

## **Course Concept: Informed Consent**

### **News Summary:**

In 2014, Facebook, along with academics from the University of California and Cornell University, conducted and published the results of an experimental study (Kramer, Guillory & Hancock, 2014) which involved the manipulation of the news feeds of 689,000 users to see how this change could affect their emotions, including tests such as the filtering of “positive emotional content” posted by the users’ friends, resulting in fewer “positive” posts of their own (Booth, 2014). This study was conducted without these users’ informed consent. This had dire implications and raised several concerns, such as the resulting impact on the users’ mental health and the ability of Facebook to potentially manipulate people’s thoughts and opinions.

### **Memorandum:**

To: Chief Compliance Officer, AI Research

From: Data Scientist

I am writing to you to bring your attention to a study conducted by Facebook which has garnered media attention for all the wrong reasons (Booth, 2014), the most heinous of them being that the study was conducted without the participants’ knowledge or explicit consent.

The consequences of Facebook’s actions in this regard cannot be overstated. The manipulations made to Facebook users’ news feeds without their permission had the powerful effect of altering their emotional perception, which is a very slippery slope leading to potential thought-control, plausibly being used for nefarious purposes such as swinging elections, inciting revolt and violence, or providing incentive for more site engagement which would boost advertising revenues, necessitating legislation for safeguards in place to prevent this from happening.

Several lawyers, researchers, politicians, and internet activists have expressed their concerns, calling the experiment “scandalous”, “spooky”, “disturbing” and “intrusive”. Some, such as Max Masnick, a doctoral researcher in epidemiology, have pointed out that just accepting the terms of use of an application is not considered consent where sensitive areas such as human research are involved (Arthur, 2014). He further affirms that it is the researcher’s responsibility to ensure that participants unequivocally understand what they’re consenting to and know that they can opt out if they want to. Based on the paper published, he believes that Facebook did not meet this ethical obligation, which is a violation of public trust. The US National Academy of Sciences, which published this paper, is also under scrutiny for not having conducted an ethical review before approving it for publication.

As adversaries to Facebook in this line of work, we as a company must shoulder some collective responsibility to ensure that we do not follow in their footsteps and to proceed with utmost caution where informed consent is concerned. Even if there have been no laws passed by our government in this regard, we must promulgate some company-wide policies to secure public acceptance and strengthen trust.

Consent desensitization is rampant among society today, as we find ourselves ticking boxes or agreeing to T&Cs without reading them just so we can use the application (Stanhaus, 2022), and this has the unfortunate consequence of people not understanding what they're consenting to. To that effect, I propose we conduct a series of webinars to educate the users of our application about our company's privacy policies and the privacy laws of our jurisdiction so that they are aware of what protections are in place to safeguard their privacy.

Further, any studies we conduct must go through a rigorous process of obtaining explicit informed consent from the participants. It is worth going through the consent forms point-by-point and even quiz the potential participants about them to ensure that they are fully aware of what they consent to and how their data would be used. Further, as company policy, it should be mandated that they can always opt out of the study at any time without penalty, and to have their right to be forgotten (their data deleted from our systems) upheld.

## **References:**

Kramer Adam D. I., Guillory Jamie E., & Hancock Jeffrey T. (2014). Experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111(24), 8788–8790. doi:10.1073/pnas.1320040111

Booth Robert. (2014). Facebook reveals news feed experiment to control emotions. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/jun/29/facebook-users-emotions-news-feeds>

Arthur Charles. (2014). Facebook emotion study breached ethical guidelines, researchers say. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/jun/30/facebook-emotion-study-breached-ethical-guidelines-researchers-say>

Stanhaus Amanda. (2022). Informed Consent. *SIADS 503: Data Science Ethics*. <https://www.coursera.org/learn/siads503/lecture/WF5gk/informed-consent>