Case Study: Inappropriate Use of Surveys

**Cambridge Analytica - what happened and why oversight failed**

A Facebook “personality quiz” (“This Is Your Digital Life”) collected respondents’ answers and their friends’ profile data via the then-available API, enabling large-scale psychographic profiling and political micro-targeting beyond any reasonable interpretation of informed consent (Confessore, 2018). Oversight failed due to weak platform governance (permissive default friend-data access and light app vetting), over-reliance on self-regulation, and regulatory lag, subsequent investigations and sanctions emphasised lawfulness and transparency in political data analytics (ICO, 2018; FTC, 2019). From a research-methods perspective, the consent pathway was not compliant with the Belmont principles (respect, beneficence, justice) and breached basic standards on purpose limitation and data minimisation (HHS, 1979/2024).

**Comparative cases - distinctive ethical failings**

myPersonality (academic quiz). The project accumulated millions of survey responses, then distributed large datasets to numerous external parties under weak access controls; Facebook later banned the app following an audit (Kapoor, 2018; Lomas, 2018; The Psychometrics Centre, n.d.). Some of the distinct issues were research framing without robust, ongoing governance, consent that did not clearly bound secondary use, inadequate anonymisation and data-sharing controls. Methodologically, this contravenes good survey practice (clear consent scope, strong de-identification, Data Use Agreements, and, where applicable, ethics/IRB oversight).

Nametests.com (viral quizzes). A security flaw exposed users’ profile data at massive scale, the issue was reported by a researcher and later fixed (De Ceukelaire, 2018; Robertson, 2018). Some distinct issues were failure of security-by-design, token handling, and third-party access hygiene, illustrating how even trivial “fun” surveys can create systemic privacy risk when protection and data minimisation are absent.

**Ethical, social, legal and professional impacts**

* Ethical (research design):
  + Covert secondary use and broad data capture fail informed consent, beneficence, and justice (HHS, 1979/2024).
* Social:
  + Erosion of public trust and risk to democratic discourse via opaque micro-targeting (ICO, 2018).
* Legal/regulatory:
  + Enforcement escalated post-2018 (for example FTC’s $5 billion settlement with Facebook, ICO investigations), underscoring that platform governance and app vetting are compliance obligations, not merely reputational concerns (ICO, 2018; FTC, 2019).
* Professional conduct:
  + The ACM Code of Ethics requires respecting privacy and honouring confidentiality, using surveys as a data-collection pretext conflicts with duties to avoid harm and act in the public interest (ACM, 2018).

**To summarize**

State a specific purpose and obtain granular, opt-in consent for any secondary use, minimise data (no friend harvesting, avoid identifiability unless essential), implement privacy/security by design (app review, monitoring, revocation), control sharing through DUAs and audits, and ensure appropriate ethics/IRB review for human-participant surveys (ICO, 2018; FTC, 2019; HHS, 1979/2024; ACM, 2018).

**References**

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