Case Study: Inappropriate Use of Surveys

In 2018, Cambridge Analytica was in the news in the United Kingdom and the USA (Confessore, 2018) for obtaining and sharing data obtained from millions of Facebook users. They obtained the data through innocuous surveys on Facebook (you may have seen this type of survey and probably participated at times). This is probably the highest profile of surveys used for alternative means and, probably, monetary gains. However, this happens often through various media.

Consider how exactly this happened and why it was used. Find one or two further examples of inappropriate use of surveys and highlight the impact of all these examples from the various ethical, social, legal and professional standpoints that apply.

Whilst I was aware of the Cambridge Analytica scandal; I'd have to have been living under a rock not to have heard about it, and I knew that it involved harvesting Facebook data, I didn't realise until I read Confessore (2018) that the way they got the data from Facebook was via a survey. The unethical means that Cambridge Analytica used to gain access to data of not just the Facebook users who completed the survey, but all of their contacts too, and the lack of data protection controls within Facebook to prevent it from happening, made the story that I thought I was already familiar with much more shocking.

Cambridge Analytica understood the value of vast amounts of personal data to profile people in order to understand what their personal influences were, and therefore how to influence people on an individual basis. Their illicitly obtained data enabled them to create 253 predictive classes for 87 million user, enabling incredibly targeting campaigns designed to psychologically trigger each recipient (Hern, 2018). It was literally social engineering. And it worked!

Another issue with surveys is the context in which they are performed how the results are reported. Taking a small detail from a larger survey and reporting it in isolation, or indeed performing the survey itself in isolation, can create misleading conclusions. Sagan & Valentina (2017) surveyed American adults with a fictitious scenario about a war with Iran and asked if they would support air strikes on civilians to end the war, with deaths ranging from 100,000 with conventional weapons to 2 million with nuclear weapons, or to continue with a ground offensive resulting in 20,000 additional American military deaths.

The result was a slight leaning towards air strikes, with no statistically significant difference between the use of conventional or nuclear weapons. This was widely reported as Americans being in favour of striking first with nuclear weapons (Carpenter et at, 2021). However, the framing of the survey was generally not reported and so the conclusion is not necessarily valid. Furthermore, a subsequent survey asked a similar question, but also included a series of questions about whether it was legal to target civilians. The respondents were split into two groups, with one group getting the legal questions before being asked whether they would support an air strike on Iranian civilians, and the other group getting the legal questions after.

The results showed that people who were asked to consider the legality of targeting civilians first were less likely to endorse the air strike, having now concluded that it would constitute a war crime. That's interesting, but perhaps not surprising. What is more interesting is that that

group who were first asked to endorse an air strike, and who did so, would be less likely to agree that such an action is illegal. In other words, “being asked to express a preference regarding a war crime such as targeting civilians, without being given any information about the laws of war, not only predisposes citizens toward behavior that would violate international humanitarian law but also can undermine their understanding of what is permissible under the laws of war” (Carpenter et at, 2021: 919).

This clearly illustrates that the way a survey is worded, including the context build through introductory text or other questions within the survey, can directly affect the results. A combination of an overly narrow survey and overly selective reporting of the survey results led to an inaccurate conclusion for the support of a nuclear strike first policy in America.

References

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