

Alex Johnson

CS 581

I pledge my honor that I have abided by the Stevens Honor System.

Assignment 6

FB Mood Manipulation

During a week in 2012 Facebook performed a mood experiment on some of its user base in order to collect data on how positive or negative news feeds can affect a person. The study showed that people who were exposed to negative news feeds were more likely to write negative posts, while people who experienced positive news feeds wrote more positively. Years later, with the experiment revealed, many flaws were found.

One of the biggest issues with the experiment was whether or not it was ethically correct. Many thought it was illegal, however when agreeing to Facebook's terms of use, it states Facebook can collect user data for analysis and research. While not illegal, it raises ethical concerns. Their terms of use are not worded clearly and it is widely known that most people do not read them. Also many asked if it is ethical for a company to try and change people's moods without consent or warning, especially when it is in a negative way.

Another issue with the experiment was that it was poorly designed. One of the tools used, the LIWC 2007 tool was flawed and would rate statements incorrectly for whether they were positive or negative. For example from "Everything We Know About Facebook's Secret Mood Manipulation Experiment", "t would rate these two tweets as scoring +2 for positive (because of

the words “great” and “happy”) and +2 for negative (because of the word “not” in both texts)”.

This is an example of how the tool was flawed to analyze the results of the experiment.

Facebook’s study in 2012 may not have been illegal, but to many seemed very unethical. By taking data discretely and changing people’s moods, it proved Facebook was more concerned with data than its users' mental health. At the end of the day, the experiment was set up poorly and provided Facebook with little information.

My Opinion

In my opinion, Facebook’s study in 2012 revealed an ethical issue with big companies that I am sure has not stopped in the last eight years. The “Terms of Use” and “Privacy Policy” is a very scary page for users, and most do not even realize it. These documents are written out to be extremely long and confusing so that many do not read them. By blindly clicking the easily accessible agree button and skipping those pages, companies can legally collect and analyze user data freely. I do not believe that companies should be able to conduct research without the users knowing, and claim legality due to some agreement clicked when the user first created their account. I do not believe that any study that manipulated a persons physically or mental state without their permission is ethical. This could be permanently damaging to a person. For example, let's say that a user has been having a very rough time the last few months and suddenly they are being shown all negative news feeds without knowing it’s an experiment. This could be very dangerous for someone who already was in a very bad place and not fair to that user. If that user was at least aware that they were in an experiment then maybe it would be less unsettling or the user could choose to back out.

I do however see the otherside of thinking for the big companies. Facebook's experiment in 2012 could not have worked if the users had known they were in an experiment. For many experiments, if the subjects are aware they are in the experiment, this skews the data because the users will do what they think the experiment wants them to do, or act differently then they usually would. With that being said, I still do not believe that these experiments are ethical and companies and researchers need to find a new way to collect data without impacting their users unknowingly.

Logging in with Facebook

Many websites provide the option to "Log in with Facebook" when entering the site. This click of a button to bypass entering your user information is extremely tempting and something I have done as well. Well no longer. A Princeton study has revealed that it is possible for scripts to be seeded on certain sites which pull user data from Facebook's API when clicking the login with Facebook button. There are many companies that create software like this, however not for this specific purpose. Companies like Lytics, ProPs and more create software which collects data for companies, however either their software or software like it is being manipulated to take personal information from Facebook's API. With this manipulated software, information thieves can find people's userIDs, birthdays, and any other information entered in their Facebook page. With just very little information people can connect a specific user to many different sites and eventually find a flaw in one site and steal even more private information. I believe that the "Log in with Facebook" option is extremely efficient, however should not be put in place until all of

the security issues are resolved. While it is not entirely Facebook's fault that the information was taken, it is their responsibility to fix the issue.