Reflective Activity 2 – Cambridge Analytica

The Cambridge Analytica Scandal and the Ethics of Survey Data

In 2018, Cambridge Analytica became the focus of international scrutiny after it was revealed that the company had harvested the personal data of up to 87 million Facebook users without consent (Confessore, 2018). The firm accessed this data through a seemingly innocuous personality quiz called This Is Your Digital Life, developed by researcher Aleksandr Kogan. Although only around 270,000 people completed the survey, Facebook’s lenient application programming interface (API) allowed data to be collected from respondents’ friends as well (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, 2018). Cambridge Analytica used this data to build detailed profiles, which were allegedly employed to influence political advertising during the 2016 United States presidential election and the United Kingdom’s Brexit referendum.

Surveys made an effective research tool in this case because they appeared legitimate and voluntary. Participants believed they were contributing to academic research, which was an entirely false pretext. Furthermore, Facebook’s architecture at the time encouraged third-party data sharing, allowing a small dataset to expand exponentially. In legitimate contexts, surveys are valuable because they enable researchers to capture attitudes, preferences, and beliefs efficiently across large populations (Bryman, 2016). However, Cambridge Analytica’s actions demonstrate how such data can be misused when ethical oversight is absent.

A similar example occurred when Google’s Street View project in 2010 was found to have inadvertently gathered personal Wi-Fi data from households alongside street imagery (BBC News, 2010). While Google claimed the data collection was accidental and aimed at improving geolocation services, it nonetheless violated privacy laws and expectations. Another case is Facebook’s Emotional Contagion study in 2014, which manipulated users’ news feeds to measure emotional reactions without explicit consent (Kramer, Guillory and Hancock, 2014). These cases illustrate the blurred line between genuine research and unethical experimentation on unaware participants.

From an ethical perspective, these incidents violated principles of informed consent, privacy, and the obligation to avoid harm. The social consequences were significant: public trust in digital platforms declined, and users became more conscious of how their data might be exploited. Legally, the Cambridge Analytica case contributed to greater regulatory enforcement under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and investigations by the UK Information Commissioner’s Office. From a professional standpoint, these examples highlight the duty of computing professionals to uphold transparency, accountability, and fairness in data collection and analysis.

In conclusion, surveys remain powerful tools for research, but when used deceptively as in Cambridge Analytica and related cases, can cross ethical boundaries and erode trust. Responsible practice requires that researchers and technologists ensure informed consent, minimise data collection, and avoid sharing data without permission from participants.

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