

# Big Data Companies and Elections: Perpetuating Populism in Kenya and Nigeria, a Descriptive Analysis

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## Abstract

Following the scandal of Cambridge Analytica in certain Western elections, several questions were raised about the effect of harvesting personal data on individual political choices. In this vein, the SCL group targeted millions of profiles with fake news and disturbing images about the country's political future. It was noticeable that the strategy of raising fear about the future gave birth to and supported the populist narratives remarkably, especially in the 2016 US and Brexit elections in the UK. On the other hand, the SCL groups worked tirelessly in fostering and sophisticating their strategies in certain African countries, mainly Nigeria and Kenya. Although the strategies of the SCL group didn't succeed in achieving similar scenarios like in Western countries, the populist movements in Africa realized the importance of digital means in perpetuating the populist political narrative. We tend to argue through this article the importance of understanding this new phenomenon and how it can disturb all notions of free will and equal right to choose that the modern state was established for. We tend to argue that these companies, in a context of the neoliberal era, don't hesitate to eradicate the values of democracy and consider the political landscape as a space of business. Moreover, the question of manipulating the public by harvesting big data might be a real issue, especially in countries that can be considered fragile states, where the legal framework for detecting such deeds seems primitive.

## Keywords

Big Data Companies, Big Data, Elections, Africa, Populism

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## 1. Introduction

During the revolutions and protest movements, particularly in Tunisia, Egypt, Al-

geria, and Morocco, there was much discussion about the importance of social media and the role it could play in promoting democracy. However, this image was soon heavily criticised following the rise of social media-inspired populist movements in France, Germany, Turkey, and the United States. The populist tide has demonstrated the power of its rhetoric and the ease with which it can reach the millions of people who use these modern communication tools.

In the face of this tide and the power of populist discourse, which targets the collective conscience and the general sense of grievance against the “other” who is seen as controlling the nation’s resources to the point of depletion, it seems necessary to understand this phenomenon and to critique the optimistic view that everything digital inherently contributes to the democratization of society and the state.

Based on this perspective, a debate emerged about the extent of the danger these platforms pose to individuals and the state. This is primarily due to their transformation into fertile ground for fake and misleading news, which captivates public attention (Turgay, 2020, p. 179).

This critical perspective gained significant attention, especially after the 2016 U.S. elections, which saw widespread use of fake news and manipulation of individual choices. Similarly, during the Brexit campaign, populist forces successfully imposed the choice of leaving the European Union, isolating Britain from its surrounding environment.

Evgeny Morozov, in his book *The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*, argues that the strong belief that social media contributes to strengthening democracy and helping to overthrow authoritarian regimes is, in itself, a misleading conviction. The internet does not have the power to democratize nations or bring about regime change. On the contrary, Morozov points out that both state and non-state actors may seek to use the internet as a tool for manipulating social and political life. For this reason, he sees the internet as a threat to democracy (Morozov, 2011, p. 179).

The interest in the digital and technological revolution that the world has witnessed since the early 1990s is of great importance in understanding the dynamics that facilitate the influence and manipulation of individual choices. This digital revolution has simultaneously led to the emergence of digital actors who provide services to various stakeholders, whether they are economic, political, or social.

The central goal of these actors is to maximize benefit, even at the expense of ethical and legal principles. One of the clearest examples of this is the role played by Cambridge Analytica<sup>1</sup> in reshaping the dynamics of the 2016 U.S. presidential

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<sup>1</sup>Cambridge Analytica was a British political consulting firm that gained a negative reputation due to its role in several elections, including the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom. Founded in 2013 as a subsidiary of the **SCL Group**, a company specializing in military contracting and psychological warfare tactics, Cambridge Analytica became known for its strategic data analysis techniques and their use in influencing voter behavior. The company attracted public attention after a scandal broke out in March 2018, revealing that it had harvested the personal data of millions of Facebook users without their consent. This data was allegedly used to create psychological profiles that enabled highly targeted political advertising and influence campaigns. These methods raised concerns about security and personal privacy in the political arena, demonstrating the profound impact of technology on shaping public opinion and determining election outcomes.

election and the 2018 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom. By analyzing individuals' psychological tendencies, Cambridge Analytica was able to influence political choices through targeted advertisements, which played a decisive role in manipulating voters' opinions.

The manipulation and utilization of big data also led to similar outcomes in the following elections: the 2017 Kenyan presidential election, the 2019 Nigerian election, and the 2018 Zimbabwean presidential election.

After the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which sparked widespread controversy among political actors in the United States and Britain regarding the ability of digital platforms to manipulate data, deep concerns emerged about the impact of these events on the concept of the state and democracy. As a result, Facebook's founder, Mark Zuckerberg, was summoned to testify before the U.S. Congress, where he pledged to make greater efforts to protect personal data from exploitation by data-driven companies.

It seems that, despite this step, which symbolically defends both the concept of the state and democracy, the manipulation of data continues in many countries. If not, there is a growing dominance that raises epistemic concerns about this phenomenon, which requires further understanding.

These cases are vivid examples of manipulating the individual and restricting their ability to make rational choices in voting due to the consumption of digital goods through social media platforms.

