The Cambridge Analytica Data Scandal and Survey Misuse

Ethical, Social, Legal, and Professional Implications

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The Cambridge Analytica scandal represents a watershed moment in data ethics, revealing how seemingly innocuous Facebook personality quizzes became instruments for political manipulation. Between 2013 and 2018, Cambridge Analytica obtained data on approximately 87 million Facebook users through researcher Aleksandr Kogan's personality quiz app, which harvested not only participants' data but also their friends' information without consent. This data enabled detailed psychographic profiling for targeted political advertising during the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Confessore, 2018). Taylor and Pagliari (2018) highlight how such cases exemplify the growing ethical challenges of mining social media data, as awareness increases about "the use of social media by data analytics companies seeking insights into citizens' political attitudes and networks, to influence voter behaviour".

How the Breach Occurred

Kogan's 'thisisyourdigitallife' app appeared as a standard academic research tool, but exploited Facebook's API permissions to harvest extensive information from participants' friends, including profiles, likes, birthdays, and location data (Symeonidis *et al.*, 2018). Cambridge Analytica leveraged this to create psychographic profiles predicting personality traits and susceptibility to specific messaging, enabling micro-targeted advertisements designed to influence voter behaviour. The commercial motivation was clear: selling these targeted influence capabilities to political campaigns (Confessore, 2018).

Additional Examples

In 2016, researchers scraped and publicly released personal data from nearly 70,000 OKCupid users without knowledge or consent, including usernames, sexual orientation, and intimate personal responses. Researchers justified this by claiming data was 'public', ignoring that users posted information expecting it would be viewed only by potential matches. The dataset remained identifiable and was downloaded over 500 times before OKCupid filed a copyright complaint (Xiao and Ma, 2021).

Another example is the U.S. suicide hotline Crisis Text Line (CTL) which shared data from vulnerable users' conversations with academic researchers between 2016-2017. Users who disclosed suicidal thoughts and self-harm were outraged that their most vulnerable disclosures were being repurposed. Whilst the academic pilot involved institutional review board oversight and anonymisation, the incident highlighted inadequate informed consent through CTL's Terms of Service (Pisani *et al.*, 2025).

Impacts

Ethically, all three cases violated informed consent principles and autonomy by denying individuals meaningful control over personal information. Highly sensitive information was exploited, prioritising commercial or research interests over potential harms including discrimination and psychological distress (Taylor and Pagliari, 2018).

Socially, these breaches eroded public trust in digital platforms, particularly damaging confidence in mental health services where confidentiality is paramount (Pisani *et al.*, 2025). They contributed to broader concerns about surveillance capitalism and power imbalances between data collectors and vulnerable individuals (Xiao and Ma, 2021).

Legally, Facebook received a record-breaking $5 billion U.S. Federal Trade Commission fine in 2019 and a £500,000 fine from the UK's Information Commissioner's Office. Cambridge Analytica filed for bankruptcy following the scandal (Hu, 2020). The OKCupid case exposed inadequate legislation protecting individual data rights (Xiao and Ma, 2021).

Professionally, the scandals violated established research ethics codes requiring informed consent and institutional review board oversight. The OKCupid researchers' dismissal of ethical concerns was condemned as 'grossly unprofessional, unethical and reprehensible' (Xiao and Ma, 2021). These cases prompted professional communities to reconsider ethical frameworks for digital research environments where traditional protections prove inadequate.

Conclusion

These cases collectively demonstrate that ostensibly harmless surveys and data collection tools can become vehicles for significant ethical violations when exploited for purposes beyond users' reasonable expectations. The multi-dimensional impacts, spanning ethical breaches of consent and autonomy, erosion of social trust, inadequate legal protections, and professional accountability failures, underscore the urgent need for stronger regulatory frameworks and ethical guidelines that address the unique challenges posed by digital data collection in an increasingly connected world.

Word count: 592

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