



Cambridge Analytica and the 2017 Elections: Why Has the Kenyan Media Remained Silent?

By Rasna Warah



In the run-up to the August 2017 elections, the *Star* newspaper carried a short news item in its inside pages that stated the Jubilee Party had contracted a company known as Cambridge Analytica to help it win the elections. Most of the other Kenyan mainstream media outlets ignored the story, which seemed strange considering that the company was embroiled in various scandals that suggested that it had manipulated British voters in the Brexit referendum, and that it might have used unethical means to get Donald Trump elected as President of the United States in 2016. Steve Bannon, who was then Trump's chief strategist, was the company's Vice President at the time of the Brexit referendum.

The company, owned by billionaire Robert Mercer, was known for running campaigns that amounted to "psychological warfare". Some claimed that the data mining company's operations might even be construed as being illegal as they crossed boundaries of privacy that should not be allowed in a democracy.

I subsequently wrote in my column in the *Daily Nation* about how this company might be manipulating voters in the 2017 Kenyan election, but my column did not generate much interest among my fellow journalists, even though I had warned Kenyans that this controversial company's dirty tactics amounted to social engineering and could lead to the spread of hate speech and fake

news during the election campaign period.

Not even an explosive exposé of the unethical practices employed by the company, which was published a year later in the UK's *Guardian* and *Observer* newspapers, led to further investigations by the Kenyan media or by Kenya's electoral body, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC). It was as if Cambridge Analytica, despite its tarnished reputation, had successfully managed to buy the silence of Kenyan journalists and electoral officials.

The Kenyan media's puzzling lack of interest in Cambridge Analytica's dirty tactics was mind-boggling. No Kenyan journalist or electoral body official investigated whether the company was behind the *uthamaki* movement that saw Uhuru Kenyatta win by a landslide in Central Kenya. No one bothered to find out whether the company was behind a social media campaign to instil fear about a Raila Odinga presidency - and Luos in general - even though undercover reporters in the UK had recorded the company's top managers admitting that they dug the dirt on their clients' political opponents, and often hired spies and sex workers to obtain potentially embarrassing information. What dirt did they have on Kenya's opposition leaders? And was the fear of this dirt being exposed a reason for the "golden handshake" between Raila Odinga and Uhuru Kenyatta last year? Again, no one to date has bothered to find out.

Dirty tactics

The unethical tactics employed by Cambridge Analytica were revealed last year by the whistleblower Christopher Rylie, who claimed the company harvested Facebook data from millions of people around the world and then targeted them with political messages and misinformation without their knowledge or consent.

This was confirmed by a series of articles known as "The Cambridge Analytica Files" published in the *Observer*, which showed that Cambridge Analytica used data from sites such as Facebook to manipulate people's emotions, and get them to vote in a particular way. One former employee told journalist Carole Cadwalladr — the author of the series — that the aim of the company was to capture every voter's information environment, from magazine subscriptions to airline bookings, and to use this data to craft individual messages to create an "alt-right news and information ecosystem".

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Cadwalladr says that Cambridge Analytica's tactics were not just about combining social psychology with data analytics - they were much more sinister. The company was not ideologically neutral and had strong links with well-heeled right-wing groups and politicians in Britain, the United States, Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine, Iran and Moldova. Its campaigns thus propagated a distinctly ultra-right agenda. Later investigations into the Trump campaign's alleged links to Russia prior to the 2016 elections also raised the question about whether Cambridge Analytica facilitated these links.

These revelations led to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg admitting that 87 million Facebook users' data had been mined. He was subsequently hauled before the US Congress and fined \$5 billion for privacy violations. Britain's parliament referred to Facebook as "digital gangsters" and the UK government has since started an antitrust inquiry into the company. France, Australia, Japan, India,

New Zealand and Singapore are also considering passing new laws to regulate giant Internet platforms like Facebook.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal not only impacted the fortunes of Facebook, whose share prices plummeted, but also Cambridge Analytica, which went bankrupt and was forced to shut down. However, in Kenya, no inquiry into Facebook or Cambridge Analytica took place and no laws or regulations to protect people's online privacy have been passed.

Why now?

Having ignored this story for so long, it seems odd that now, nearly two years after the 2017 election, the *Daily Nation's* editors feel that news about a high-profile British MP admitting to the UK's Channel 4 News that she worked for Cambridge Analytica in Jubilee's election campaign in 2017 deserves front-page treatment. In its 17 July 2019 edition, the *Daily Nation* splashed the story of Alexandra Phillips telling a journalist that she was secretly employed by Uhuru Kenyatta as a political communications consultant. The newspaper also carried a photo of Phillips donning a Jubilee cap. In the leaked video clip where she admitted to working for Jubilee, Phillips also said that she loved Kenya. (Why wouldn't she? Her contract was valued at £300,000 per month and her job description, she claims, including writing speeches for Uhuru.)

The Jubilee Party denied any links with Cambridge Analytica, but a few days later, in its Sunday edition, the *Nation* revealed that it had seen leaked emails that linked State House operative Nancy Gitau with the disgraced company. Apparently all communication between Cambridge Analytica's consultants working in Kenya had to be copied to Ms. Gitau, who also offered suggestions on how the election campaign should be conducted.