This form of manipulation is not new. The last century saw, quite evidently, the manipulation of the masses, whether in countries that considered themselves democratic or in those that went through painful struggles, eventually leading to the birth of a unique model; the totalitarian state, as described by Hannah Arendt. The common denominator between these models is the use of fear as a form of guidance and control. Arendt argues that totalitarian regimes thrive by instilling fear in the masses. This fear serves as a powerful tool for social control, where individuals become hesitant to oppose or question authority due to the potential consequences. These regimes deliberately create an atmosphere of uncertainty, where individuals are unsure of the boundaries of acceptable behavior (Hana Arendt, 1951, p. 461).

This form of fear also persisted in digital spaces, albeit with slight variations. After the social and economic transformations of the last century, the accumulation of this situation led to the transfer of the culture of fear from real spaces to virtual spaces. This fear was activated in digital spaces through what Bauman refers to as the seductive allure of modern life, which pushes individuals to conform to standards out of fear of marginalization and exclusion (Zygmunt Bauman, 2006, p. 47). Therefore, by spreading a wave of digital fear in these virtual spaces, several populist movements have been able to gain power and reach authority in many countries.

The models of fear mentioned are tools for guidance and control. It may seem

that the fear, from Arendt's perspective, is entirely different from the fear in post-modern contexts. However, we argue that fear remains consistent in terms of its function, but the contexts have evolved, leading it to be used not only by the state—the actual owner of physical coercive power in modern narratives—but also by multiple actors such as corporations and data research centers. These actors appear to possess effective soft power, capable of manipulating individuals.

On the other hand, one of the core concepts in this paper is populism. By this, we refer to a tendency and a distinctive understanding of the political sphere as a space where the use of fear against the “Other” is seen as legitimate. The “Other” may take various forms: traditional elites, economic elites, cultural elites, or immigrants (Mudde, 2004, p. 542).

What makes this understanding unique is its framing of politics as a dichotomy between the “Self” and the “other”. This dichotomy offers a simple and emotionally charged strategy for confronting complex problems. It enables the mobilization of collective emotions and serves to justify exceptional political actions, including the bypassing of traditional institutions—and, above all, the rule of law, as exemplified in the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

In the same vein, and beyond the dichotomy between “self” and “other”, we draw on Azmi Bishara's definition of populism as “*a type of political discourse in which rhetorical and behavioral levels are closely intertwined. This discourse may interact with a spontaneous, emotionally charged political mood fueled by an angry public that has lost trust in the prevailing system, political parties, and ruling elites. It is also employed as a political strategy aimed at addressing this mood in order to bring about political change through gaining power. In extreme cases, this discourse can evolve into an ideology*” (Azmi Bishara, 2020, p. 17).

Based on this view, populism is not merely an emotional discourse—it is often a discourse charged with anger and fear directed at the “Other”. However, emotions alone are insufficient to sustain political momentum or gain power.

In this respect, we argue that in the post-modern era, populist movements tend to combine emotional political narratives—which blame the “Other” (such as elites, immigrants, or global institutions) for economic and political hardships—with strategic planning. This strategy increasingly involves collaboration with high-tech companies to harvest user data and algorithmically amplify fear and resentment toward the “Other”.

Populism, in this sense, is no longer only a rhetorical style but a data-driven political machinery that uses emotional triggers to engineer consent and bypass traditional democratic processes.

Besides the core concepts discussed in this paper, we focus on Nigeria and Kenya as case studies. This choice is based on strong evidence of Cambridge Analytica's involvement in manipulating the electoral processes in both countries, thereby perpetuating populism. Furthermore, Nigeria and Kenya are among the largest economies in Africa—Nigeria being the continent's largest economy with a GDP

exceeding \$100 billion (World Bank, 2023b), and Kenya a key economic hub in East Africa with a GDP over \$100 billion (World Bank, 2023a). Both countries also have high digital penetration rates, with approximately 50% of Nigeria's population (Data Reportal, Kenya, 2024b) and 40% of Kenya's population using the internet as of recent reports (Data Reportal, Nigeria, 2024a). This widespread digital connectivity makes them particularly relevant for studying the impact of digital political interference on electoral outcomes. The firm's strategies not only influenced election results but also contributed to the perpetuation of populist narratives within these nations. By analyzing these cases, we aim to shed light on the broader implications of digital political interference in emerging democracies and how such tactics can undermine democratic institutions and public trust across Africa.

In this paper, alongside the points mentioned earlier, we argue that these companies have hidden objectives aimed at subjugating individuals to a conformist system, where it becomes easier to influence their political choices, thereby serving the utilitarian interests of populist political actors.

We can hypothesize that these manipulations of digital data explicitly or implicitly contribute to fueling the populist wave, which raises several questions about the future trajectory of this wave, especially in the presence of companies that support it and only believe in the power of money. This is particularly concerning in fragile states, such as many African countries, where these companies are active.

In this paper, we aim to address a central issue, which is:

How do big data companies contribute to the creation of advanced mechanisms for manipulating individuals' political choices, ensuring the continuation of control and guidance while also fostering the growth of populist movements in the future?

To answer the above question, we will base our analysis on the case of Cambridge Analytica and examine how it influenced individuals' political choices during electoral processes. We will explore how psychographic profiling contributes to the ease of guiding and controlling political choices, and how the methodology used by big data companies has fueled the populist wave, both in the Western context and in the context of Third World countries, particularly in African nations.

