Short Paper #1: Ethics of “Taste, Ties, and Time”

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1. Introduction

The “Tastes, Ties and Time” (T3) project[[1]](#footnote-1) tried to introduce a new public dataset, which could make maximal use of information from Facebook.com into academia. However, it articulates some immediate yet severe ethical concerns. Now if you get to T3’s online homepage, you could still see: “The T3 dataset is still offline as we take further steps to ensure the privacy of students in the dataset.” This might be a pity for those who could’ve do useful researches using the data, but it does come with paybacks. From the perspective of ethics, T3 could help researchers be aware of emerging challenges of the field of computational social sciences.

This paper starts with the discussion on T3 project’s adherence to Salganik’s four principles of ethical research, with my perspectives on the problems of T3 projects. Section 3 would give my attitudes on whether or not should we use T3’s data and discusses suggestions on future researches.

1. Four principles and T3’s problems

Salganik’s four principles[[2]](#footnote-2) of ethical research have laid ground for his principle-based approach. We could see why T3 project received so many concerns from these four principles.

1. Respect for Person

Researchers of T3 project put much effort into the protection of subjects’ privacy, including the removal of student identification information etc., but apparently, this wasn’t enough.

This involves the problem of informed consent. The researchers of T3 project downloaded their source data directly from facebook.com, in order to keep the data intact (avoid interviewer effects, imperfections in recall etc.). Although T3 got permission from facebook.com and the subject university, it didn’t get consent from each student. This became the main source of all the concerns, because the following reasons:

First, researchers of T3 emphasized that they only used data that were accessible by default by each RA. Nevertheless, these research assistants have some personal social relations with subjects. Some of them might be friends and thus these RAs could see more information of subjects than strangers could. Information in the latter occasion is what users would consider as “public” on facebook.com. Even if we consider that public information on Facebook is equal to public information that could be used in research (I don’t think they’re the same, but will get to that later), T3 researchers may have used some in-network data that actually needs informed consent other than terms of use of facebook.com.

Second, information publicized on Facebook doesn’t mean people would allow it to be used in researches. After another controversial study, Facebook emotional contagion study has happened, Rosen(2014)[[3]](#footnote-3)pointed out that he was not surprised that websites were using user’s personal information. What shocked him is that in this study, it is researchers who were using the data and even got their papers published. This implies that people have different attitudes towards information that is used by websites and used for scientific study. We can accept websites like Facebook using our information because they don’t care about our information. They only use algorithms and codes to try to predict our preferences but not try to understand the reason behind our behaviors, which is exactly researchers are trying to do. T3 project intended to get the best use of data we put on Facebook, which highly improves the depth of related researches, and thus requires higher necessity of informed consent.

Third, if T3’s researchers have got informed consent, could they give it to other researchers? In my opinion, even if T3 researchers could legitimately use the data, they still need subjects’ informed consent to decide whether they can give the data to other people. If we consider T3’s database as a software, there might be 2 ways to address this problem: 1) including this in the Terms of Use of T3’s consent request (or something equivalent but more accessible to readers); 2) some encryption on the data.

1. beneficence

In terms of maximizing benefits, minimizing risks, and avoiding harm to subjects, researchers of T3 project showed their caution, like removing “identifying” information and delay in release of cultural taste data etc.[[4]](#footnote-4)

However, they could have set more boundaries for the identifying information so it would be harder for other people to find out which university it was. The anonymity of the school was not under well protect. This “northeastern American university” was found out to be Harvard College only a few days after the dataset was released. Without the anonymity of the school, we could easily preclude a certain group of students to be the subjects since T3 paper has said they are freshman class of 2009.

Another concern of me about this project is the feasibility and efficiency of their way of minimize risk when they let other researchers use this dataset. Researchers of T3 project asked people who want to use the database to submit a brief statement and seems like they get to decide whether these people could use the data. Then it is unclear what kind of standards they are going to use when they try to make decision. They also mention a user agreement, which might has pretty much the same efficiency as Terms of Use, with few people read through. The researchers of T3 project might need to take responsibility the risk after the dataset has been published.

1. Justice

There are some students in T3 research who possess unique demographic characteristics so they bear the burden more, which is against the principle of justice. Some students in this group are of the unique race. With freshman class of 2009 in Harvard College decided, it’s pretty easy to find these demographically unique students, who should’ve gotten some additional protections.

1. Respect for law and public interest

According to the paper on T3 project, the researchers first, read and consider the terms-of-service agreement of Facebook.com, which shows compliance. And the study published their results in academic journals enabled transparency-based accountability. Thus, T3 project complied with the principle of “respect for law and public interest”.

1. My Personal Attitudes towards Usage of the Data

If I need this data for my own research, I won’t use it. Simple answer is that if I were one of the subjects, I would not want my information being used in researches without my consent. However, if I were given the chance to show my consent, I would do it because this project is good for social sciences researches and the society.

Here are some other circumstances (suggestions) under which I would agree to use the data:

1. The informed consent is given in a subtle way that subjects would not know it’s for this study, which can keep the data intact and get the informed consent.
2. Informed consents are given after the database has been set up and before its release.
3. Subjects could have free access to database.
4. The amount or range of the subjects could be enlarged to more than one university.

1. [Lewis, K., Kaufman, J., Gonzalez, M., Wimmer, A., & Christakis, N. (2008). Tastes, ties, and time: A new social network dataset using Facebook.com. *Social networks*, 30(4), 330-342.](http://www.sciencedirect.com.proxy.uchicago.edu/science/article/pii/S0378873308000385) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Salganik, Matthew J. [Bit by Bit: Social Research in the Digital Age](http://www.bitbybitbook.com/), Princeton University Press, Open review edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [Rosen, J. (2014). Facebook's controversial study is business as usual for tech companies but corrosive for universities. The Washington Post.](https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/07/03/dont-blame-facebook-for-screwing-with-your-mood-blame-academia/?utm_term=.e2bd90d038b1) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [Zimmer, M. (2010). "But the data is already public": on the ethics of research in Facebook. *Ethics and information technology*, 12(4), 313-325.](http://link.springer.com.proxy.uchicago.edu/article/10.1007%2Fs10676-010-9227-5) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)