Into and Beyond the “Facebook study”: Ethics in the Digital Age

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Matthew J. Salganik, in the yet unpublished book *Bit by Bit: Social Research in the Digital Age*, offers several ethical principles with which to evaluate social science research. By analyzing the notorious Facebook study “Taste, Ties and Time” study through this lens, we can uncover ways in which existing systems of ethical review fall short in addressing the particular ethical dilemmas in big data research. (Salganik’s fourth principle, Respect for law and public interest, often works in concert with the other principles, and is considered both explicitly and implicitly in the discussions below.)

**Respect for Persons – questions of Informed Consent**

The scientific community has previously established ethical standards in which “informed consent” may not be required *if the consent would significantly affect subjects’ behavior and experimental outcomes*. Given that Facebook’s study was measuring the effect of positive/negative verbal cues on friends’ emotional states, it is reasonable to conclude that informing subjects of their participation in this study might skew results. From this standpoint, it is difficult to fault the academic researchers and Harvard IRB that signed off on this study for choosing not to explicitly inform subjects of their participation in this particular study. Furthermore, according to existing ethical review practices, by reaching out to the IRB for review, the academic researchers fulfilled their ethical responsibility to show respect for persons.

However, the Facebook company itself may have violated this ethical principle and disrespected their subjects by failing to adequately inform users of their participation in such experiments. The ambiguity here centers on the Terms of Service agreement. Facebook investigators explained that the Terms of Service agreement informed users of their possible inclusion in such experiments, which a close reading of the agreement could confirm, and thus concluded that Facebook behaved ethically.

But, the waters get muddied when we also consider how these agreements function in practice. These documents serve one primary purpose: to protect companies from costly litigation. As a result, many Terms of Service agreements today are now lengthy, complex, legalese-filled documents. It is common understanding that many users simply sign Terms of Service agreements without first reading them. Moreover, even for those who wish to “opt-out” of these agreements, the cost of abstaining from the use of such services in certain spheres is prohibitively high due to the intense saturation of that platform in a given social group (Facebook) or professional field (LinkedIn). It is reasonable to infer that companies *know* these agreements are obtained under conditions unfavorable to the user. Yet, because this practice is widespread and users continue to sign up and take advantage of these services, it seems unfair too, to hold Facebook uniquely accountable for violating ethical standards in this instance. This issue is clearly of substantive ethical importance to society at large, but does not seem to provide a “smoking gun” for either side in the debate over the ethics of this Facebook study.

**Beneficence**

Salganik takes this principle from the Belmont Report, which traces its lineage to the Hippocratic oath common to the medical profession: “First do no harm.” In reality, the results of the Facebook study itself effectively proves that the study was indeed conducted beneficently, with reasonably minimal damage to the user and to the general public interest. Indeed, the effect of the Facebook study’s researchers’ manipulations of their subjects’ emotional states was incredibly small, in the range of 0.04-0.1%.

However, even if the principle of beneficence was not violated in practice, the ease with which Facebook’s study passed “ethical muster” with both the Facebook company and the academic institutions involved does generate some general anxiety about whether this principle was effectively applied during ethical review. Beneficence would be a toothless ethical principle unless it could be applied *before* the experiment is conducted. Given the relative silence of the academic institutions involved, and the lack of insight into the specifics of the IRB review, it is understandable that some have had difficulty trusting whether the principle of beneficence was effectively applied during the ethical review process.

Here is where Rosen’s[[1]](#footnote-1) concerns about the silence of academic institutions feel most applicable. Both the practice and the perception of beneficence are important. While the Facebook study may not overtly fail the principle of beneficence, the widespread concern over whether or not Facebook’s research proposal was sufficiently evaluated for beneficence *prior* to its start shows why academic institutions need to be more transparent, and more importantly, perform outreach to the “laity-at-large.” The public interest benefits of such outreach are two-fold: one, it builds trust in and accountability for the scientific community; two, it enables the product of the scientific community to be more equally shared across the broader society (an ethical consideration for the principle of justice, discussed below).

**Justice**

The question of justice in evaluating the ethics of social research typically comes down to questions of fairness and equality. Investigators in the Facebook study did not appear to have been unreasonably unjust in the selection of their subjects, or the method of its dissemination of its work. Though the Harvard class selected for the study was a highly unique and not representative sample, at the time, there was no other similar data set which would overcome these shortcomings, and the research was sufficiently exploratory that a more representative sample was not obviously necessary to facilitate the drawing of some substantive conclusion.

And yet, there are lingering concerns of equality in the *aftermath* of the Facebook study, evidence of larger anxieties over the accessibility and dissemination of the benefits, innovations, and breakthroughs in scientific thought. This question applies broadly to corporate and academic institutions when it comes to social research, though the existing expectations and regulatory practices differ for each. The stratification of digital products in the higher socio-economic classes also generates further concerns about justice: if social research is used to create public policies, how might the relative homogeneity of the subject pool affect the policies created?

**Conclusion**

It is important that the Facebook study in and of itself does not appear to egregiously violate any of Salganik’s ethical principles. Rather, the ethical uncertainty and criticisms surrounding this study seem to stem from a lack of transparency in the institutions involved and, more generally, the absence of consensus about what it means to behave “ethically” in the digital age. The scrutiny of the Facebook study has also stimulated new awareness about how corporations participate in social research, and discussions about the ethical checks and balances that should be implemented (and by whom) to ensure that both private and public industry social research is consistently held to the same or similar rigorous standards. In this light, it is much easier to understand why Jay Rosen is so concerned over the seeming hesitation of academic institutions to be forthright and address these concerns publicly, taking a leading role to guarantee future ethical research. Perhaps academic institutions should not quietly cede their stake in this matter to others.

And yet, the social science research field and their institutions, both public and private, have a lot to learn before they can likely propose a workable solution. It is telling that Jason Kaufman, principle investigator in the Facebook study, speaking to the failure of the anonymization method, explained: “We’re sociologists, not technologists, so a lot of this is new to us.”[[2]](#footnote-2) All of the researchers, Harvard’s IRB, and the Facebook company failed to anticipate the crucial need for privacy experts for their study. We must take a sober look at our IRB’s and ask: are they adequately equipped to navigate this uncharted ethical space?

So, should we use the dataset at the heart of this Facebook controversy for future studies? Since the de-anonymized data has already been published, it seems that the ethics of whether to use the data is a choice between unwavering adherence to the ethical principle and the acknowledgment that in reality, neither choice will further harm nor restore the privacy of the participants’ data. As a pragmatist, I would likely be willing to use the dataset for future research. Regardless, I hope that the scientific community will move forward with all haste to build new consensus on ethical standards and practices that will allow scientists to more easily choose, without seeming to overlook important ethical considerations, whether to use “older” data obtained under less transparent conditions.

1. Jay Rosen, “Facebook’s Controversial Study Is Business as Usual for Tech Companies but Corrosive for Universities - The Washington Post,” accessed October 8, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/07/03/dont-blame-facebook-for-screwing-with-your-mood-blame-academia/?utm\_term=.6de11a2094f2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Michael Zimmer, “‘But the Data Is Already Public’: On the Ethics of Research in Facebook,” Ethics and Information Technology 12, no. 4 (June 4, 2010): 313–25, doi:10.1007/s10676-010-9227-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)