## **2. The Alliance of Big Data and Populism: Influencing Individual Political Choices**

Before the establishment of Cambridge Analytica, the Strategic Communication Laboratories (SCL) group worked on behavioral research and strategic communication campaigns based on data, including data-driven mobilization and influence campaigns. Initially, it primarily served military and government experts before expanding into political consulting with its new branch, Cambridge Analytica. The core mission of this branch was to study how to influence individuals' choices during critical political events worldwide (Micheal Webb et al., 2021, p. 3).

This new direction would not have come to light without the trilateral meeting between Steve Bannon, the right-wing figure and editor at Breitbart News; Alexander Nix, who would later become the CEO of Cambridge Analytica; and Robert Mercer, the American billionaire. This meeting marked the inception of the Cambridge Analytica project, which, through its approach, managed to reshape the world following the rise of populist political forces in several countries, including the United States (Micheal Webb et al., 2021, p. 3).

One of the outcomes of this meeting was the commitment of American billionaire Robert Mercer, founder of Renaissance Technologies, to invest a total of \$20 million in SCL's new project, which was later named Cambridge Analytica (Micheal Webb et al., 2021, p. 4). For the first time in its history, the SCL Group adopted a new method of influencing individuals' beliefs by leveraging digital data and analyzing behavioral patterns through a detailed study of individuals' digital identities. It is worth noting that the company had operated traditionally in many elections since its founding in 1990, before transitioning to the use of digital spaces.

In this context, the company was involved in the following elections: (Hernandez, 2023, p. 17).

- South Africa 1994 Elections
- Orange Revolution in Ukraine 2004
- Legislative Elections in Indonesia 2006
- 2007 Presidential Elections
- Trinidad and Tobago Elections 2010
- Saint Lucia Election Campaign 2011

The SCL Group used a traditional method of mobilization in its work on the mentioned elections and campaigns, relying on what is called analog data to influence votes. This was achieved through traditional, non-digital forms of communication and media. (Micheal Webb et al., 2021, p. 69). The SCL Group used opinion polls by collecting analog data containing information about voters' preferences, opinions, and behaviors. In the same approach, they directed the media by utilizing radio, television, and print media to spread messages supporting one political party over another. They also organized rallies and sometimes crafted narratives specific to a political direction to influence individuals' perceptions. Additionally, they analyzed voter behavior gathered from analog sources, such as demographic data and voting patterns from previous elections, to identify key voter segments and design campaign strategies accordingly (Martin Moore, 2018, p. 30). After the establishment of Cambridge Analytica in 2013, a series of manipulations of individual data from social media users began, starting with the 2013 Kenyan elections and extending to many other African countries. The company was able to test the effectiveness of its methods in these countries, exploiting the underdevelopment and fragility of institutions in tracking digital manipulations (Evgeny Morozov, 2011, p. 261). Starting in 2016, the British political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica began collecting data from millions of people to use as a

strategic tool in the upcoming elections in the United States<sup>2</sup>. This process initially involved building a massive database from Facebook users through an app designed by researcher Alexander Kogan. The app, called “This Is Your Digital Life”, allowed easy access to individuals’ personal preferences and significantly facilitated the creation of psychological profiles for users of the app, as well as their friends on Facebook (Ikhlāq ur Rehman, 2019, p. 4). Cambridge Analytica, on this basis, began with a persuasive marketing process. The sequence of this process starts with using data as raw material collected from social media platforms. This data is then categorized, analyzed, and modeled to be translated into a digital discourse that is easily consumable by individuals, based on the psychological profiles created to influence their political choices.

Based on this strategy, Cambridge Analytica worked to meet the request of its client, Donald Trump, to win the 2016 U.S. presidential election<sup>3</sup> (Jennifer Szalai, 2019, p. 2). In this case, the company employed a profit-driven alliance with politics to secure the U.S. presidency. After an initial agreement between the two parties, Cambridge Analytica prepared psychological profiles for social media users and targeted those who were opposed to Trump, as well as the undecided third-party voters in America who had not yet decided whether to vote for Hillary Clinton or Trump (Chiara Campione, 2019, p. 20). Amidst this electoral battle, which appeared to the world as a clash between rational discourse and populist rhetoric, the company flooded users with text and digital messages designed to instill fear in them about voting for Hillary Clinton.

The spread of fear begins from several angles, the first of which is the enormous funding for advertising campaigns aimed at tarnishing the image of the opponent, portraying them as corrupt, and painting a frightening picture of the future of the United States if the opponent were to gain power. This also involves exploiting past political mistakes and justifying them with claims of political corruption.

The ease of access to personal data would not have been successful without Facebook’s policy regarding advertising revenue. Most of the company’s profits are based on advertising income, which the company did not refuse in the face of finan-

