, Michal Kosinski was accepted by Cambridge University to complete a PhD at their new Psychometrics Centre. Psychometrics has been in development since the 1980s. It focuses on measuring psychological traits, such as personality.  It is based on five personality traits, known as the "Big Five" – or OCEAN

Openness - how open you are to new experiences?

Conscientiousness - how much of a perfectionist are you?

Extroversion - how sociable are you?

Agreeableness - how considerate and cooperative you are?

Neuroticism - are you easily upset?

Based on these dimensions, it is possible to make a relatively accurate assessment of the kind of person in front of us. This includes their needs and fears, and how they are likely to behave.

For a long time, the problem with this approach was data collection, because it involved filling out a complicated, highly personal questionnaire. Then came the Internet.  **And Facebook.  And Michal Kosinski.**

Kosinski and his colleagues developed a quite simple test. First, they provided test subjects with a questionnaire in the form of an online quiz. From their responses, Kosinski calculated their personal Big Five values.  Kosinski's team then mixed in online data from his subjects: what they "liked," shared or posted on Facebook, or what gender, age, place of residence they specified, for example.

While each piece of information is too weak to produce a reliable prediction, when tens, hundreds, or thousands of individual data points are combined, the resulting predictions become really accurate. In 2012, Kosinski proved that, on the basis of an average of 68 Facebook "likes" by a user, it was possible to predict, with very high accuracy, their skin colour, their sexual orientation – and their political affiliation.

**Kosinki reckoned he was able to evaluate a person better than the average work colleague, merely on the basis of ten Facebook "likes."**

On the day that Michal Kosinski published his findings, he got two phone calls.

One was the threat of a *lawsuit*. The other was a *job offer*.

*Both of the calls were from Facebook.*

Michal Kosinski began running a personality quiz on Facebook in June 2007, when there were only 20 million users. It was extremely successful, garnering more than eight million respondents and helping hundreds of psychologists with their scientific research.

His team went on to develop even more powerful computer software that could predict personality through social media, including the Apply Magic Sauce prediction application which is still available online.

*"Our research shows that capturing digital behaviour patterns, such as tweets, Facebook likes or web browser logs, is sufficient to be able to build up a detailed picture of an individual's personality, intelligence or political leanings."*

**Michal Kosinski**

In 2014, Kosinski was approached by a private company called Cambridge Analytics. He says that he rebuffed their approaches as unethical. The next link in the chain is still hidden from view.

What is certain is that the personal data of 87 million Facebook users was then harvested by Cambridge Analytica, using the methods pioneered by Kosinski's team, such as using 'free' Facebook personality tests that have implied data permissions.

## Why does this matter?

Cambridge Analytica was hired by both the Republican Party in 2016 and by the Brexit Leave Campaign in the UK. It is of course debateable to what extent they were able to influence voters.

What is certain is that they were able to advise on placing targeted political messaging to 87 million people, all of whom were unaware of how their thinking was being manipulated.

Until very recently, Cambridge Analytica's proud boast was that they played a significant role in both the election of Donald Trump and the Leave vote in the UK. They may, to some extent, have been boasting.

**But what is certain is that the methods they have developed will not be going away.**