

Ethics case study

Summer Institute in Computational Social Science*

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In August 2006, about 10 days prior to the primary election, 20,000 people living in Michigan received something surprising in the mail. They receive a mailer that asked “WHAT IF YOUR NEIGHBORS KNEW WHETHER YOU VOTED?” (caps in original). There was some additional text below this question and then a table showing the actual voting behavior of the recipient’s neighbors in previous elections (Fig. 1).

This mailer was part of a research experiment on voting behavior. One time mailings typically increase voter turnout by about one percentage point, but this one increased turnout by 8.1 percentage points, the largest effect seen up to that point (Gerber et al., 2008). The effect was so large that a political operative named Hal Malchow offered the researcher \$100,000 not to publish the result of the experiment, presumably so that Malchow could make use of this information himself (Issenberg, 2012, p. 304). But, the researchers did ultimately publish the paper in 2008 in the *American Political Science Review*. Here’s the abstract of the paper, which explains more about the scientific motivations for the study:

“Voter turnout theories based on rational self-interested behavior generally fail to predict significant turnout unless they account for the utility that citizens receive from performing their civic duty. We distinguish between two aspects of this type of utility, intrinsic satisfaction from behaving in accordance with a norm and extrinsic incentives to comply, and test the effects of priming intrinsic motives and applying varying degrees of extrinsic pressure. A large-scale field experiment involving several hundred thousand registered voters used a series of mailings to gauge these effects. Substantially higher turnout was observed among those who received mailings promising to publicize their turnout to their household or their neighbors. These findings demonstrate the profound importance of social pressure as an inducement to political participation.”

In addition to the 20,000 mailers that asked “WHAT IF YOUR NEIGHBORS KNEW WHETHER YOU VOTED?,” the researchers also sent 60,000 other mailers with three slightly different designs (Fig. 2, 3, and 4). When you carefully inspect the mailers you may notice that the researchers’ names do not appear on them. Rather, the return address is to Practical Political Consulting. In the acknowledgments section of the paper, the authors explain: “Special thanks go to Mark Grebner of Practical Political Consulting, who designed and administered the mail program studied here.” The acknowledgments section of the paper also makes clear that this study was approved by the Human Subjects Committee (i.e., Institutional Review Board) at the researchers’ university.

Some people who received these mailers were not happy. In fact, Issenberg (2012, p. 198) reports that “Grebner [the director of Practical Political Consulting] was never able to calculate how many people took the trouble to complain by phone, because his office answering machine filled so quickly that new callers were unable to leave a message.” In fact, Grebner noted that the backlash could have been even larger if they had scaled up the treatment. He said to Alan Gerber, one of the researchers, “Alan if we had spent five hundred thousand dollars and covered the whole state you and I would be living with Salman Rushdie.” (Issenberg, 2012, p. 200).

This particular case is great for a discussion because it is interesting and important research, and it touches on many of the ethical issues that arise in computational social science. But it touches on these issues in unexpected ways, and so it can help us move beyond some stale debates that have been happening

*We thank Don Green for advice that helped improve this activity. This activity is based on a similar activity in Chapter 6 of Salganik (2018) and based on an activity from SICSS 2017, which was authored by Matthew Salganik and Yo-Yo Chen.

for a while. It is also a great case because there are no easy answers. Please discuss these question in your group:

1. Before you proceed, please quickly read the paper: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305540808009X>. If this were a real ethical discussion—not an activity—you would need to be very familiar with the research itself.
2. Assess the ethical issues raised by this study. Please draw on any framework, principles, or ideas that you think are appropriate.
3. Given your assessment, what approaches would you take to address the ethical issues related to this study? These approaches could be related to the design, testing, or publishing of the study.
4. Would it impact your answer to the questions above if Mark Grebner was already sending out similar mailings at this time? More generally, how should researchers think about evaluating existing interventions created by practitioners?

References

- Gerber, A. S., Green, D. P., and Larimer, C. W. (2008). Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment. *American Political Science Review*, 102(01):33–48.
- Issenberg, S. (2012). *The Victory Lab: The Secret Science of Winning Campaigns*. Broadway Books, New York.
- Salganik, M. J. (2018). *Bit by Bit: Social Research in the Digital Age*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

Neighbors mailing

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 FLINT MI 48507

Dear Registered Voter:

WHAT IF YOUR NEIGHBORS KNEW WHETHER YOU VOTED?