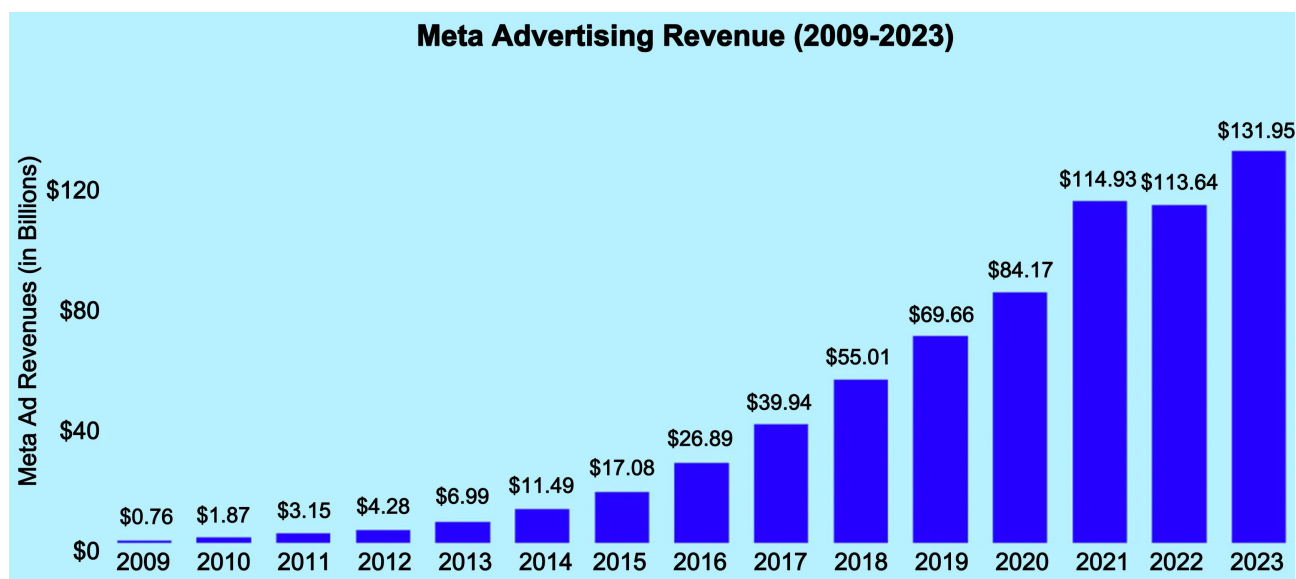
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<sup>2</sup>In her article “**Facebook says Cambridge Analytica Harvested Data of 87 Million Users**”, published in *The New York Times* on April 4, 2018, American journalist Cecilia Kang reported that data from up to **87 million users** were shared in a blatant manner with political consulting firms linked to **President Trump** during the **2016 elections**. This figure is significantly higher than the initial estimate of **50 million** people. In this context, she quotes **Andy Easton**, a Facebook spokesperson in Washington, who stated, “The 87 million figure is an estimate of the total number of users whose data was obtained by Cambridge Analytica”.

<sup>3</sup>In her article titled “**In New Memoirs, Two Whistleblowers Offer Details from Inside Cambridge Analytica**”, published on October 9, 2019 in *The New York Times*, American journalist Jennifer Szalai highlighted that Trump’s campaign was highly suspicious. She pointed out that there was mysterious funding from American billionaire Robert Mercer and his family, with deep connections to Steve Bannon, the former strategist for President Trump, and also to Alexander Nix, the CEO of Cambridge Analytica, who boasted about how far the company was willing to go to influence the U.S. election. The article also noted that the company sought to gather vast amounts of Facebook data to assist in its precise targeting efforts, using an app developed by a researcher at Cambridge University. “The app seemed like a personality test, but in the end, it served as a tool to collect all Facebook data from the user who downloaded it, as well as all the data from their Facebook friends”.

cial temptations, especially during election periods. By utilizing various advertising figures, one can understand how this policy opened the door for big data companies to invest their wealth in Facebook, considering it a promising space due to its vast number of users worldwide.

Facebook, founded by Mark Zuckerberg and launched in 2006, currently has around 3.29 billion active monthly users. These numbers place Facebook as the largest social media platform globally, with approximately 37.2% of the world's population using the platform. Additionally, the number of daily active users was about 2.037 billion during the same period, indicating that around 68% of monthly users log in daily (Meta, platform, investor earnings report for 3Q 2024).



Source: Statista (2023)—Advertising Revenues 2023-2009.

It is therefore not surprising that the main source of profit for Facebook is advertising. As shown in the graph above, its advertising system is highly effective and targets individuals. This very system played a crucial role in Cambridge Analytica's strategy during the U.S. elections. The company simply needed to deploy the right advertisements to the right users (Chiara Campione, 2019, p. 35). If Cambridge Analytica clearly contributed to the rise of populist forces in the heart of democratic countries, it also employed its methods in Third World countries, specifically in Africa. In this regard, the second section will focus on the African context, the role the company played, and the extent to which its approach influenced the creation of digital populism in the region.

### 3. Traditional African Populism via the New Digital Populism

The issue of populism in African countries is a relatively old phenomenon, primarily due to the people's rallying around charismatic leaders and symbols in state-building. Since the struggle for independence, some leaders have been viewed as anti-colonial, anti-political, and anti-elite figures (Alexander B-Makulilo, 2013, p.

65).

