

Inappropriate Use of Surveys: Cambridge Analytica and Beyond

The Cambridge Analytica mechanism

Cambridge Analytica's data harvesting operation exemplified the weaponisation of seemingly benign research instruments. The company utilised Aleksandr Kogan's "thisisyourdigitallife" personality quiz, ostensibly for academic research, which collected data from approximately 270,000 participants. However, the application exploited Facebook's API to harvest data from participants' entire social networks, ultimately accessing information from 87 million users without consent (Hu, 2020).

The harvested data enabled psychographic profiling to create what Christopher Wylie described as a "psychological warfare mindf*** tool" (Cadwalladr, 2018). Cambridge Analytica combined this Facebook data with commercially purchased datasets from Acxiom, Experian, and Infogroup to build comprehensive voter profiles for microtargeting political advertisements during the 2016 US presidential election.

Additional examples of survey misuse

Example 1: OkCupid's Emotional Manipulation Study (2014)

Dating platform OkCupid conducted unauthorised experiments on users by deliberately providing false compatibility scores to observe behavioural changes. The company's co-founder Christian Rudder publicly admitted to manipulating match percentages and hiding attractive users' profiles to study user responses. Unlike academic research requiring ethical approval, OkCupid conducted these experiments without informed consent, treating users as unwitting research subjects (Rudder, 2014). The study violated basic research ethics principles by deceiving participants and potentially causing emotional harm through manipulated romantic connections.

Example 2: Facebook's Emotional Contagion Study (2012)

Facebook collaborated with academic researchers to manipulate the emotional content of 689,003 users' news feeds without explicit consent, studying whether emotional states could be transmitted through social networks. Published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, the study reduced positive content for some users and negative content for others to measure emotional responses in subsequent posts (Kramer et al., 2014). The research sparked significant controversy as participants were unaware they were subjects in a psychological experiment, violating informed consent principles and potentially causing psychological distress.

Ethical implications

These cases demonstrate fundamental violations of informed consent and purpose limitation principles. Participants provided data for ostensibly legitimate purposes (personality assessment, dating services, or social networking), yet their information was exploited for commercial manipulation and unauthorised experimentation. This represents a breach of the trust relationship between platforms and users, undermining the integrity of legitimate social research.

The utilitarian harm extends beyond individual privacy violations to democratic interference and psychological manipulation, as seen in Cambridge Analytica's influence on electoral processes and Facebook's emotional manipulation experiments.

Legal consequences

Cambridge Analytica's activities violated multiple legal frameworks. Facebook faced a \$5 billion FTC penalty in 2019, though critics argued this was insufficient given the scale of violations (Hu, 2020). Under GDPR, such activities would constitute breaches of lawful basis requirements (Article 6) and consent provisions (Article 7), potentially incurring penalties up to 4% of global turnover.

The Facebook emotional contagion study prompted regulatory scrutiny, with the UK's Information Commissioner investigating whether the research violated data protection principles, though enforcement mechanisms were limited under pre-GDPR frameworks.

Social and professional impact

These incidents have created a trust deficit in legitimate research, with survey response rates declining as public awareness of data misuse increases. The professionalisation crisis in data science and research ethics has prompted calls for mandatory ethical training and certification programmes.

The democratic implications prove particularly severe, with microtargeted political advertising potentially undermining electoral integrity and informed democratic participation. Academic institutions have strengthened ethical review processes following the Facebook emotional contagion controversy.

Conclusion

The Cambridge Analytica scandal and similar cases demonstrate how methodological deception can transform legitimate research instruments into tools of manipulation and exploitation. These incidents highlight the urgent need for robust consent mechanisms, purpose limitation enforcement, and professional accountability standards to preserve both individual privacy rights and the integrity of legitimate research practices.

The long-term consequences extend beyond immediate privacy violations to fundamental questions about democratic governance and social trust in an increasingly data-driven society.

References:

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