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Disavowing "Tastes, Ties, and Time"[1]

In 2008, researchers made an amazing dataset at least partially available to the public. The data – the multiyear Facebook connections and preferences of a university's incoming class – seemed rich and promising but was quickly identified as the Harvard College class of 2009. Ultimately, the Harvard Facebook Study defied at least three out of Matthew J. Salganik's four principles of research.[2] While it does not appear that any specific individual within the study has faced serious negative consequences from it, the consequentialist approach adopted by researchers carries too dangerous a precedent for other scholars; instead, a deontological approach should be adopted.

Ultimately, the overall premise for disavowing the study rests upon the idea that any one person's identity could be triangulated using the data at hand and their personal information shared or used for nefarious purposes. While the Harvard Facebook Study has not shown itself to be damaging from any of its unknowing participants, even a reproduction of the study at another college or university could have serious negative consequences. Thus, researchers *must* focus on the means rather than the end results when conducting studies.

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[1] Kevin Lewis, Jason Kaufman, Marco Gonzalez, Andreas Wimmer, and Nicholas Christakis, "Tastes, ties, and time: A new social network dataset using Facebook.com," *Social Networks* 30 (2008): 330-342.
[2] Matthew J. Salganik, *Bit By Bit: Social Research in the Digital Age*, Chapter 6.

Respect for persons

The main faltering point for the study is respect for persons. Salganik advocates for individuals to be treated as autonomous and those with diminished autonomy should be provided additional protection. The Harvard Facebook Study fails in multiple ways. First, since there were a small number of minority students within the 2009 Harvard cohort, anonymity simply could not be ensured. Racial or ethnic minorities need additional safe guards over their identity. Given their relatively small absolute number, the likelihood of their identity being discovered is disproportionally high compared to their white peers. Black and Latino students were particularly vulnerable.

In addition to racial and ethnic minorities, crucial economic information was also made available. For example, only 14 students came from zip codes where the median household income was between 150,001 and 200,001 dollars. Identifying which students came from these wealthy backgrounds means that blackmail or extortion could easily be performed. This is especially troublesome given that both undergraduates and graduate students served as Research Assistants (RAs) on the project.[3] Had a graduate student served as a teacher or teaching assistant to one of these students, the natural power dynamic had the potential to be even more pronounced.

It is also apparent that the researchers did not consider the broader implications of danger to the participants and their family and friends. Several countries only had one student as a member of that cohort. Being able to

[3] Michael Zimmer, '"But the data is already public": on the ethics of research in Facebook," *Ethics of Information Technology* (2010) 12, pp. 313-325: 318.

individually identify that student, as well as have access to his or her social groups, could potentially reveal a sexual identity that, while largely accepted in the United States, is punishable in the student's home country. Other, secondary and tertiary individuals associated with that student, might bear the burden of extortion or capital punishment.

For example, only one student[4] came from Albania, Malaysia, and the Philippines where homosexuals face legal challenges or have limited rights. Additionally, homosexuality is illegal in Iran and punishable by death; only one participant hailed from Iran, making it much easier to discover his or her identity.

Finally, it is possible to imagine a modified study where participants were made of their involvement in the study so that they could opt in or opt out. While participation bias would initially be present, it is likely that over time, the effect on participants would fade and they would engage in typical online behavior.

Beneficence

Salganik's appeal for beneficence states that, much like medical doctors, researchers should do no harm to participants. Once again, although the researchers did not perform any harmful tests upon their subjects, the release of their data has the potential to cause serious harm, not only to the participant herself, but also to her family or friends. While one may argue that the ends justify the means, such a stance represents a dangerous pitfall: if reproduced, this study could have dangerous, unintended consequences. Thus, a deontological approach should be

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[4] Michael Zimmer, '"But the data is already public": on the ethics of research in Facebook," *Ethics of Information Technology* (2010) 12, pp. 313-325: 319.

adopted, even if that means certain kinds of research cannot occur. Above all, the safety and security of participants is paramount.

Justice

Once again, because of the limited number of participants in racial or ethnic categories, as well as annual household income category, the burden was not equally placed on all participants. White students made up 60.9% of the sample size and therefore would be much harder to triangulate than peers from smaller groups such as Latinos or Blacks. Although the study does do a good job of gaining a representative sample from across the United States, not all students are easily doxxed and this danger falls disproportionally on minority students, who are entitled to extra protections.

Additionally, participants were never debriefed or told that they had participated in a study that could impact them in the future. For example, The Chronicle of Higher Education wrote an article about the study and contacted a student participant, Sarah M. Ashburn. Ms. Ashburn said she had not learned of the study until the author of the article told her about it, although many years had passed.[5] Debriefing participants both to tell them of the findings and provide for the safety and security moving forward is paramount to any study on human participants.

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[5] Marc Parry, "Harvard Researchers Accused of Breaching Students' Privacy: Social-network project shows promise and peril of doing social science online," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 7.10.2011.

Respect for Law and Public Interest

Salganik's fourth principle does appear to have been upheld, although the researchers were still in murky water. It appears that the study fell within the terms of service (T.O.S) for Facebook and therefore did not violate the law. Nevertheless, the legalize of the T.O.S. may have been difficult for a young person to understand, provided they even read them. Nevertheless, there has been great public interest as well as the potential for public good to come from analysis of this study. Understanding how peers mimic taste is a fascinating question and this study is a partial continuation of Pierre Bourdieu's work.[6] But the public good it presents is questionable. As Helen Nissenbaum demonstrates, the public/private dichotomy does not exist in the digital age and there are ethical concerns for publicizing someone's personal data.[7]

Conclusion

Although fascinating, I would not publish any research based upon this dataset. Doing so would be to adopt a consequentialist philosophy, which I believe is dangerous to the public good. Regardless of its sometimes frustrating conclusions, a deontological approach is the only ethnical way to conduct research.

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[6] I believe the authors of the article fundamentally misunderstand Pierre Bourdieu's argument in *Distinction*. They correctly state that Bourdieu believes that cultural proclivities play an important role in shaping social boundaries but Bourdieu is making the larger argument that some individuals – the upper crust – set taste while all others simply ape at them. No matter how hard they try, non-elites will never fully understand or perfectly embody this taste. They are reduced to mimicking, a state of which they might not even be aware. Thus, mapping social networks might lead you to taste makers but will never reveal how taste is internalized.

[7] Helen Nissenbaum, *Privacy in Context: Technology, Policy, and the Integrity of Social Life*, Stanford University Press, 2010.