In Tanzania, President Julius Nyerere enjoyed immense popularity and a highly charismatic presence. His political party, the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), won all seats in the elections preceding independence. Although Tanzania gained independence in 1961 under a multiparty system, Nyerere's personal popularity exceeded that of his party. Due to his populist appeal, he remained the country's president from 1961 until 1985, when he voluntarily decided to retire from politics (Alexander B-Makulilo, 2013, p. 65). While this case is specific to Tanzania, there are common patterns among African countries. Most African leaders pursued the goal of building a strong central state. During this period, there was a prevailing belief in the importance of a centralized government that could promote unity and development through a one-party system and state-managed economic policies (Alexander B-Makulilo, 2013, p. 66). However, the one-party system and centralized state policy failed by the early 1980s. The central state attempted to address economic development imbalances and regional disparities, but to no avail. As a result, it had to submit to the dictates of Western powers, leading to what became known as the Structural Adjustment Policy. This policy emphasized the gradual liberalization of the economy, reducing state control, and transitioning toward a free-market system (Thomson et al., 2017, p. 18). Contrary to the expected outcomes, structural adjustment programs created fertile ground for the rise of populist movements. In Zambia, for example, the situation became so critical that riots broke out due to shortages of basic necessities such as food. This led to the emergence of populist leaders who opposed the elite. (Alexander B-Makulilo, 2013, p. 66). In some cases, populist leaders became even more prominent by leveraging the media and treating opinion polls as unquestionable facts. However, neo-paternalism and corruption were also used to sustain populism (Alexander B-Makulilo, 2013, p. 66).

If populism is a somewhat old phenomenon in African countries, often manifested in the glorification of the leader as a freedom fighter, it has taken on new dimensions with the use of modern tools to fuel populist fervor, particularly through the exploitation of social media to influence individual choices. In the Kenyan case, Cambridge Analytica worked to sway the electoral battle in favor of President Kenyatta during the Nigerian elections on August 8, 2017. This strategy resulted in exacerbating tribal conflict and tensions in the country (BBC, 2018). It is worth noting that the political landscape in Africa is heavily influenced by ethnic and tribal affiliations. Politicians often rely on these affiliations to secure votes, leading to sharp divisions among voters. The main ethnic groups in Kenya include the Kikuyu, Luo, Kalenjin, Luhya, and others. Tribal loyalties often translate into political support, which has caused elections to take a violent turn, as witnessed during the 2007 and 2008 elections (Jeremy Horowitz, 2022, p. 23). Cambridge Analytica worked with Uhuru Kenyatta's team to develop an advanced digital campaign. It utilized a technique known as psychographic profiling, which relies on data related to individuals' personalities, values, and behaviors to craft tailored

political messages. The company collected vast amounts of data from social media platforms, particularly Facebook, and used it to target Kenyan voters with specifically designed political ads. This campaign aimed to shape voters' perceptions of Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga by delivering targeted content that aligned with their psychological profiles (Hernandez, 2023, p. 18).

During the Kenyan presidential election, the company collected vast amounts of data on Kenyan voters, including their ethnic backgrounds, social media behavior, and political preferences. This data was used to create detailed voter profiles, allowing the campaign to tailor its messages to different ethnic groups in highly sophisticated ways (Hernandez, 2023, p. 20).

The company also published targeted digital ads, videos, and social media content that exploited racial fears and insecurity. In this context, the company engaged in spreading misinformation, creating and disseminating content that portrayed the opposition in a negative light, often using racially charged language. (Crabtree, 2018, p. 84). For example, the opposition was sometimes depicted as being associated with violence and chaos, exploiting memories of the violence that followed the 2007 and 2008 elections to instill fear among voters<sup>4</sup>. Cambridge Analytica's role went beyond simply advising the campaign; it helped craft messages aimed at influencing voters' emotions, particularly by exploiting fear and tribal divisions. The campaign used divisive rhetoric, focusing on deep ethnic tensions in Kenya to sway voters. For example, videos supported by the Jubilee Party and its allies portrayed the opposition leader, Raila Odinga, negatively, implying that his election could lead to chaos and violence, referencing the violent events following the 2007-2008 elections. The company's techniques aimed to create a climate of fear among certain ethnic groups, reinforcing the idea that re-electing Kenyatta was the safer option.

Cambridge Analytica's involvement also included strong manipulation through social media, where the company was responsible for organizing a flood of fake news, misinformation, and targeted ads that portrayed Kenyatta positively while tarnishing the opposition's reputation (Micheal Webb et al., 2021, p. 84). Fake accounts, bots, and targeted ads were used to spread messages that influenced public opinion across platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp<sup>5</sup> (Micheal Webb et

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<sup>4</sup>The company's website describes its work in Kenya in 2013 as "the largest political research project ever conducted in East Africa", which enabled the formulation of a campaign "based on the real needs of voters (jobs) and concerns (tribal violence)". The 2013 elections were the first after the brutal violence that erupted in 2008, which left more than a thousand people dead. In April 2017, a report by Nigerian e-commerce platform Jumia showed that 67% of Kenyans use the internet, compared to the African average of 18%—a trend supported by encouraging economic growth in the country and the emerging middle class. This has allowed the company to significantly influence individual choices compared to the options available in 2013.

<sup>5</sup>When the Cambridge Analytica scandal broke in 2018, the company initially denied its involvement in Kenya's 2017 elections. However, undercover investigations by British Channel 4 News revealed recordings of company executives admitting their role in Kenyatta's campaign. Mark Turnbull, the managing director at Cambridge Analytica, explained in the secret footage that the company had "managed" Kenyatta's campaigns in the 2013 and 2017 elections, stating that they had "revamped" the party's rhetoric twice.

al., 2021, p. 84). In this situation, and following Uhuru Kenyatta's victory with 54%, his opponent, Raila Odinga, refused to accept the election results, accusing them of using fraudulent means, including hacking into the Independent Electoral Commission's system<sup>6</sup>.

