

# Pink-haired whistleblower at heart of Facebook scandal

March 27 2018, by James Pheby

---



A Canadian data analytics expert Christopher Wylie appearing as a witness before the British parliamentary committee

Instantly recognisable with his pink hair and nose ring, Christopher Wylie claims to have helped create data analysis company Cambridge Analytica before turning whistleblower and becoming "the face" of the

crisis engulfing Facebook.

Carole Cadwalladr, the Guardian journalist who worked with Wylie for a year on the story, described him as "clever, funny, bitchy, profound, intellectually ravenous, compelling. A master storyteller. A politicker. A data science nerd."

The bespectacled 28-year-old describes himself as "the gay Canadian vegan who somehow ended up creating Steve Bannon's psychological warfare tool," referring to Trump's former adviser, whom the report said had deep links with Cambridge Analytica (CA).

With Wylie's help, Cadwalladr revealed how CA scooped up data from millions of Facebook users in the US.

They then used the information to build political and psychological profiles, in order to create targeted messages for voters.

Facebook insists it did not know the data taken from its site were being used, but the revelations have raised urgent questions over how data of 50 million users ended up in CA's hands.

Shares of the tech giant have since tumbled, with \$70 billion (56 billion euros) wiped off in 10 days.

## **'Walter Mitty'**

Wylie studied law and then fashion, before entering the British political sphere when he landed a job working for the Liberal Democrats.

Former Lib Dem colleague Ben Rathe had a less complementary description of Wylie, tweeting that he "thinks he's Edward Snowden, when he's actually Walter Mitty"—a reference to a fictional character

with a vivid fantasy life.

Wylie became a research director for Strategic Communication Laboratories (SCL), the parent company of CA, in 2014.

"I helped create that company," he said of CA in an interview with several European newspapers.

"I got caught up in my own curiosity, in the work I was doing. It's not an excuse, but I found myself doing the research work I wanted to do, with a budget of several million, it was really very tempting," he told French daily Liberation.



Christopher Wylie: 'I got caught up in my own curiosity'

Initially, he enjoyed the globetrotting lifestyle, meeting with ministers from around the world.

But the job took a dark turn when he discovered that his predecessor had died in a Kenyan hotel. He believes the victim paid the price when a "deal went sour".

"People suspected poisoning," he told a British parliamentary committee investigating "fake news" on Tuesday.

## **'Repair Facebook!'**

His appearance before MPs saw him swap his usual loud T-shirts for a sober suit and tie, producing hours of testimony against the firm that he left in 2014.

He said he eventually decided to speak out after US President Donald Trump's shock election victory, which he partly attributed to the misuse of personal data for political purposes.

Cambridge Analytica vigorously denies the charges levelled against it, saying that Wylie was merely "a part-time employee who left his position in July 2014" and had no direct knowledge of how the firm had operated since.

Wylie urged British MPs to dig deeper into the story, insisting that his concern was not political and was focussed on abuses in the democratic process—including during the Brexit referendum campaign.

"I supported Leave, despite having pink hair and my nose ring," he said.

He claimed that various pro-Brexit organisations worked together to get around campaign finance rules, using the services of Aggregate IQ, a Canadian company linked to the SCL group.

Wylie believes that it is "very reasonable" to say that CA's activities may have swung the Brexit vote, although he stressed he was not anti-Facebook, anti-social media or anti-data.

"I don't say 'delete Facebook', but 'repair Facebook'," he told the European newspapers.

However, he admitted to MPs that he had "become the face" of the scandal.

© 2018 AFP

Citation: Pink-haired whistleblower at heart of Facebook scandal (2018, March 27) retrieved 23 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2018-03-pink-haired-whistleblower-heart-facebook-scandal.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.