Why did this story merit newspaper space and why now? Perhaps it has to do with the politics of the 2022 elections. Uhuru Kenyatta will not be running in these elections, as he will have come to the end of his second and final term. Moreover, the Jubilee Party is no longer what it was, with the infighting between the two principal parties of this coalition becoming more vicious by the day. So a story like this is not likely to have any significant impact on the 2022 elections. And it will also have no effect on the fortunes of Cambridge Analytica, which has already closed shop, thanks to the many scandals it was embroiled in. Which is why it seems odd that the *Nation* chose to highlight this story now.

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But what the story did reveal was the extent to which Uhuru Kenyatta and his Jubilee Party were willing to go to win the 2013 and 2017 elections. Uhuru is not averse to paying foreign PR companies huge amounts of money to manipulate voters and the media. In the run-up to the 2013 elections, when he was facing charges of crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court (ICC), he hired the services of a London-based PR firm called BTP Advisers to manage his election campaign. The PR company, whose slogan is "We deliver campaigns that change hearts and minds", advised Uhuru to use aggressive propaganda tactics that cast the ICC as racist and its supporters, including local civil society organisations (which his propagandists dubbed "the evil society"), as puppets of the West.

On its website, BTP Advisers revealed the winning strategy that delivered the presidency to Uhuru in 2013: "By exposing the weak and flawed nature of the ICC case against him, we made the election

a choice about whether Kenyans would decide their own future or have it dictated to them by others.” By framing the ICC cases as a sovereignty issue for Kenyans, the strategy cleverly undermined both the ICC and the case against Kenyatta. As fate would have it, the ICC would later drop charges against Kenyatta and his fellow indictee and running mate William Ruto due to lack of sufficient evidence.

Uhuru also hired a group of bloggers and journalists dubbed “The State House Boys” who carried out an aggressive propaganda campaign on social and other digital media to whitewash Uhuru and his party. The so-called Presidential Strategic Communications Unit was built by Johnson Sakaja - a young man with political ambitions who would later become Senator for Nairobi County - who recruited the likes of Dennis Itumbi and David Nzioka to build Brand Uhuru. Although this roguish bunch of propagandists have since been sidelined and now work for Deputy President William Ruto, their vitriolic rhetoric and misinformation campaign had a lasting impact on the 2013 and 2017 elections.

Digital surveillance

Did President Uhuru Kenyatta and his Jubilee party win the 2013 and 2017 elections fairly, or did a UK-based political consultancy company called Cambridge Analytica help them win by using unethical means? This question surfaced again after the release of an explosive documentary aired on the UK’s Channel 4 News in 2018 that showed the managing director of the company, Mark Turnbull, admitting to stage-managing the last two elections in Kenya, from rebranding the Jubilee party twice and even writing its manifesto and speeches. In the Channel 4 News documentary, Turnbull is shown telling undercover reporters that the company uses people’s deep-seated hopes and fears to manipulate them. “It is no good fighting an election campaign on the facts, because actually it is all about emotion,” he said.

The question Kenyans must ask is whether Cambridge Analytica undermined our democracy and made a mockery of our elections. Is the company responsible for deepening ethnic divisions in our society? The deliberate manipulation of people’s fears and emotions also raises ethical questions. In a country like Kenya, where ethnic-based tensions have led to violence and bloodshed in the past, was Cambridge Analytica being highly irresponsible by stoking these tensions?

Other African countries have been more diligent about employing companies that create divisions and disseminate misinformation. For example, in the wake of the corruption and “state capture” scandals involving former South African president Jacob Zuma and the notorious Gupta family, the UK-based PR company Bell Pottinger was accused of initiating a cynical campaign on behalf of the Guptas that pitted South Africa’s whites against blacks. When details of the “economic apartheid” campaign were exposed, the PR company lost credibility and collapsed. But in Kenya, not a single investigation has been conducted to expose the unethical actions Cambridge Analytica was involved in that might have impacted our elections and polarised the country along ethnic lines.

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Going forward, can we expect similar campaigns in the run-up to the 2022 election? Are there other companies such as Cambridge Analytica that are marketing themselves to Kenyan politicians? Such companies have found a ready market in poor and corrupt countries where leaders will go to any length (and pay millions) to win elections. Might Ruto, the presidential candidate in 2022, also hire a company like Cambridge Analytica for his election campaign? Ruto has loads of money and the

contest in 2022 will very likely be a high stakes game. Cambridge Analytica may have closed shop, but other companies might be waiting in the wings to make money during the 2022 election campaign period? Might they now have their eyes on Ruto? And will the Kenyan media be more diligent about such companies or will they wait for foreign media to expose them?

We must also ask whether the introduction of the Huduma Namba (the newly rolled-out National Integrated Identity Management System) in the absence of regulations that protect privacy could also impact the elections. Could the personal biometric and other data that has been captured by the Huduma Namba be manipulated by electoral officials? Was electoral official Chris Msando's murder prior to the 2017 elections linked to his knowledge of such a scheme?

We live in scary times. Information technology, which was once viewed as "the great leveler" that would deliver true democracy to the world's people, is now being used to manipulate elections, subvert democracy, and promote authoritarianism.

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