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The politics of 'mind control'

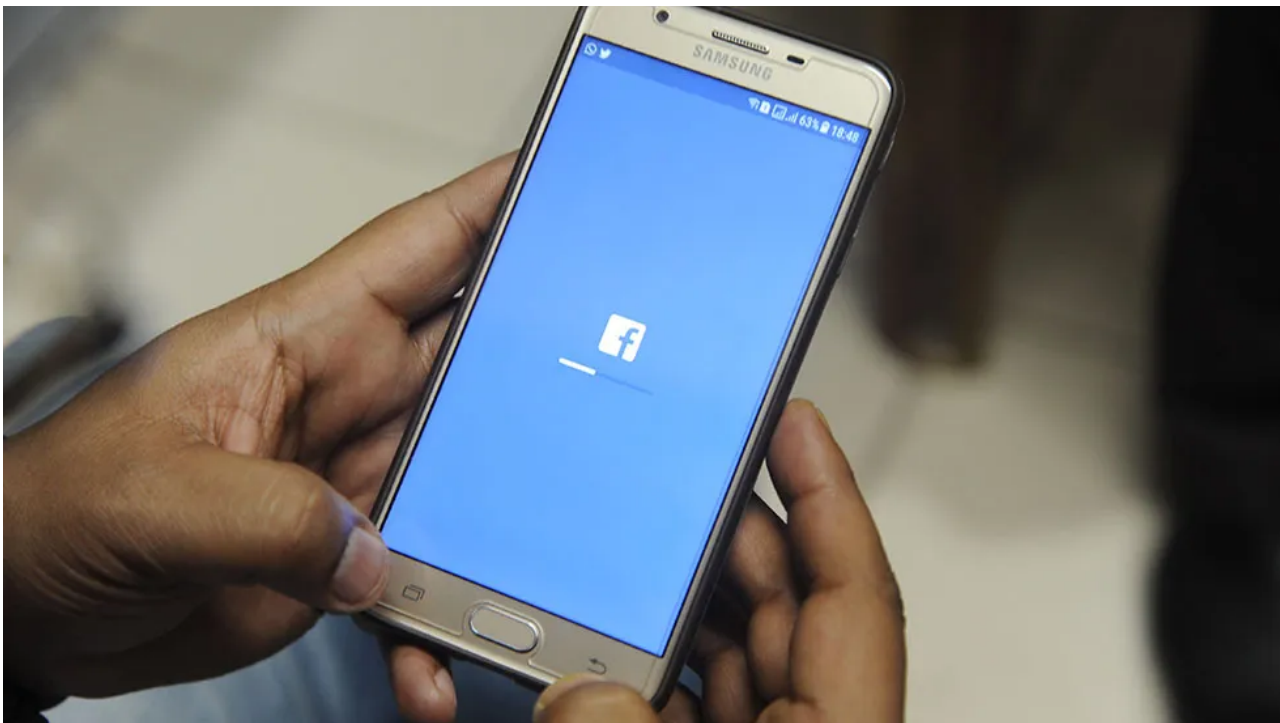
BY HARLAN ULLMAN, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 01/24/22 8:00 AM ET

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Make no mistake: Mind control is happening and in ways most people fail to recognize. The term “mind control” reeks of George Orwell’s “1984” and a dystopian universe in which humans are semi-automatons regulated by a higher authority resident in science-fiction movies.

In reality, people are affected every day by a kind of “mind control” — campaigns and messaging meant to persuade, convince, cajole or coerce them to buy product A as opposed to products B-Z; to support or vote for particular candidates or issues; or to

were Brexit (the 2016 referendum in Great Britain about whether to remain or leave the European Union (EU)) and in the 2016 U.S. presidential election by a relatively unknown UK firm called Cambridge Analytica (CA). In 2019, Netflix released a blockbuster documentary about CA called "The Great Hack."

Cambridge Analytica was formed in 2013 as a subsidiary of a UK behavioral research, data analysis and communications company called SCL (Strategic Communications Laboratories) funded by UK Tory politicians and ex-UK military officers. SCL was engaged in influencing elections in several countries by manipulating data to affect voters' perceptions and subsequent votes.

The main American CA investors were billionaire hedge fund manager Robert Mercer and his daughter Rebekah Mercer, both of whom became strong Trump supporters, and Steve Bannon, Trump's future strategist, who at the time was at Breitbart News, owned by the Mercers.

After winning the Scottish referendum to remain in the UK, Prime Minister David Cameron wrongly believed that he would prevail in the June 2016 referendum on EU membership. But Brexit, pushed by future Prime Minister Boris Johnson, prevailed 52-48 percent. There were three main reasons why "Remain" failed.

First, Johnson adviser Dominic Cummings, who would turn against the prime minister in late 2021 when he was dismissed from 10 Downing Street, made a decisive observation. About one million British voters did not belong to any party. It was these voters who would be targeted by the "Leave" campaign and ultimately decide the referendum.

Concurrently and second, the Russians drew the same conclusion. Using social media, Russian propaganda focused on these same undecided British voters to support "Leave" as part of Moscow's effort to divide the Western alliance. While not fully proven, Russian "active measures" likely contributed to the "Leave" vote.

Third was Cambridge Analytica. CA had harvested thousands of pieces of data from Facebook on many millions of Britons. Shareholder legal suits would follow for which Facebook would be fined for violating privacy laws. But in December 2021, a U.S. federal court dismissed more serious charges and allegations that Facebook management knew and permitted CA to loot its data.

the uncommitted Britons. And the combination worked. "Leave" won.

The 2016 Trump campaign hired CA, which collected data on somewhere between 50-90 million Americans, affecting roughly a quarter of the U.S. population, largely from Facebook, to shape the vote for Trump.

The lesson is that by manipulating private data, one can impose a form of mind control on any cohort of the population. All political parties understand this and could plagiarize these techniques in the future.

Harlan Ullman, Ph.D, is senior adviser at Washington, D.C.'s Atlantic Council and the primary author of "shock and awe." His latest book is, ["The Fifth Horseman and the New MAD: How Massive Attacks of Disruption Became the Looming Existential Danger to a Divided Nation and that World at Large."](#)

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