

Ethical and Professional Implications of Misusing Surveys – The Case of Cambridge Analytica

Case Summary

In 2018, Cambridge Analytica was exposed for harvesting personal data from over 87 million Facebook users through innocuous personality quizzes (Confessore, 2018). Although only about 270,000 users gave consent, data was collected from their extended networks without permission. This data was weaponised to influence the 2016 US presidential election and the UK Brexit referendum. A comparable case is Google's Project Nightingale, which collected sensitive health data from millions of Ascension healthcare patients without their explicit knowledge (Copeland, 2019). Though legally justified under HIPAA, the approach sparked widespread ethical concern due to its lack of transparency.

Ethical Implications

Both examples raise significant ethical issues. Informed consent was not obtained meaningfully, breaching autonomy and transparency principles (Finn and Shilton, 2023). Data was used not for scientific progress, but for political and commercial gain, violating the ethical principle of beneficence. These actions reflect a disregard for responsible data stewardship, demonstrating a need for stricter ethical governance in digital research.

Social Implications

Social trust in both researchers and digital platforms has been eroded. The Cambridge Analytica scandal, in particular, illustrated how data misuse can exacerbate misinformation and deepen political polarisation. Public backlash has driven calls for stronger data governance frameworks and ethical oversight in technology sectors.

Legal Considerations

Cambridge Analytica's actions led to global scrutiny and legal investigations, especially under GDPR and the UK's Data Protection Act 2018. In contrast, Project Nightingale operated within legal limits of HIPAA, highlighting gaps in legislation surrounding third-party data handling and consent. These cases illustrate that legality does not equate to ethical soundness.

Professional Standpoints

Both the BCS and ACM Codes of Conduct stress public interest, accountability, and integrity. Professionals involved in these cases failed to uphold these standards, resulting in reputational damage and undermining public confidence. Ethical codes must be implemented as living documents—guiding practice, not merely serving as formalities (ACM, 2018; BCS, 2021).

Conclusion

These incidents underscore the need for critical ethical reflection when conducting survey-based research. Researchers must prioritise transparency, informed consent, and the ethical handling of data to protect the rights and

welfare of individuals. A proactive ethical stance is vital to ensure trust, fairness, and integrity in research practice.

References

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