Although both sides in the electoral equation agreed to end their dispute politically in the so-called handshake meeting in March 2018, and despite the intervention of the Supreme Court in September 2017, which ruled to annul the election results in which President Kenyatta won, the same digital methods continued to manipulate people's choices to serve populist trends. These tactics, although used in a less aggressive manner in the 2022 elections, contributed significantly to a promising future for populism in Kenya. William Ruto, who won the election, presented himself as a populist leader representing the interests of the "working class", a rhetoric that resonated with many Kenyans, especially among the youth. His campaign adopted a "toilers versus dynasties" narrative, portraying ordinary Kenyans (toilers) against traditional political elites (dynasties) such as Raila Odinga and Uhuru Kenyatta. While there is no evidence of data misuse or unethical tactics similar to Cambridge Analytica's 2017 approach, Ruto's team successfully used social media platforms and targeted online campaigns to spread their populist message.

The exploitation of modern digital means in this sense contributed to the re-fuelling of the populist tide in Kenya, which significantly exploited these means in order to ensure its existence and continuity in the future. In this sense, Cambridge Analytica's intervention in African elections did not overturn the equations and results as it did in the 2016 US presidential election or the 2018 Brexit referendum, but it did contribute to the awareness of African populist movements of the importance of evidence and disinformation in the continuation of their project in the future.

The same trend was observed in the 2015 Nigerian elections, which saw a contest between candidate Goodluck Jonathan and his opponent, Muhammadu Buhari. According to investigative reports, Cambridge Analytica used multiple means to discredit Muhammadu Buhari, including misleading news about his ties to Boko Haram and the threat of his coming to power, suggesting that he would implement

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<sup>6</sup>In a landmark decision on 1 September 2017, Kenya's High Court invalidated the results of the presidential election due to what it called "irregularities and violations" in the process of transmitting the results by the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), the first time a court in Africa has invalidated a presidential election. The court ordered new elections to be held within 60 days. The new election was set for 26 October 2017, but Raila Odinga announced a boycott of the election, arguing that the Electoral Commission had not made the necessary reforms to ensure free and fair elections. As a result, Uhuru Kenyatta ran largely unchallenged and won the re-election with 98 per cent of the vote, with a very low turnout of 39 per cent. The post-election period was characterized by high tensions and violence, especially in opposition strongholds, with clashes between police and protesters resulting in dozens of deaths. In November 2017, the Supreme Court confirmed Kenyatta's victory, but the political environment remained tense. In March 2018, President Kenyatta and Raila Odinga surprised the public with a public reconciliation known as the "handshake", which eased political tensions and led to the establishment of the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI), which aimed to address issues of national unity and political reform.

Sharia law if he came to power<sup>7</sup> (Christopher Wylie, 2019, p. 166).

Based on this strategy, the company published a video with multiple scenes of violence to portray candidate Muhammadu Buhari as a supporter of Boko Haram, that he would open channels of negotiation with the group if he came to power, and that Sharia law would be implemented in Nigeria (Carole Cadwalladr, 2018).

This approach<sup>8</sup> has a central function in fuelling fear and suspicion among Nigerian society, which will subsequently contribute to the development of populist movements that feed on a culture of fear of the unknown (Carole Cadwalladr, 2018).

This scare tactic had a significant impact on voters who were fearful of the future and saw the survival of the current political elite as a less risky option. These strategies led to a wide polarisation of Nigerian society, and issues such as national security, the economy, and national unity became more contentious, setting the stage for the rise of populism that offers “easy” and “radical” solutions to such concerns. Despite Cambridge Analytica’s intervention, the results did not go in Goodluck Jonathan’s favour, with Buhari winning the election, marking a turning point in the political landscape. However, despite Jonathan’s loss, the smear campaign had a significant impact on the Nigerian political climate. It affected voters’ trust in traditional parties and revealed the high susceptibility of the electorate to targeted media, creating a space for populism that capitalises on resentment (Carole Cadwalladr, 2018, *The Guardian*, p. 1)<sup>9</sup>. Populist currents began to take a distinctive form after these elections, especially with the escalation of protests and demands for radical reforms. Populist rhetoric directed at corruption, mismanagement, and unreliable elites became part of the language of public discourse, and a culture of blaming the traditional political elite for being unable to achieve the desired change became widespread.

The Cambridge Analytica experiment in Nigeria became a vivid example of the power of external influence in African countries, and this experience prompted many populist politicians to subsequently adopt similar tactics in elections. In subsequent elections, candidates began adopting strategies based on clear messages against elites and offering direct solutions to major issues such as unemployment

<sup>7</sup>Christopher points out on page 166 of his book “Mindfck” that the company supported Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan who was running against populist Muhammadu Buhari and was hired by Nigerian billionaires who were worried that Buhari’s election victory could lead to the cancellation of their oil and mineral exploration rights, which would destroy their main source of income.

<sup>8</sup>The anti-Bukhari video imagines a future where he is president and sharia law is imposed. The voice-over, similar to a Hollywood movie trailer, says: “We are coming to Nigeria on the 15th of February 2015. Dark, scary and uncertain. Sharia law for all”. It asks the question: “What will Nigeria look like if Buhari imposes Sharia law?” and suggests that he will make a deal with the Islamist militant group Boko Haram that will amount to a “pact with the devil”. The video also suggests that “Buhari will punish anyone who speaks against the regime” and that “women will wear the hijab”. The video ends by saying: “You can prevent this film from becoming a reality”.