Why do so many people fail to vote? We've been talking about the problem for years, but it only seems to get worse. This year, we're taking a new approach. We're sending this mailing to you and your neighbors to publicize who does and does not vote.

The chart shows the names of some of your neighbors, showing which have voted in the past. After the August 8 election, we intend to mail an updated chart. You and your neighbors will all know who voted and who did not.

DO YOUR CIVIC DUTY — VOTE!

MAPLE DR	Aug 04	Nov 04	Aug 06
9995 JOSEPH JAMES SMITH	Voted	Voted	_____
9995 JENNIFER KAY SMITH		Voted	_____
9997 RICHARD B JACKSON		Voted	_____
9999 KATHY MARIE JACKSON		Voted	_____
9999 BRIAN JOSEPH JACKSON		Voted	_____
9991 JENNIFER KAY THOMPSON		Voted	_____
9991 BOB R THOMPSON		Voted	_____
9993 BILL S SMITH			_____
9989 WILLIAM LUKE CASPER		Voted	_____
9989 JENNIFER SUE CASPER		Voted	_____
9987 MARIA S JOHNSON	Voted	Voted	_____
9987 TOM JACK JOHNSON	Voted	Voted	_____
9987 RICHARD TOM JOHNSON		Voted	_____
9985 ROSEMARY S SUE		Voted	_____
9985 KATHRYN L SUE		Voted	_____
9985 HOWARD BEN SUE		Voted	_____
9983 NATHAN CHAD BERG		Voted	_____
9983 CARRIE ANN BERG		Voted	_____
9981 EARL JOEL SMITH			_____
9979 DEBORAH KAY WAYNE		Voted	_____
9979 JOEL R WAYNE		Voted	_____

Figure 1: Neighbor mailer from Gerber et al. (2008).

APPENDIX A: MAILINGS**Civic Duty mailing**

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ECRL0T **C002
THE JONES FAMILY
9999 WILLIAMS RD
FLINT MI 48507

Dear Registered Voter:

DO YOUR CIVIC DUTY AND VOTE!

Why do so many people fail to vote? We've been talking about this problem for years, but it only seems to get worse.

The whole point of democracy is that citizens are active participants in government; that we have a voice in government. Your voice starts with your vote. On August 8, remember your rights and responsibilities as a citizen. Remember to vote.

DO YOUR CIVIC DUTY — VOTE!

Figure 2: Civic duty mailer from Gerber et al. (2008).

Hawthorne mailing

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ECRL0T **C001
THE SMITH FAMILY
9999 PARK LANE
FLINT MI 48507

Dear Registered Voter:

YOU ARE BEING STUDIED!

Why do so many people fail to vote? We've been talking about this problem for years, but it only seems to get worse.

This year, we're trying to figure out why people do or do not vote. We'll be studying voter turnout in the August 8 primary election.

Our analysis will be based on public records, so you will not be contacted again or disturbed in any way. Anything we learn about your voting or not voting will remain confidential and will not be disclosed to anyone else.

DO YOUR CIVIC DUTY — VOTE!

Figure 3: Hawthorne mailer from Gerber et al. (2008).

Self mailing

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Dear Registered Voter:

WHO VOTES IS PUBLIC INFORMATION!

Why do so many people fail to vote? We've been talking about the problem for years, but it only seems to get worse.

This year, we're taking a different approach. We are reminding people that who votes is a matter of public record.

The chart shows your name from the list of registered voters, showing past votes, as well as an empty box which we will fill in to show whether you vote in the August 8 primary election. We intend to mail you an updated chart when we have that information.

We will leave the box blank if you do not vote.

DO YOUR CIVIC DUTY—VOTE!

OAK ST	Aug 04	Nov 04	Aug 06
9999 ROBERT WAYNE		Voted	_____
9999 LAURA WAYNE	Voted	Voted	_____

Figure 4: Self mailer from Gerber et al. (2008).