

Case Study: Inappropriate Use of Surveys

In 2018, Facebook users around the world were shocked to hear that for years their personal data had been collected and used without their consent. Cambridge Analytica had been using an application called “This is Your Digital Life” that collected personal data by asking a series of questions to users to develop psychological profiles for the users that answered their surveys (Meredith, 2018). The data was then sold to clients, mostly for political advertising (Hern, 2018). The Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal demonstrates how seemingly innocent surveys can be used to steal and misuse personal data. However, this isn’t the only time that such a thing has occurred.

Most women experience a menstrual cycle, and many track these cycles by using apps. Apps are convenient ways to understand various health issues, track fertility, and even know when to plan a vacation. I myself had been an avid user of a period-tracker application before the data scandal with Flo occurred. Flo, one of the most popular period-tracking apps, was discovered to be using the surveys on user health, menstrual cycles, and reproductive plans to collect data that was being used by third parties for marketing and advertising purposes (FTC, 2021). But what impact has this inappropriate use of surveys had?

- From an ethical standpoint: the lack of informed consent that personal data was going to be used by third parties resulted in a lack of trust between the company and the individual. Health data can be extremely sensitive, and for that data to be given to others without your knowledge is unacceptable.

- From a social standpoint: awareness of the misuse of personal health data spread among people, and this led many users to delete their period-tracker apps, regardless of whether the app was Flo or not.
- From a legal standpoint: in this instance, the case resulted in the FTC (Federal Trade Commission) of the United States taking action. However, more terrible consequences could have occurred for the users. As Roe v. Wade is now overturned in the United States, period-tracker users are more fearful than ever that their data may be used to prosecute them, specifically those who seek to have an abortion (Garamvolgyi, 2022).
- From a professional standpoint: this case highlights the responsibility that data scientists have in ensuring that health-related data is collected, stored, and used ethically and in compliance with regulations such as the GDPR.

People have a fundamental right to privacy, and this extends to data protection (EDPS, n.d.). No individual should be afraid of their personal data, especially their health data, being sold to strangers who wish to sell you products, convince you to vote for a specific political candidate, or even prosecute, blackmail, or otherwise use the data against you. As an aspiring data scientist, it was disheartening to read that the app that Cambridge Analytica used was developed by a data scientist. We all have a responsibility to ensure that the data of others is protected to the extent that we ourselves would like our own data to be protected. User data is not just data points to be used at will, it's information about people who have private lives that should be respected.

References

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