<sup>9</sup>Cambridge Analytica reportedly hired Israeli hackers to collect the medical file of Nigerian presidential candidate Muhammadu Buhari. They were able to hack into his email account and revealed his illness and the possibility that he might not be able to handle the presidency. More details in: Carole Cadwalladr. Cambridge Analytica’s ruthless bid to sway the vote in Nigeria. Media article published in 21 March 2018, *The Guardian*.

and poverty, backed by a populist tone that emphasised “changing the traditional system. (Carole Cadwalladr, 2018, *The Guardian*, p. 1).

This trend has led to an increasingly divided Nigerian society, with populism becoming an attractive alternative for many Nigerians who have lost faith in the traditional political system, especially after the experience they have had under the smear tactics.

The Cambridge Analytica approach has had a ripple effect in entrenching a populist style in Nigerian politics:

- Scepticism of institutions and elites: The campaign weakened trust in the political elite and the electoral system, helping to create a climate of scepticism and resentment.
- Increased acceptance of anti-regime messages: This climate has led to an increase in the popularity of currents that promise radical change in the traditional system, and voters have become more inclined to believe anti-elite slogans.
- Directing politics to focus on popular fears: By targeting popular fears and anxieties, Cambridge Analytica created a basis for political communication that centres on emotions and fear, elements that form an essential part of populist discourse.

Following the presidency of Muhammadu Buhari, elections were held in Nigeria on 25 February 2023. These elections included presidential elections and legislative elections for the House of Representatives and the Senate. Bola Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC) won the presidential election, beating major rivals such as Atiku Abubakar of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and Peter Obi of the Labour Party (Naduka Orjinmo, 2023).

Bola Tinubu, Nigeria’s current president, is seen as a populist figure, although opinions on these characterisations vary, due to his sometimes populist and sometimes technocratic methods. Tinubu has been referred to as a political “godfather” in Nigeria, especially in the south-west region, where he has significant influence over party politics and candidate selection. His political strategy has involved forming coalitions and utilising his extensive network of contacts to consolidate power, a common trait among populist leaders who seek to attract support from diverse groups (Saeed Husaini, 2024).

His administration has pursued neoliberal economic liberalisation policies, including the removal of fuel subsidies and currency liberalisation (Saeed Husaini, 2024). Critics argue that these policies disproportionately affect the lower and middle classes, a feature of populist governance where leaders claim to represent the interests of “the people” while implementing measures that may not be in line with their own wellbeing and social rank (Said Bakkar, 2022).

Tinubu’s rhetoric often emphasises themes of social justice and economic progress, aligning with populist ideals of defending the “ordinary citizen” against traditional elites. However, his critics argue that his actions do not always reflect these principles, suggesting a disconnect between his populist claims and govern-

ing practices (Shaka Momodu, 2024). While Tinubu exhibits characteristics generally associated with populism—such as strong political manoeuvring, appeals to the masses, and controversial economic reforms—his effectiveness and sincerity as a populist leader is a subject of ongoing debate among analysts.

In relation to Bola Tinubu's rivals, Peter Obi, a former Labour Party candidate, is seen as a populist rival to Bola Tinubu. Obi has distinguished himself from the traditional political elite, positioning himself as an anti-establishment figure, appealing particularly to young voters who are disillusioned with the status quo in Nigeria. His campaign focused on addressing economic hardship, insecurity, and unemployment, which resonated with many Nigerians seeking change.

Obi's supporters, known as Obi-Dets, supported his vision of a new Nigeria, emphasising transparency and good governance. This grassroots movement has shown a major shift in the Nigerian political landscape, activating a previously marginalised third-party platform in a system dominated by the two major parties, APC and PDP. Although he did not win the election, Obi's candidacy highlighted digital media and the role that populist rhetoric can play in appealing to the emotions of the youth (Cristina Kripphal, 2023).

A noteworthy aspect in both cases is that both parties are using methods similar to those used in the individual targeting of big data companies. Both parties have shown a keen interest in data as a means of gaining the presidency (Victor Adetula, 2024, p. 6). In this regard, Political parties and candidates in Nigeria have increasingly used data analytics to design targeted campaigns aimed at influencing voter behaviour. This has included the collection of personal data to personalise messages to specific groups of voters, similar to the micro-targeting strategies used by Cambridge Analytica during previous elections (Chiagozie Nwonwu et al., 2023).

The 2023 elections saw a huge focus on social media platforms for political advertising. Candidates utilised these platforms to reach out to young voters, who represent a significant portion of the electorate. The ability to target specific groups with personalised campaign messages has allowed campaigns to increase the scope of their impact (Cristina Kripphal, 2023).

Throughout the election period, the use of disinformation was widely reported, with politicians and their supporters using social media to manipulate public opinion. This included spreading fake news, misrepresenting facts, and creating false endorsements to influence voters. These tactics contributed to fragmenting society and undermining trust in the electoral process, sometimes fuelling ethnic and religious division<sup>10</sup> (Chiagozie Nwonwu et al., 2023). Investigations revealed that disinformation was often amplified through coordinated efforts between connected social media accounts. These tactics were aimed not only at supporting certain candidates but also at undermining their opponents and institutions (Chiagozie Nwonwu et al., 2023).

