

# Consumer Safety Review Boards

*By sonam choudhary(u1069221)*

The principles outlined in the Polonetsky et al paper are: Respect for persons, Beneficence, Justice. I would talk about these principles individually with respect to the mentioned Facebook experiment conducted to encourage more and more voters to register their vote.

- ***Respect for persons***

As the paper mentions, this principle lays emphasis on individual autonomy, manifest in the principles of fair notice and informed choice. Looking at the proposed experiment the review board would look at this principle and analyze if this principle holds or not before giving the go ahead. In the context of this experiment, the following questions should be answered by the researchers doing this experiment, are people given the right to make an informed choice of whether they want to participate in the experiment or not? Are they given a choice whether to accept or deny to receive a voting reminder and also if they wish to share their information of having registered their vote with others? It is also important to consider all the users including the ones who cannot decide if they wish to participate or not. In this experiment, I think since people didn't had the choice to accept/deny to participate or share information this principle is clearly not followed. Also, by clicking on "I voted" button the users agree to share their information in their social community and not to any researcher which accounts for another violation of this principle. However, if Facebook provided to its users the right to make a choice of whether they want a reminder for voting and give them the choice to whether they wish to share their information with others about registering their vote and ask for an informed consent that this data would be used as part of research, in a private setting, this principle would be obeyed and the review board would go ahead with the experiment as far as this principle is concerned.

- ***Beneficence***

This principle focusses on weighing the risk of harms and the benefit an experiment would have across the stakeholders. With respect to this principle and the experiment, the review board would assess risks related to information and information systems as a whole. In the Facebook experiment the review board would analyze Information-centric harms that stem from contravening data confidentiality, availability, and integrity requirements. The major concern would be to have a clear view with respect to the protection of the individual's identity in the experiment? After a user presses "I voted" and the information is shared in his/her social group and everyone else who sees the information does the same, and if this data is being used in the experiment to count the number of voters influenced by each person, then it is important to handle this data carefully as it can be used to trace back user's identity. Another question would be if the results are being published to the public. For this experiment if the results are published then what all information is used and if the assumptions and results shared in the final report are a true representation. How accessible are secondary data sources that can be combined with published data to re-identify the Facebook users? Also, the severity of potential harms to all persons who may be affected by the research activities, in this experiment, the political parties and the people who are not Facebook users. While the risk levels may be different for different parties and the review board would take into account these when evaluating the experiment. If by this experiment, there is a significant increase in the vote count for a particular party then it would harm the other party if a significant number of their supporters are not Facebook users. One other important question would be to think if this experiment undermines the cooperation from the community whose cooperation/participation is needed/targeted, or decrease cooperation with the Government?

Talking about the benefits this experiment would have on the society, one major advantage would be to have more and more people vote in the elections. It is also important to analyze if the benefits, however great or small, can be clearly identified for all the stakeholder involved. If this experiment would impact a small or large section of the society. For this case it would be a considerable part as Facebook has millions of users.

In my opinion, for this experiment, the risk of harm outweighs the benefits. However, if the experiment is performed by asking the users for an informed consent and providing them with certain security guidelines to help them preserve their data and if the experiment itself makes use of less personal data then the risks can be minimized and the review board might consider going forward with this experiment.

- ***Justice***

This principle of justice implies that research must “not arbitrarily target persons or groups based on attributes including (but not limited to): religion, political affiliation, sexual orientation, health, age, technical competency, national origin, race, or socioeconomic status.”

To check for this principle the review board would analyze the mentioned Facebook experiment in terms of disparate impact and whether the experiment focuses only on a particular section/population of the society and how are the other sections are affected by this experiment. For example, as the Gizmodo Article mentions, Facebook’s user base is slightly skewed. Most users are young and females are more interested in spending time on Facebook than males and both of these sections of users tend to vote for democrats. Also, by publicly displaying the voting information as “I Voted” it would further influence others in the list and encourage them to vote, increasing the number to a lot more. So, if only these people are provided with the reminders then in a way this experiment is biased towards the democrats and would contribute largely to their vote count thus influencing the election results. The other users (males) and non-users of Facebook might miss out on a reminder opportunity to vote and may not register their vote. Some non-users might not feel the need or feel lazy or less motivated but people on Facebook would still be interested to vote on seeing that their friends did. Thus, violating the justice principle by unintentionally skewing the voter’s majority to one party. Considering these factors, in my opinion the review board would not approve of this experiment.

At the end I would like to conclude that in my opinion, as mentioned above, considering the principles that the consumer safety review board would comply by, this experiment would not pass through the board because of lack of informed consent from the users to use their data for research and also their consent on whether they would like a reminder or not. Another reason would be that the risk of harm outnumbers the benefits as even after user consent a huge amount of responsibility lies in ensuring data integrity and security and to ensure the results are a true representation of the intend of carrying out the experiment in the first place. Last would be to ensure justice in terms disparate impact that the experiment might represent as the results would reflect only a section of the society and thus undermining other sections of the society.