Reflective activity - Ethics in Computing

While research has shown that there exist a number of varied ethical problems, privacy is the main ethical problem faced by professionals in the computing field (Stahl et al, 2016). Privacy apart from its legal framework can be also seen as a moral right (Stahl et al, 2016).

If I were a computing professional employed by one of the social media giants currently dominating the respective market (e.g., Facebook) I would find myself amidst a very turbulent time underpinned by privacy scandals, heavily regulative and evolving legal framework and case-law changing years of established practice. More specifically, in 2019 Facebook was found in the epicentre of a very significant data breach in relation to the Cambridge Analytica survey data leak (BBC, 2019). This was followed by a landmark judgement of the Court of Justice of the European Union which effectively invalidated the "EU-US Privacy Shield" and imposed very stringent measures for the flow of personal data to the US (EUR-Lex, 2020). Up to that point, personal data transfers to the US had been rather simple, thanks to the Privacy Shield which was the standard vehicle used by a number of big tech companies operating in the EU, including Facebook and other social media operators (European Data Protection Board, 2020). The use of such "transfer tools" was a way for Facebook to avoid "headaches" of compliance with complex legislative acts, as it provided a guarantee for Facebook users that their data were being afforded the same level of security and protection as in the EU.

It becomes evident that, in the frame of the abovementioned climate, my work as a computing professional at Facebook would be characterized by obligations to follow a very strict set of rules and internal company-wide guidance concerning the way in which users' data are to be manipulated and protected. This would essentially translate in:

- limitation of the amount of data that I would be in the position to process/access
- limitation in the ways I would be allowed to manipulate data
- new or additional responsibilities concerning the security of data, such as anonymization or pseudonymization of data (European Data Protection Board, 2020).

Furthermore, the way in which I, as a Facebook computing professional, would be implementing the abovementioned actions would have a significant reputational impact on the company, specifically in the way it is perceived by society. Users trust in Facebook dropped by sixty-six per cent since the Cambridge Analytica scandal (Butow, 2018), with a higher percentage of younger users (so-called "millennials") deciding to use the application less often due to the scandal (Herhold, 2019).

To sum up, it is clear that the day-to-day actions of a company's employees, when operating in privacy-related areas, can strongly influence the company's liability towards the competent authorities and reputation towards society. Consequently, the provision of actionable advice to computing professionals operating in ethical-sensitive areas would significantly help both the professionals and the company itself.

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