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Logic guards against abuse by data firms

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People make decisions based on their subconscious. PHOTO | FOTOSEARCH

Kenyans are watching with displeasure this week as the significant scandal unfolds in London, Silicon Valley, and Washington, D.C. The scandal brought a sharp drop in Facebook's share price equating to a Sh360 billion decrease in its market value in only one day. American regulators are pouncing.

Facebook allowed a third party to exploit the personal data of millions of users to build psychographic profiles categorising targeted voters into neurotic introverts, religious extroverts, fair-minded liberals, or fans of the occult. Warnings from Kenya's Daily Nation to America's New York Times came forth this week to warn Facebook users on how to better protect their data shared with the social media behemoth.

Meanwhile, British regulators are circling in on the third party British firm Cambridge Analytica. Cambridge Analytica was formed in 2013 by rightwing activists and donors. It proclaims to

utilise data mining, data brokerage, and data analysis to formulate targeted strategic communication for elections around the world.

Britain's Channel 4 caught Cambridge Analytica's CEO Alexander Nix claiming on an undercover camera that their firm conducted substantial data gathering, analysis, and strategy for US President Donald Trump's 2016 campaign to swing the election using unethical means.

The firm's associates put up a personality test that users could take, which then could steal their data and that of their friends, among other unethical actions.

Channel 4 also caught Cambridge Analytica's managing director Mark Turnbull stating how such data gets used and manipulative messages then pushed back out to users "there is no good fighting an election campaign on the facts. Because actually it's all about emotions.

The two fundamental human drivers are hopes and fears and many of those are unspoken and even unconscious. You didn't know that was a fear until you saw something that just evoked that reaction from you." In short, the firm implies that it uses cunning unconscious psychology and unethical fake bribery and fake scandals to swing elections around the world, not just in the United States.

Why is it so troubling? The quote highlights what researchers have known for years. People make decisions based on their subconscious. Fears are more powerful than hopes.

Negative worry lingers longer than positive exuberance, as reported previously in Business Talk in the Business Daily's July 13, 2017 issue titled "Negativity robs Kenya of glitter."

The human brain developed over the millennia to survive in the bush. Back in ancient times, humans had to compete with lions, buffalos, snakes, and elephants for survival. Inasmuch, the most primordial parts of the brain house our emotions as a way to quickly and immediately give us a fearful emotional warning to run, hide, or fight.

Ever wonder why instantly when you meet a new person you either like them, dislike them, or do not care about them? The emotional part of the brain looks for cues as to whether they pose a threat or not. How they stand, smell, smile and their height, lip size, cheek width all trigger intense emotional and often irrational responses unconsciously.

Sadly, despite all the logic that humans are capable of in our more recently developed prefrontal cortex of the brain, we still allow our primitive emotions to make decisions for us without the critical reasoning and logic that we are capable of doing.

So, our brains can instantly detect real or imagined danger, which causes fear and the mind keeps that feeling for lengthy periods of time.

This unconscious emotional decision making is exactly what Cambridge Analytica seeks to exploit to make you, a world consumer and voter, change your behaviour without your knowledge. As an example, the visceral negative emotions that millions of Americans feel about

former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton came from Cambridge Analytica's psychological manipulation from and through Facebook and other social media to unsuspecting voters.

People must become much more logical with how they make decisions. Do not just decide through a "gut feeling". Business Talk in the *Business Daily* in the March 2nd, 2017 issue titled Gut feeling should never-substitute for facts dealt with this.

What triggers fears in Kenya? Taking away land rights. Different ethnicity politicians deprioritising your community. Our children not succeeding despite success in school. Given these hot topic issues, make sure you do not become susceptible to emotional manipulation here in Kenya too.

Learn how to make logical decisions. Evil big data firms in East Africa also try to influence how you think, believe, behave, purchase, consume, and vote.

Check the Twitter hashtag #StopReflectVerify and look to @AfricaCheck and @PesaCheck for fact checking community services based here in Kenya that can give you powerful real information to combat psychological manipulation.

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