The Great Hack, the must-see documentary about fake news

By Hugo Rifkind
Conspiracies, leaks — and lessons in how to manipulate people

The Great Hack, a new Netflix documentary, is the definitive chronicle of the ground zero of fake news. Hugo Rifkind speaks to its creators

If you want to understand all that techie/political stuff of the past few years, otherwise known as the whole “Facebook-caused-Trump-and-Brexit-by-sendingsmy-Greanumad” argument, it helps to understand, probably, that there are two main theories as to what actually happened.

The first postulates a conspiracy. The rise of the internet, this argument goes, created an unprecedented treasure trove of data about each and every one of us. This involved everything from credit card swipe, to web history, to likes and dislikes, which, as the American professor David Carroll puts it in the new, essential Netflix documentary The Great Hack, gives "any buyer direct access to my emotional pulse".

Initially this was just used to sell us stuff. And it worked too, as seen by all those eerie instances where you’ve been talking about a holiday to Corsica and you suddenly start seeing adverts for holidays in Corsica, and you wonder how Facebook has been listening to your conversations.

Then, though, there was quite nasty companies — such as one called Cambridge Analytica — that had previously excelled in manipulating elections in places you don’t know much about figuring out how to use this sort of data to sell politics instead.

This was even more devastatingly effective because it used websites that, in the words of the early Facebook investor Roger McNamier, also in The Great Hack, were designed to monopsonise attention, with all the basic tricks of propaganda married to the tricks of casino gambling slot machines.

This new power, the theory continues, attracted the attention of some fairly nasty billionaires, whom one ought not to name because this stuff is sketchy and they might sue. And also of nasty foreign powers, because they and nasty billionaires tend to have the same aims.

First, they needed a grand experiment, so they focused on Britain. “Brexit was the petri dish,” says the journalist Carole Cadwalladr. And it worked.Millions tuned in, the theory goes, individually targeted at exactly the right people, exploited fear and anger to create a few hundred thousand parallel realities, which were then tightened and redirected into a vote against the European Union, thereby creating the sort of chaos that malign billionaires always want, for some reason.

And then, with this having worked so brilliantly, and at the urging of the billionaires and nasty foreign powers, these companies shifted their attention to the US and did it again, but bigger. And, for a few brief months, right before they realized how much trouble they might be in, they even boasted about it.

The second theory is easier to understand, and it is that all of the above is simply bollocks. That one gets less attention in The Great Hack, although it certainly there. Under this theory, harvesting people’s data is intrusive, maybe, but it doesn’t really give you much power over them, and certainly not over how they might vote.

Also under this theory, it is actually the people who have lost these campaigns who have peddled damaging, viral, internet lies to the electorate, as an excuse not to come to terms with the real reasons for their failure, and to discredit the politics that defeated them.

What’s more, under this theory, your Cambridge Analytica are better understood as bullying fake oil salesmen whose only real genius lies in selling political campaigns the worst failings that they can make any difference. And intriguingly, some of the keenest proponents of this second theory, at least today, are those companies themselves.

For anybody who has an eye, a handful of them are dully aware of all the above, but never quite managed to get on top of it. The Great Hack is the documentary for you. Whether you cleave towards theory one or theory two — and for what it is worth, I do a bit of both — it represents the definitive chronicle of the western ground zero of fake news.

All the characters are here, from the dissident former Cambridge Analytica employees Brittany Kaiser and Chris Wylie to Cadwalladr, to Professor Cambridge Analytica fall apart, and the story explodes worldwide.

Kaiser, probably, is the most compelling character, a quite trendy liberal from Chicago who campaigned for Barack Obama, and who was then recruited by the Old Etonian Nix with the words: “Let me get you drunk and steal all of your secrets.”

Within months she was embedded in the posh British elite, talking differently, wearing different clothes, and with new lobbies, such as game shooting. Even now, as a whistleblower, she evades a certain amoral distance, making her motives hard to trust. Julian Whitelam is a former director of Cambridge Analytica’s parent company, SCL. “Brittany was somebody I thought was a friend,” he says, sadly. “Who Alexander thought was a friend.”

There’s no certainty here.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of The Great Hack, though, is the extent to which it represents the view of outsiders, looking in. It was made for Netflix by Jehane Noujaim and Karim Amer, who are Egyptian-Americans. Six years ago they made The Square, about the Egyptian revolution of 2013. As far as they are concerned, this was a revolution too.

