Scientist in Facebook data scandal says being scapegoated

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The academic behind the app that allowed consulting firm Cambridge Analytica to farm the data of some 87 million Facebook users said Tuesday he was being scapegoated while the social network was being "mined left and right by thousands" of companies.

Aleksandr Kogan, who teaches at Cambridge University, told a British parliamentary committee that criticism of his work by Facebook showed the US social media giant was in "PR crisis mode".

"I don't believe they actually think these things because I think they realise that their platform has been mined left and right by thousands of others," said the Russian-American scientist, who is now banned from Facebook.

"I was just the unlucky person that ended up somehow linked to the Trump campaign. It's convenient to point the finger at a single entity," he said, playing down his own work as of little political value.

Kogan created a personality prediction app through his company Global Science Research (GSR), which offered a small financial payment in return for users filling out a personality test.

Facebook says it was downloaded by 270,000 people, but it also gave Kogan access to their friends, giving him a wealth of information on 90 million users, according to the social media giant's boss Mark Zuckerberg.

The data was sold to Cambridge Analytica's parent company. Cambridge Analytica went on to work on Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign.

However, Kogan told MPs on Tuesday that the data was too imprecise to build up accurate profiles that could be used to effectively target political Facebook ads.

"One of the biggest points of confusion has been how accurate the personality scores we provided to SCL (CA's parent company) were," he said.

"The scores were highly inaccurate. We found that the scores were more accurate than a random guess, but less accurate than assuming everyone is average on every trait."

Facebook's own tools "provide companies a far more effective pathway to target people based on their personalities than using scores from users from our work," he added.

Kogan said that CA assured him that what he was doing was "perfectly legal and within the terms of service" of the social media giant.

CA's former chief executive Alexander Nix has denied using data collected by GSR, but Kogan called the claim "a fabrication".

'No Bond villain'

Clarence Mitchell, a CA spokesman told a press conference Tuesday that Kogan's data "was shown to be virtually useless in that it was only just above random guessing".

He reiterated CA did not use any of it on the Trump campaign and had

broken no laws, while mistakes had been acknowledged.

"The company has been portrayed in some quarters as almost some Bond villain," he said.

"Cambridge Analytica is no Bond villain."

Kogan also accused Facebook of feigning ignorance of how their users' data was being used, saying it was "well documented that Facebook collaborates with researchers.

"They gave me the data set without any agreement signed," he explained. "Sometime later they came and we did have a signed agreement."

When asked why Facebook would be so accommodating, Kogan replied that "this was something they gave their employees to stimulate them."

Committee chairman Damien Collins asked if that meant Facebook let its employees give data to academics "and let them play with it?", to which Kogan responded; "Yes".

The scientist claimed in an earlier interview that "tens of thousands" of apps will have taken advantage of Facebook data rules.

It was, however, not part of Facebook's terms for Kogan to sell data.

Born in Moldova and raised in Russia, before emigrating to the United States at the age of seven, Kogan studied at the University of California, Berkeley, and obtained his doctorate at the University of Hong Kong.

He joined the University of Cambridge's Department of Psychology as a lecturer in 2012.

He has also conducted work funded by the Russian government with St Petersburg University, but said that was irrelevant to the Facebook scandal.

The scientist also goes by the name Aleksandr Spectre, which he took when he married his Singaporean bride.

When an MP pointed out that the name was also the evil organisation in James Bond films, Kogan said this was just an "unfortunate coincidence".

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