

# Cambridge Analytica—the data analytics industry is already in full swing

March 23 2018, by David Beer

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Revelations about [Cambridge Analytica](#) have laid bare the seeming lack of control that we have over our own data. Suddenly, with all the talk of "psychographics" and voter manipulation, the power of data analytics has become the source of some concern.

But the risk is that if we look at the case of Cambridge Analytica in isolation, we might prevent a much wider debate about the use and control of our data. By focusing on the reports of [extreme practices](#), we might miss the many everyday ways that [data analytics](#) are now shaping our lives.

The [data analytics industry](#) is much more diverse and far-reaching than the current news coverage might lead us to believe. During a recent project, I found something quite different to the reports that we are now seeing about Cambridge Analytica.

Despite having its origins in the 1970s, when computer scientists and processing experts were beginning to try to imagine what a data-informed organisation might look like, it wasn't until the 1990s that the data analytics industry began to really develop. Some of the most famous early examples of the organisational and individual application of data analytics were in sport, and particularly [in football](#), where data was gathered to try to enhance performance levels, to find hidden patterns within games or to spot potential talent.

Beyond this, the use of data in different sectors has spread drastically in the last 20 years, most markedly in the fields of performance management, advertising and marketing, as well as some notable developments in [security and risk](#). This has included things like workplace [talent metrics](#) and [postcode level classifications](#), through to the use of data about lifestyles [to fix insurance premiums](#) or in [credit scoring](#). The increasing harvesting of data – enabled by the new infrastructures of GPS, [RFID sensors](#), internet shopping, smartphones and [social media](#) – has created a range of new opportunities for data harvesting. As the data began to pile up, a burgeoning industry emerged.

## **You as a data analyst**

As might be expected, some of these data analytics providers offer consultancy and analytics services, helping to track customers, brands, public opinion and the like. What seemed much more important to me, though, was that a good portion of this industry was instead focused on providing the software and tools to, as they put it, turn us into our own data analysts.

Many of these tools utilise and adapt The Apache Software Foundation's open-source [Hadoop project](#) – which allows for large clusters of computers to be used to process data. These tools are usually presented as accessible dashboard-style technologies that require little technical skill or know-how of the user. The result is that data can be harvested and used in many different contexts and by a much wider range of people than we might imagine.

Measuring a wide range of things, from sentiment, buzz, amplification and influence in social media, to taste profiling, social network formations and so on, these tools come with some glossy promises. The point here is that the practice of [data analysis](#) is not restricted to qualified technical experts. The data analytics industry is actually aiming to turn anyone into a data analyst and to make all organisations data savvy.

Of course, data analytics come with some powerful promises designed to make us evermore data focused. We are told [repeatedly by this industry](#) that data can speed us up, make us smarter, allow us to see into the hidden depths of organisations, allow us to act in real-time or enable us to predict the future. This means that we also need to be cautious about accepting claims that are made about the capabilities of data analytics, and which are invested with an agenda aimed at [expanding data use](#).

If we want a full and comprehensive debate about the role of data in our lives, we need to first appreciate that the analysis and use of our data is

not restricted to the types of figures that we have been reading about in these recent stories – it is deeply embedded in the structures in which we live.

This calls for us to reflect on how our data is used and how data analysis, afforded by these new tools, is coming to shape our lives in lots of ways. Data analysis is now an embedded presence that branches out into everything from [local government](#), large corporations and SMEs, to political parties, [school governance](#), PR and management consultancy.

The Cambridge Analytica case is crucial in understanding the way that our data are being used, but the opportunity these revelations offer for reflection shouldn't be restricted solely to this type of reported misuse. We should look beyond that to try to understand how data-led approaches are influencing our lives on lots of different fronts, especially as the tools of data analysis are taken up in numerous different sectors. Just because the rest of the industry may not be as extreme as Cambridge Analytica, it does not mean that we should neglect to ask questions about the many ways that our data are being used to judge, rank and order our lives.

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