The Cambridge Analytica / Facebook affair: the challenge of securing personal data on social networks

As the scandal deepens concerning the practices of Cambridge Analytica and its use of the personal data of 87 million Facebook users, Mohamed Makhlouf, Professor in Information Systems Management at KEDGE Business School, shares his view of the major risks concerning the security of social network users’ data.

“Facebook, Twitter, Instagram… all the social networks have built their business models around the data supplied voluntarily by their users. These users do not pay for the service, notwithstanding, these groups’ wealth is derived from the user himself and the use of his data by third-party applications, explains Pr. Mohamed Makhlouf. The mass of accumulated data, its security and its use without consent by third parties can cause extremely serious societal problems.”

In Pr. Mohamed Makhlouf’s view, the case of Cambridge Analytica is unprecedented in the history of the social networks and perfectly illustrates the risks involved: “Cambridge Analytica has worked on modelling user profiles by developing an algorithm based on an effective and well-known model: the OCEAN model. Cambridge Analytica has combined behavioural data with factual data - demographic, geographical and socio-economic - and with psychographic attitude-based data - purchasing habits, lifestyle, political commitment - to generate targeted messages which can be addressed using advertising technology”.

“Cambridge Analytica has ultimately succeeded in creating an incredibly efficient model making it possible to target users with messages perfectly adapted to their profiles. But at this stage, nothing illegal had happened”, stresses Pr. Mohamed Makhlouf.

“From a legal standpoint, the line was crossed with the creation of an application downloaded by 270,000 people which enabled Cambridge Analytica to access all of these users’ Facebook data (likes, photos, comments, etc.). In addition to data from all of their friends. In total, 300 different types of data were collected. All of this without neither asking for their prior consent and nor even informing them, as their former research director pointed out. In just a few months, Cambridge Analytica harvested all the information concerning more than 87 million people registered on Facebook and used it for political persuasion purposes”.

And Pr. Mohamed Makhlouf concludes: “The mea culpas from the social networking giants concerning their data leaks falls well short of what users want and what governmental organizations and independent privacy protection organizations expect. With this lack of transparency, will these networks reinvent a new economic model or risk losing users?”

Pr. Mohamed Makhlouf is at your disposal of any requests for interviews or reports concerning this news item.

Mohamed Makhlouf is a Professor in Information Systems Management at KEDGE Business School. He possesses extensive managerial experience with major European industrial, financial and telecommunications companies. He holds a PhD in management from Telecom Business School in Paris, of an MSc in information systems management and a Research Master’s in mathematics, information technology and human sciences. He is also an IT engineer. He combines conceptual, behavioural and practical research. Pr. Mohamed Makhlouf has developed a unified approach for corporate governance and information systems governance for strategic alignment purposes, based on Big Data and end-to-end digital transformation. He has published numerous articles in leading international journals.

About KEDGE Business School:
KEDGE is a leading French business school with four campuses in France (Paris, Bordeaux, Marseilles and
Toulon), three abroad (Shanghai, Suzhou and Dakar) and three partner campuses (Avignon, Bastia and Bayonne). The KEDGE community is made up of 12,600 students (including 25% coming from abroad), 183 professors (including 44% coming from abroad), 275 international academic partners and 55,000 alumni around the world. KEDGE offers 36 programmes in management, designed for students and industry professionals. It also provides tailor made educational programmes for businesses at national and international levels. KEDGE Business School is AACSB, EQUIS and AMBA-accredited, and is a member of the Conférence des Grandes Ecoles. It is also recognised by the French government, with labelised programmes, and has obtained the EESPIG label. KEDGE was ranked 40th by the Financial Times in the European Business School ranking and 37th globally in its Executive MBA ranking.

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