

US State Dept has deal with under-fire UK data-miner

March 20 2018, by Dave Clark



Cambridge Analytica's chief executive officer Alexander Nix gives an interview during the Web Summit in Lisbon on November 9, 2017

The US State Department has a \$500,000 contract with the British analysis firm facing allegations it misused Facebook user data and

offered to dig dirt on its international clients' election opponents.

A State Department official told AFP on Monday the agency's Global Engagement Center has a contract with Strategic Communications Laboratories (SCL) Group, the parent company of under-fire Cambridge Analytica.

The agency has no business with CA, but SCL is closely tied to its offshoot and Facebook announced last week that it was suspending both, under the title "SCL/Cambridge Analytica," from its platform.

A public record of the contract on a US government site, spotted by the Defense One news website, lists its value as \$496,232 and [states](#) it was awarded to the "SCL Group Ltd of London" on February 17, 2017.

The State Department official said the contract was to provide "research and analytical support in connection with our mission to counter terrorist propaganda and disinformation overseas.

"SCL, in particular SCL Defence, has done work for other parts of the US government in the past and is a major company in the field of research and analytics," she said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The Global Engagement Center was set up under former US president Barack Obama to analyze and push back against online propaganda and recruitment by armed extremist groups such as the Islamic State.

Since Donald Trump came to office, Congress has assigned \$120 million to the center to counter the kind of state propaganda US intelligence says Russia deployed to influence the 2016 presidential election.

But former secretary of state Rex Tillerson, who was sacked last week, never accepted the funding and the GEC had continued to focus on

online jihadist influence rather than state actors like China and Russia.

Analyzing the online profile of suspected jihadists and sympathizers and then "micro-targeting" them for counterpropaganda would be exactly the kind of work that the data-mining firm SCL was set up to do.

But the Cambridge Analytica unit, launched in 2013 to offer advanced assistance to election campaign operations, has been accused of using underhand techniques to influence voters in democratic polls.

Facebook has suspended the firm's account for allegedly covertly creating behavioral profiles of 50 million potential US voters as part of its paid support for Trump's 2016 campaign.

Dirty tricks

Cambridge Analytica denies the claim, but it is also facing a probe from British regulators seeking a court order to seize its servers and investigate allegations of breach of privacy during voter research.

And more pressure was piled on the firm when Britain's Channel 4 news broadcast footage of CA executives boasting to an undercover reporter about alleged election influence techniques.

The pair told the reporter, masquerading as a Sri Lankan businessman keen to influence a vote in his home country, that they had secretly worked in African and European countries as well as in the US.

They described the practice of sub-contracting dirty tricks work to former British and Israeli intelligence agents and using Ukrainian women to lure unsuspecting candidates into compromising situations.

The firm accused Channel 4 of misrepresentation and said the executives

had tried to assess the bona fides of a potential client by testing whether he would ask for unethical services they would never provide.

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