Advances in technology are now allowing us to access more data about human beings than ever before. In the mean time, however, the privacy of online social media has become a more and more serious concern for many people. Beginning in 2008, the release of the Facebook data in the “Tastes, Ties, and Time” triggered an outcry from the public, for the researchers in this study scraped the students’ profile of all members of the Class of 2009, combining with the students’ email addresses and housing information, and used the data for their own research, while also sharing the result with others. In this paper, I am going to first discuss how this research adhere to the four principles of ethical research, and then explain why I would not use this data for further research.

The first principle: “Respect For Persons” can be interpreted as receiving informed consent from the participants. Such principle, for most of the time, serves as an important prerequisite for minimizing harm to participants. The T3 researchers, however, did not ask the students for permission before accessing their Facebook profile. Some may argue that within the data policy of Facebook, it does inform their users that they will collect information on “things you do and information you provide”(Facebook, 2016), and everybody will need to accept the term of use when creating a Facebook account. However, there are three potential issues relating to this. One, studies have shown that users frequently simply “click through” such agreements without fully reading them or recognizing they are entering into a legally binding contract (Gatt, 2002). Second, even if the students agreed to the term of use that allows the Facebook to collect their public information, they did not allow their profile to be downloaded and invite subsequent uses of their profile for further research. Third, not only their Facebook profile, their personal email addresses and housing information were also released to T3 researchers in aid of their data collecting processes, which is a huge privacy violation issue.

The second principle, “beneficence” refers to the idea that before conducting an experiment, researchers should analyze the potential benefit and harm, try maximizing possible benefits and minimizing possible risks. No doubt, the final result of the T3 study would give us inspiring insights. As predicted by the researcher, it would offer “substantial insights into the lives and social networks of a complete cohort of college students” (Lewis, Kaufman, Gonzalez, Wimmer and Christakis, 2008). However, they did not take the informational risk, “the potential for harm from the disclosure of information” (Council, 2014) into consideration. When allowing researchers to share the data with other researchers, the risk becomes even higher. Even though in the T3 study, researchers noted that “All identifying information was deleted or encoded immediately after the data were downloaded” and that “all the data is cleaned so you cannot connect anyone to an identity” (Lewis et al., 2008), unfortunately, this “anonymization” was not sufficient to protect the data. Re-identification might occur when piecing together bits of information, leading to the identification of an individual, which may pose harm to that individual. Apparently, the researchers of T3 experiment did not take this potential risk seriously.

The third principle: Justice means that the research should not benefit one group in the society while another group bears the costs of research (Salganik, 2017). Similar with the beneficence analysis above, while it is true that most people in the society will gain insights from this research, when re-identification of some students does happen, however, they would have to burden the cost of this research by having their profile exposed to the public without prior acknowledgement. In the example given by Lewis, individuals with unique nationality were under a high risk of being identified. For the worse case, local alumni organization might list their names in a publicly accessible newsletter, resulting in unpredicted consequences (Lewis et al., 2008). Thus, T3 research does not totally obey the principle of justice.

The fourth principle, “Respect For Law and Public Interest” includes two components: Compliance and Transparency-based Accountability. Compliance means “researchers attempt to identify and obey relevant laws, contracts, and terms of service”(Salganik, 2017). On the one hand, T3 research did obtain approval from Harvard’s IRB. On the other hand, whether its IRB fully understood the risk of this research is under controversy. Furthermore, the T3 researchers also required other users who wanted to access the data sign an agreement on a Terms and Conditions of User statement, to protect the privacy of the subjects in the experiment, although same issue might occur when people just click the agree button without actually knowing what the content was. Transparency-based Accountability means “the researchers need to be clear about goals, methods, and results at all stages of their research process and to take responsibility for their actions”( Salganik, 2017). T3 research published their results as well as their methods in academic journals so it ensured the transparency-based accountability. Therefore, the T3 experiment did put an effort on “Respect for Law and Public Interest”.

Would I use the data for further use? The answer is no. As a researcher, I need to analyze the balance between the benefit and the possible risk related to the research. First of all, the research did not obey “informed consent” in the first place, which means that it does not respect students as autonomous. Unlike the situation in the Emotional Contagion study, where informed consent will compromise the experiment result, if I were the researcher in T3 research, I would send out an ethical-response survey first in order to select participants who confirmed that they will not be affected by the results of the research, instead of including those college students in the study without former inform. Secondly, according to Nissenbaum, we should also consider the appropriateness of the flows of information. Nissenbaum emphasized three parameters in his study, which are attributes (types of information), actors (subject, sender, recipient) and transmission principles (constraints under which information flows) (Nissenbaum, 2010). Under T3 research, the situation would be that the transmission principle would be rather difficult to follow. Even if the “actor”, I as a researcher, will not use this data to do any harm, if I used the data for further research, I unintentionally increase the probability that the issue of re-identification will happen. As mentioned above, some students may even suffer from being publicly listed in a newsletter. Therefore, after balancing the potential risk and benefit, under the guidance of beneficence, I would not use the data for further research.

While following the ethics rules is rather important in the digital age, the “Tastes, Ties, and Time” is not the only a single case under controversy. Researchers still need to be very careful when conducting a social research.

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