

Unit 5, e-Portfolio Activity: Cambridge Analytica and unethical use of survey data→

Word Count ≈ 500

When it comes to research and data collection, stakeholders must understand how their data is being used and for what purposes. The Cambridge Analytica scandal, which came to light in 2018, is a prime example of how data gathered through seemingly harmless methods can be exploited unethically. Cambridge Analytica used an app disguised as a personality quiz to gather personal data from Facebook users, but more importantly, it harvested data from their friends without explicit consent, ultimately compromising the information of 87 million people (Hinds et al., 2020). This incident highlighted the importance of avoiding the common mentality of "it won't happen to me" when it comes to data privacy.

Cambridge Analytica's misuse of data was particularly concerning because it wasn't just about gathering demographic or preference-based information. The company aimed to build detailed psychological profiles of users to "microtarget" individuals with political ads and messages tailored to manipulate their emotions and sway their opinions. This was notably used in the 2016 Brexit Leave Campaign, where £3.9 million was spent on microtargeting voters with social media ads (Risso, 2018). By exploiting personal data without consent, Cambridge Analytica was able to influence significant political outcomes, raising serious concerns about the impact of data misuse on democratic processes.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal isn't an isolated event; rather, it signals a broader trend of data misuse across industries. As Invisibly (2021) points out, Google was fined \$57 million in 2020 for improperly using location tracking data for advertisers without users' informed consent. Twitter also admitted in 2019 to allowing advertisers access to personal data, such as email addresses and phone numbers, to improve targeted marketing campaigns. These cases demonstrate that both social media platforms and large tech companies often prioritise profit over user privacy, raising ethical concerns about how personal data is collected, shared, and exploited for financial gain.

The lure of monetary gain continues to drive unethical data practices. Corporations often rely on data to enhance their advertising strategies, maximize profits, and maintain a competitive edge. However, these practices often occur at the expense of user privacy, as data is collected and used in ways that many users do not fully understand or consent to. For this reason, stricter regulations, transparent data practices, and severe penalties for violators are critical to safeguarding user privacy in the digital age.

Ultimately, protecting personal data requires awareness and action from all stakeholders. This isn't solely the responsibility of data scientists; users themselves must be vigilant about how their data is being used and shared. Governments and regulatory bodies should impose stronger fines and stricter penalties to deter unethical practices, while organisations must prioritise transparency in how they collect, manage, and use personal data. As seen in the 2016 Brexit campaign, unethical data practices can have significant political, social, and financial consequences (Risso, 2018). To prevent future misuse, ethical data practices must be ingrained in the culture of companies, enforced by regulation, and supported by vigilant stakeholders.

References –

Hinds, J., Williams, E.J. and Joinson, A.N. (2020) “It wouldn't happen to me”: Privacy concerns and perspectives following the Cambridge Analytica scandal. *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, 143, p.102498.

Risso, L. (2018) Harvesting your soul? Cambridge analytica and brexit. *Brexit Means Brexit*, 2018, pp.75-90.

Invisibly. (2021) 7 examples of data misuse and how to prevent it. Invisibly. Available at: <https://www.invisibly.com/learn-blog/data-misuse-7-examples/> [Accessed: 1st October 2024].