“I think part of it comes from the fact that we do come from Egypt.” Amer tells me over the phone. “I think in the UK, and in America, people believe that democracy is just kind of like a God-given right, that is here to
stay. And most people haven’t had to fight for it. And so they don’t really think that fascism can happen here. But we have seen that this is not the case.”

For Amor, the techniques used in the Brexit referendum and the US election represent a continuation of the “ psyop”, or psychological operations, used on Muslim populations worldwide after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. If that sounds wildly melodramatic, and I fear it might, his film-making partner Nejma puts it in more sober context.

In Egypt, shortly after 9/11, she filmed advertising agencies that had been hired to work on Brand America, a project launched by the US State Department to improve America’s reputation in the Middle East. “And to what was fascinating about what Cambridge Analytica had been doing,” she tells me, “was that all these tactics that had previously been used in all of these other countries were now being utilised in the US and in Britain.”

Exactly what Cambridge Analytica was doing before the Brexit referendum is murky, both in this film and in reality. The Great Hack takes more or less at face value the claims of Nix and others that they had worked on numerous political projects worldwide. One example given comes via a client recruitment pitch, voiced by Nix, in which he claims to have come up with the “Dis-Scu” social campaign in Trinidad and Tobago, in an attempt to, in his words, “increase apathy” by discouraging black youths from voting. The slogan appeared on walls, with their encouragement. “We cut stencils with the logo,” he says. “This is the prime minister’s house that’s being graffitied. It was carnage.”

It makes them sound like serious players, seriously affecting the politics of a vulnerable minority nation. Was it, though, all true? Later, Channel 4 would record him bragging about using all sorts of mechanisms, from fake news, to bribes, to Ukrainian prostitutes to influence elections. His defence, later, was that he had made it up, as a cover for clients. It’s certainly possible that many of his claims were untrue. It’s not impossible that all of them were.

In a similar vein, it’s near impossible to establish for certain what involvement Cambridge Analytica had with Brexit, by working for Arron Banks’s Leave.EU. After the referendum, but before the US election, both groups boasted of working together, and Kaiser even appeared with Leave.EU at a press conference.

In this documentary Cadwalladr speaks of writing about this partnership, only for Cambridge Analytica suddenly to write to him denying that it had happened. Actually they denied it to me first, and I told him, and I was right astonished. Today the official line is that preliminary work happened, and came to nothing. Maybe.

The Great Hack does a tremendous job of unravelling this black box into a narrative that you don’t need to have followed this story relentlessly for three years to understand. I’ve been in a hole in its centre, though, and it is the hole that has dogged theory one, way up top, from the start.

Kaiser speaks of bombarding people with adverts, shaping their reality, exploiting the fact that genius data crunching had predicted that the election would be won by convincing a small handful of people in a small handful of states. Only, who are those people who changed their minds as a result? Why has nobody found them? If Cambridge Analytica could, and so easily, why couldn’t Amor and Nejma? Indeed, why couldn’t anybody else?

“You have no idea what you’re saying to us right now.” Amor says, grimly. “That has been the biggest bane of our existence. We always wanted to find those people. Joe and Kate who thought this, and Joe and Facebook’s chief executive, Mark Zuckerberg, at the Senate judiciary committee in Washington in 2018. Below and above right: David Carroll in The Great Hack

Kate who now think that. We wanted to find who those people were. The quote-quotecussels. That’s what we have been all about. But we were not able to find those people. So I suppose what we were trying to say in this film is that there is no bucket called ‘the persuadeds’. We are all persuadable.”

Again, perhaps. Without them, though, this whole story isn’t quite done. Facebook’s data leaks to Cambridge Analytica were real and considerable, as seen by the one Federal Trade Commission last week fined the company $5 billion. We wouldn’t have had Mark Zuckerberg testifying in front of Congress without this story, nor Facebook’s employment of Nick Clegg. We should remember, also, as Nejma reminds me, that only a few short years ago most of us didn’t even have a language to discuss this stuff. And, as this film reminds us too, that the quite strange collection of activists, academics and ill-fitting journalists who have pursued and defined this story (Cadwalladr was once an essentially humorous feature writer, not unlike me) did so not because they came up with their own conspiracy theory, but because Nix, Leave.EU’s Andy Wigmore and their like bragged openly about how they could manipulate people with data, so proud and smug were they of having done it. Yet, despite all that, in the absence of actual, flesh-and-blood people who were actually swayed, few of whom those who have settled on theory two are going to switch to theory one. Although perhaps that doesn’t matter. My limited understanding of all this has less to do with manipulation by anybody, and more to do with a sort of lurid, pervasive mania that social media has injected into politics.

We band into tribes, we select the news we like, and we grow radicalised