

18064 Don't waste the Cambridge Analytica scandal: it's a chance to take control of our data

Adapted from Scott Ludlam, The Guardian, 23 March 2018

Emerging from several days in hiding while the Cambridge Analytica storm swamped his company, Mark Zuckerberg finally spoke on Thursday.

"We have a responsibility to protect your data, and if we can't then we don't deserve to serve you," he said. To be clear, this is a statement, not an apology. What has been exposed here is not some unforeseeable aberration, but an ordinary consequence of what may be called "surveillance capitalism".

Facebook, its business model, and the web of commercial and political agreements holding it in place are currently undergoing a moment of outrage. Big, positive changes are possible when events conspire to blow a scandal onto the front page day after day, if such a moment is channelled in meaningful ways.

As ever, this means a lot of well-paid people are scrambling right now to make sure that things change as little as possible, by making sure that we are collectively content to learn the wrong lessons and then go back to how we were. If this all dies down with a handful of executives forced to switch companies and an empty commitment by Facebook to work harder to earn our trust, the moment will have been wasted.

The sleazy way in which Cambridge Analytica was able to scrape Facebook's vast collection of private information is not the real story here. Neither is the existence of these creepy little consultancies which promise to combine big data holdings with psychographic analysis to help political candidates manipulate voters.

The real question is whether we are ready, collectively, to draw a line under surveillance capitalism itself, and start taking back a measure of control.

The interests ranged against the public are huge. Corporate giants like Facebook and Google provide a free service in exchange for information about your most intimate personal, commercial, locational and political life, which they then sell to advertisers or other third parties. That's the for-profit surveillance model: your inner life and purchasing habits are the product, packaged and sold on.

The ultimate question is whether we're ready to exercise our data sovereignty, or whether we're content to play passive victims while surveillance capitalism extends ever finer threads into every corner of our lives. For better or worse, a window is open in which to have that conversation, and it's in all our interests that it stays open long after Facebook's immediate misfortunes have scrolled off the bottom of the newsfeed.