

2016'S BIGGEST SHOCKS AND THE ROLE THAT DIGITAL MARKETING PLAYED

As 2016 draws to an end, the last month of the year is likely to be filled not only with reminiscing about the New Year's resolutions made in a champagne-fuelled haze in the early hours of January 1st, but also with musings over the two big political shocks which held the world's attention – UK's Brexit and America's Presidential Election.

Is Big Data dead?

Saying that no one saw either of these coming would be an understatement – common sense, polls, media and big data all predicted the wrong results, leading many to claim that 'big data is dead'. However, discussion about the role of digital media in politics, and its overall shaping of public opinion, is slightly more complex than that.

It's no secret that direct marketing has improved drastically in the digital age, and Facebook has subtly become 'the microtargeter's ultimate weapon', a position augmented even further by the increased role that social media platform plays in news consumption. What many fail (or refuse) to acknowledge, Mr Zuckerberg included, is that while allowing the option to display user-tailored content and boost the popularity of certain stories is all well and good if it ensures we see more Fantastic Beasts/StarWars merchandise shopping suggestions, more of our friend Jessica's holiday photos from her vacation in Greece and less of our second-cousin's friend's baby's photos, the fact that big organisations and powerful people can influence what we consume online can be considered ever so slightly sinister.

The ANTISocial Network

The good news is, people are talking about the issues. For instance, Facebook's fake news predicament has circulated the media for a while now, much to the frustration of Zuckerberg. Despite the fact that the founder of the social network has deemed claims that the pandemic of fake news on users' news feed has aided Trump's election as irrational (to put it mildly), evidence suggests that fake stories were circulated in much greater volumes and frequency than the follow-up debunking stories.

Supporters of the stance that tech companies shouldn't be held accountable for what is shown on a news feed based on the principle of 'increased engagement' seem to be overlooking the fact that such metrics are no longer a valid one when regarding a platform with such wide reach, which allows those in power access to all sorts of granular data about its users. To quote BBC News' tech reporter [Dave Lee](#), popular doesn't always equal good.

And if you haven't freaked out yet and closed this article in search of less sinister reading material, hold fire, because there's more. Digital media's links to politics is like the real-world, tech version of Inception. Only with less Leo DiCaprio and an even bigger budget.

Politics of Remarketing

Some of the cause and effect links between your internet activity and what shows up on your Facebook feed is fairly obvious. To return to the Fantastic Beasts example, if I'd looked at show times for the movie online, bought cinema tickets, etc. I wouldn't be too shocked to see ads for related merchandise. This sort of remarketing is straightforward and more or less

innocent (unless you take issue with consumerism overall, but we can leave that topic until the Christmas shopping is done!).

That said, did you know that completing a *Which breed of dog best matches your personality?* *Quiz online* might actually have aided President-elect Trump's campaign in targeting you as a potential supporter? This [article](#) in *The New YorkTimes* discusses at length how the answers to the personality quizzes constantly bouncing around your news feed are transformed into precious 'onboarding' data i.e. combination of your online persona and offline identity.

New Media Trumps Traditional Ads

The data firm in question, Cambridge Analytica, specialises in putting together psychological profiles from voting histories as well as a full range of demographics (which it collects from data giants) to allow political clients to profile voters. Now, if you have been following the narrative we're building here, it won't come as a surprise to find out that the firm worked on both the Brexit 'Leave' campaign and Donald Trump's campaign in the US Presidential Election.

And, just in case you follow US politics closely, let me throw in a little bonus for you – according to same NYT article, one of the board members of Cambridge Analytica is none other than Stephen Bannon – head of controversial, right-wing Breitbart News and future White House chief strategist.

Now, while it is a truth universally acknowledged that powerful people with questionable morals in possession of a single media outlet must have access to many (Rupert Murdoch springs to mind as a point of comparison), people can usually take comfort in the fact that these people and organisations are held at

least somewhat accountable by media regulations and the like. However, in the case of Trump's utilisation of new media for his campaign and behind-the-scenes data packaging for the purposes of 'psychographic' advertising, the true alarm comes from the realisation that such niche-profiled advertising wasn't invented by the political campaigners in question – Facebook already had the required infrastructure in place, and with Zuckerberg dismissing both the social media platform's role in the election and demands for increased screening of what content goes on there, who is there to hold firms like Cambridge Analytica accountable?

The Good, The Bad and the Data

Before you sink into complete despair and proclaim targeted advertising the digital tool the 'father of public relations' and propaganda Edward Bernays would have loved to have, let me point out that there's good news in all of this also – it isn't the early 20th century anymore - people are talking about the issue, watchdogs are not letting Zuckerberg sweep 'fake news' under the carpet, and as is the case with all powerful advertising mediums, the presidential campaign (whether you agree with the politics or not) illustrates that [Facebook marketing](#) has great potential to influence your audience if used intelligently.