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<sup>10</sup>In a survey conducted by the BBC newspaper, which indicated that in the 2023 elections, political parties are funding influencers to spread disinformation and play on emotional feelings to appeal to the masses on issues of racial and religious differences.

These tactics used by politicians, although they do not reach the degree of accuracy that big data companies have in individual targeting, they contribute significantly to feeding the populist tide in electoral elections, especially with the increase in the number of people using the Internet and social media, which reached about 41.6 million in May 2023 compared to 2022, when social media use reached about 31 million users, an increase of 16% in Nigeria. This increase indicates that the use of disinformation and the targeting of people for populist projects may continue in the future if the digital space is not regulated by the state.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Data companies are highly capable of collecting, storing, and cleansing vast amounts of personal data, and processing this data in unethical ways has negative consequences for individuals and real impacts on democracies. In this regard, data companies involved in election campaigns use standard data analytics practices to better understand groups of voters: Through segmentation, based on indicators as well as more stable markers such as ethnicity and religion, to send targeted messages to different parts of the electorate to increase voter turnout or influence voters' choices in ways that are not necessarily based on objective assessments but rather on spreading misinformation and fear of the unknown.

Ethical concerns arise from the practices of data companies, raising a variety of questions regarding their ethical implications and their potential impact on the state and society.

The focus of big data companies on the profiling of individuals is explicitly or implicitly fuelling populist trends across the globe. Moreover, in certain contexts, the information extracted by data companies has the potential to influence voter support for specific and sometimes populist presidential candidates, leading voters away from making a rational choice. This misinformation can create confusion and scepticism, leading to low voter confidence and motivation to participate in the electoral process.

The information that data companies collect about voters and elections comes from multiple sources. Surveys are the most common method used to collect data through questionnaires. Social media has become the most popular source for data companies to analyse big data. Big data companies specialise in aggregating data to provide insights into government accountability, government performance, or election results. However, there may be too many issues due to ethical considerations around the handling of voters' personal information and legal requirements restricting the collection and use of such data.

Big Data companies work systematically to determine the grand strategic goals of a campaign, the message it conveys, and the medium it uses based on the quality of evidence available to them. When using voter modelling and targeting accordingly, campaigns must have high confidence in how they will reach the intended target. This is because campaigns should not treat voters as a single mass, preferring instead to send messages to them as individuals, groups, or in ways that ap-

peal to their identity or sense of personal identity. The better the quality of the data used as input to the algorithms, the more effective the decision-making and influencing of individuals will be.

While developed countries have legal structures that enable them to control these suspicious manipulations, underdeveloped countries provide an open theatre for the application of all legitimate and illegitimate means to serve corrupt politicians and populist political trends.

In the American case, the exploitation of the data of 87 million people in the service of Donald Trump's populist election campaign in 2016 led to the summoning of the director of Facebook and his hearing in the US Congress. Meanwhile, in the Kenyan and Nigerian cases, Cambridge Analytica's interference in the electoral process led to tribal and ethnic conflicts, and fuelled a collective fear and suspicion towards ethnic and tribal components within the African countries.

Given the fragility of the African state and the weakness of its legal structures, these events passed without personal responsibility. This is due to the fragility of the legal structure related to the protection of personal and individual data and the issue of privacy.<sup>11</sup>

In general, these companies operate in a neoliberal global climate, which is inherently anti-political and favours money above all moral considerations. This was evident in the company's support for calls attacking immigrants in Britain, arguing, like the rest of the Brexit populist movement, that Britain's crisis is a migration crisis. This trend was also observed in the total support for Donald Trump's electoral project to restore the glories of America and make it strong again through policies that are hostile to foreigners, and even blame them for the status quo in America.

The same company has served political clients in Nigeria, Kenya, and other African countries who have offered huge sums of money to help them succeed in elections. The results of what the company achieved in Nigeria and Kenya were not similar to what it achieved in developed countries—i.e., the coming to power of populist political forces—but it almost destroyed the fragile social peace in these countries. On the other hand, these strategies contributed to the realisation by populist forces and other politicians of the importance of data and its exploitation to reach power, which explains the use of social media by populist forces to deliver their message against the traditional political class in Nigeria's 2023 elections and Kenya's 2022 elections.

The future of populism on the African continent depends on the expansion of data exploitation and the size of social media users. We argued in this paper that

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<sup>11</sup>Regulatory frameworks governing the operations of data companies have not been able to keep up with the scope and depth of the structural interventions they are making in electoral processes. As such, existing laws are lagging behind on issues related to transparency, accountability, integrity and respect for election rules. Interestingly, some African countries have enacted laws or policies that directly respond to the use of data analytics in elections. However, these laws do not cover everything that is needed to protect democratic processes from the influence of data analytics companies. Moreover, these regulations can contain loopholes that jeopardise their overall effectiveness.

big data companies do not believe in politics, the ethics of politics and free competition as much as they believe in the power of money, an approach similar to that of populism, which appeals to collective emotions in exchange for its deep belief in the power of money and the futility of politics and politicians in the neoliberal context. We have argued in this paper that with the expansion of big data companies—sometimes operating in the shadows—populist projects will be strengthened, especially in fragile countries such as Africa.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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