

Reflection on the Inappropriate Use of Surveys and Their Wider Implications

The Cambridge Analytica scandal remains one of the clearest examples of how something as simple as an online survey can be turned into a powerful instrument for manipulation. When I first learned about the case, what surprised me most was how ordinary the entry point had been. A personality quiz on Facebook did not seem threatening. Many people, myself included, have taken quick surveys online without thinking twice. Yet millions of users unknowingly handed over not only their own information but also the data of people they were connected to. Reading Confessore's 2018 report reminded me of how easily trust can be exploited when people assume that a survey is harmless entertainment.

What makes this case particularly uncomfortable is that the deception was intentional and calculated. The survey appeared innocent on the surface, but the underlying goal was to build detailed psychological profiles that could influence political behaviour. Reflecting on this, I realise how little most of us understand about what our data is capable of revealing. The scandal exposed a gap between what users believe they are sharing and what companies are actually able to extract. It made me reconsider how often I casually accept terms and conditions without questioning the purpose behind data collection.

The Cambridge Analytica case also pushed me to think about other examples where surveys have been used inappropriately. One that stands out is the misuse of health and wellness surveys by certain mobile apps. These quizzes often ask deeply personal questions about mental health, stress levels or relationships. Many people use them because they feel vulnerable or want guidance. However, investigations have shown that some of these apps quietly pass this information to advertisers or data brokers. When I first read about this, I felt uneasy. Health data carries an emotional weight, and the idea that it could be sold or used for targeted advertising feels like a serious breach of trust. People turn to these tools for support, not to have their vulnerabilities monetised.

A slightly different but still worrying example is the online competitions or product surveys that promise rewards but are really designed to gather enough personal information to target individuals for scams. They are usually presented as harmless consumer surveys, and it is easy to understand why people fall for them. In a way, these examples share the same underlying issue: they rely on familiarity and trust. Surveys feel normal, routine even, which is why they make such effective tools for exploitation.

Reflecting on these cases together makes the ethical problems clear to me. The first issue is the lack of informed consent. People are misled about what their data will be used for, which undermines any sense of autonomy. There is also the intentional misuse of personal information, which violates basic principles of honesty and respect for individuals. When I think about ethics in a computing context, I often come back to the idea that just because technology allows us to do something does not mean it is acceptable to do it. The inappropriate use of surveys reinforces this point. It is not simply a technical problem, but a moral one.

The social impact of these examples is also significant. Cambridge Analytica showed how personal data could influence political outcomes and deepen social divisions. Health survey

misuse has the potential to deter people from seeking genuine support when they need it. Scam surveys contribute to a general sense of distrust in online communication. When these incidents accumulate, they create an environment where people become suspicious of even legitimate research or harmless questionnaires. This erosion of trust affects academics, charities, healthcare providers and many other groups that rely on surveys to gather accurate information.

From a legal perspective, these cases highlight both progress and ongoing challenges. Regulations such as GDPR were partly a response to cases like Cambridge Analytica and have helped strengthen user rights around consent and data transparency. However, legal protections do not always keep pace with technological innovation. Many inappropriate survey practices operate across borders, making enforcement difficult. Reflecting on this, I feel that laws are essential but not sufficient on their own. They can set boundaries, but they cannot replace ethical thinking or professional responsibility.

The professional implications are also important to consider. As someone entering the computing field, these cases remind me that my decisions could have real consequences for people's privacy and wellbeing. Professional codes of conduct emphasise responsibility, honesty and respect for users, and the misuse of surveys directly contradicts these values. It is easy to imagine how a developer might justify questionable data collection by framing it as a business requirement, but ultimately these decisions shape how technology affects society. Reflecting on this makes me more aware of the responsibility that comes with working in tech. It reinforces the idea that ethical judgement has to be part of the design process from the beginning, not an afterthought.

Overall, thinking about the inappropriate use of surveys has made me much more critical of the way online data is gathered and used. These cases show that misuse does not always come from dramatic hacking incidents but often from ordinary interactions that seem benign. The impact is far-reaching, affecting trust, privacy, political systems and professional integrity. As technology continues to evolve, the challenge is not just to create new systems but to ensure they are developed with transparency, fairness and respect for the people who use them. Reflecting on these examples has made me more conscious of the choices I make both as a user and as a future professional in computing.