

# **Ethical, Social, Legal, and Professional Implications of Survey Misuse**

In 2018, the Cambridge Analytica scandal revealed how online surveys could be misused to collect and exploit personal data. A personality quiz app created by researcher Aleksandr Kogan harvested information from millions of Facebook users and their online connections, often without explicit consent (Hu, 2020). This data was later used by Cambridge Analytica to profile and target individuals during political campaigns, including the 2016 US presidential election (Prichard, 2021). The incident demonstrated how techniques resembling academic research could be repurposed for political influence and commercial gain (Hu, 2020; Prichard, 2021). It sparked global concern about digital privacy and the ethics of data collection.

The ethical implications of this case were serious. Users believed they were participating in harmless quizzes for academic purposes, unaware that their data would be used for political targeting (Hu, 2020; Bambauer, 2019). This violated their autonomy and breached the principle of informed consent, a core tenet of ethical research and data practices (Bambauer, 2019). From a social perspective, the scandal led to widespread public backlash. Hashtags like DeleteFacebook gained traction, and trust in online platforms was severely damaged (Hu, 2020). Legal consequences followed, including a five billion dollar fine issued by the US Federal Trade Commission and a five hundred thousand pound fine by the UK Information Commissioner's Office, highlighting the severity of the breach under existing data protection laws (Hu, 2020). Professionally, this case raised questions about the responsibilities of data scientists,

developers and platform providers, particularly regarding privacy and transparency in digital ecosystems.

A more recent case of survey misuse occurred in 2024 in Australia. The firm McNair YellowSquares, contracted by the Australian Electoral Commission to gather feedback related to the Indigenous Voice referendum, was accused of instructing staff to falsely report interviews conducted in Sydney as having taken place in remote Indigenous communities (The Guardian, 2024). The objective appeared to be fulfilling diversity quotas without incurring the costs of actual outreach. Whistle-blowers reported the manipulation, which led to scrutiny and the suspension of McNair's government contracts. Although the case did not trigger formal legal penalties, it raised significant concern over the integrity of public research and the ethical treatment of marginalised groups.

This example also reveals important ethical and social consequences. Falsifying respondent location and identity violates honesty and transparency, undermines the value of the data collected, and silences the voices the research was meant to include (Roberts and Allen, 2016). Such actions distort the democratic process and marginalise underrepresented populations (González et al., 2019). While Australia lacks data protection laws equivalent to the European General Data Protection Regulation, the suspension of contracts reflected recognition that this behaviour was unacceptable (The Guardian, 2024). From a professional standpoint, the incident underscores the need for ethical frameworks in survey research, including independent oversight and accountability (Roberts and Allen, 2016).

Both cases reflect a broader issue: the ease with which surveys can be exploited when ethical and legal safeguards are weak or ignored. In the case of Cambridge Analytica, the survey appeared academic but served a covert political agenda (Hu, 2020; Prichard 2021). In the McNair case, data collection was manipulated to meet institutional targets (The Guardian, 2024). In both, public trust was undermined and the legitimacy of decisions made using the data was compromised.

The social consequences of such misuse are far-reaching. When individuals or communities discover that surveys have been used to deceive or exploit them, they may become less willing to participate in future research (González et al., 2019). This is especially damaging for groups whose voices are already underrepresented in policymaking and media narratives. Furthermore, social media surveys and micro-targeting techniques risk amplifying biases and deepening divisions, especially when there is no transparency about how data are collected or used (Bakir, 2020). Ethical breaches in these contexts reinforce digital inequality and social mistrust.

From a legal standpoint, the Cambridge Analytica scandal prompted discussions about the adequacy of current regulations (Hu, 2020). While fines were issued and new policies debated, enforcing laws across jurisdictions remains a challenge (González et al., 2019). The Australian case revealed how legal gaps can allow misuse to continue unless whistle-blowers intervene (The Guardian, 2024). These cases highlight the need for consistent and enforceable laws around data use, consent and accountability (González et al., 2019).

Professionally, survey misuse violates codes of conduct upheld by organisations such as the British Computer Society and the Association for Computing Machinery (BCS,

2023; ACM, 2018). These codes emphasise integrity, responsibility and respect for individuals. The Cambridge Analytica case is often cited in computing ethics as an example of how technical knowledge can be misapplied with serious consequences (Hu, 2020). It also illustrates the risks of failing to involve ethics professionals early in the design and deployment of data systems. Similarly, the Australian example underlines the importance of proper methodological training, audit trails and professional courage among researchers, particularly those working on politically sensitive projects (Roberts and Allen, 2016).

Research literature supports the view that survey misuse has deeper structural causes. Studies by Prichard (2021) and Bakir (2020) show how psychological profiling and psychometrics can be co-opted for political purposes under the guise of behavioural research. González et al. (2019) further demonstrate that reactions to the Cambridge Analytica scandal varied globally, suggesting that survey ethics must be addressed both locally and across cultural and legal contexts.

Reflecting on these cases as a future computing professional, I realise that ethical decisions are not always clear-cut. It is not enough to build systems that function well; they must also respect users and meet legal and professional standards. I must take responsibility for ensuring that data is collected honestly, stored securely and used in ways that do not harm individuals or communities. I must also be prepared to question practices that conflict with ethical norms, even when there is pressure to meet commercial or political targets. Training, transparency and accountability are not optional. They are essential to responsible professional conduct.

The Cambridge Analytica and McNair YellowSquares cases illustrate the dangers of manipulating survey data for ulterior motives. They show how ethical, legal, social and professional boundaries can be crossed when oversight is weak and integrity is lacking. To rebuild trust in surveys and digital data collection, stronger legal frameworks, consistent professional standards and a cultural commitment to transparency are required. When these conditions are met, surveys can serve their intended role: understanding people, informing decisions and supporting a more just society.

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