

Data scientist drops Facebook defamation suit

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In this March 29, 2018, file photo, the logo for Facebook appears on screens at the Nasdaq MarketSite, in New York's Times Square. Aleksandr Kogan, the data scientist at the center of Facebook's Cambridge Analytica privacy scandal, said he is dropping a defamation lawsuit against the social network rather than engage in an expensive, drawn-out legal battle. (AP Photo/Richard Drew, File)

Aleksandr Kogan, the data scientist at the center of Facebook's Cambridge Analytica privacy scandal, said he is dropping a defamation lawsuit against the social network rather than engage in an expensive, drawn-out legal battle.

Kogan, 33, sued the social giant in March, claiming the social giant scapegoated him to deflect attention from its own misdeeds, thwarting his academic career in the process. The suit sought unspecified monetary damages and a retraction and correction of what Kogan said were "false and defamatory statements."

"We thought there was a one percent chance they would do the right thing," Kogan told The Associated Press. Facebook is "brilliant and ruthless," he added. "And if you get in their way they will destroy you."

A Facebook spokesperson said the company had "no comment to share concerning this development."

The former Cambridge University psychology professor created an online personality test app in 2014 that vacuumed up the [personal data](#) of as many as 87 million Facebook users. The vast majority of those were unwitting online friends of the roughly 200,000 people Kogan says were paid about \$4 to participate in his "ThisIsYourDigital Life" quiz.

Cambridge Analytica, a political data-mining firm founded by conservative power brokers including billionaire Robert Mercer and former White House aide Steve Bannon, paid Kogan \$800,000 to conduct his research and to provide the firm with a copy of the data. The project's aim was to create voter profiles based on Facebook users' online behavior to help in tailored political-ad targeting, according to Christopher Wylie, a former data scientist at the firm.

In March 2018, when the scandal broke, Facebook executives charged

that Kogan had lied to them about how the data he harvested would be used. Facebook deputy general counsel Paul Grewal claimed at the time in a statement to The New York Times that Kogan perpetrated "a scam—and a fraud." CEO Mark Zuckerberg accused Kogan of violating Facebook rules "to gather a bunch of information, sell it or share it in some sketchy way."

Kogan said such accusations were "either unfair or untrue." Facebook shut down Kogan's app in late 2015 after it was exposed in press accounts and he said he then destroyed his copy of the rogue data at its request. But it didn't ban him from the social media platform until the Cambridge Analytica scandal broke last year.

Evidence presented to a U.K. parliamentary committee indicated that Cambridge Analytica had not deleted the Kogan-acquired dataset on 30 million Facebook users by February 2016. Britain's Information Commissioner's Office said Cambridge Analytica used some of that data "to target voters during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign process." Data collected included age, gender, posts, email addresses and pages users "liked," depending on their privacy setting, the regulator said.

Cambridge Analytica worked for the eventual 2016 GOP presidential nominee, Donald Trump. Had Trump not won the election, "my life (would be) very different," Kogan said.

Kogan and other developers say Facebook allowed such wholesale gathering of friend data at the time, although access was later throttled back for all but select partners.

"They created these great tools for developers to collect the data and made it very easy. This is not a hack. This was 'Here's the door. It's open. We're giving away the groceries. Please collect them,' Kogan told CBS News' 60 Minutes last year.

Other developers tell similar tales of Facebook's lax attitude toward user data and their own naïve complicity. If true, Facebook would have been in direct violation of a 2011 consent order with the Federal Trade Commission for allowing third-party apps like Kogan's to collect data on users without their knowledge or consent.

Kogan's university appointment ended in September, his company has gone bust and he has been doing freelance programming, he said. "I think it would be damn near impossible to get an academic job," Kogan said by phone from Buffalo, New York, where he currently lives with his wife.

Facebook's privacy transgressions are also the subject of investigations in Europe and by a number of U.S. state attorney generals. Canada has sued the company over its alleged failure to protect user data, as has the attorney general of the District of Columbia. As well, A federal judge in northern California last month allowed a class action lawsuit over Facebook's privacy transgressions to move forward.

Kogan told the AP he now regrets invading so many people's privacy. "In hindsight it was clearly a really bad idea to do that project."

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