

## 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.*

### How did Cambridge Analytica develop innocuous surveys?

Cambridge Analytica worked with Global Science Research (GSR) to identify necessary parameters relevant to users' OCEAN (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism) psychological profile. This profile manifested as a 120 question personality quiz on Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform and as a survey on the Qualtrics platform. User who logged onto their Facebook profile had to then grant GSR access to their profile which, by association, granted access to their friends' data too via Facebook's Open API (Isaak and Hanna, 2018). The aim of gathering this data was to establish a method for psychographic profiling based on social media and other variables.

Cambridge Analytica then used the Facebook data together with other social media platforms, browsers, online purchase history, voting results to build data on roughly 230 million US adults. These data allowed Cambridge Analytica to better target individuals with messages designed to influence their behaviour. The data points were not merely limited to Facebook profiles, but also to any websites associated with Facebook tracking cookies.

### Why were the surveys developed?

The surveys offered financial incentives for respondents to complete the large questionnaire. Here, the incentives ranged between \$2 USD and \$4 USD (Hern, 2018). The surveys were developed to build a matrix of possibilities for each type of user's personality. The resultant data provided 253 algorithms per profile (Hern, 2018).

The surveys achieved a goal of producing a model that effectively processed users' Facebook likes to automatically generate at predictions about a user's personality, political affiliation or more. The survey results influenced the messages displayed to users in the

Mercer and Steve Bannon Republican campaign, leading up to the 2016 primaries. Having successfully built a model to profile user's personalities, Cambridge Analytica hoped to craft advertisements which was not possible, by influencing the type of messaging, which ultimately affects their voting intentions.

## Further examples

Another example of the impact of using social media platforms to influence outcomes is found in the recent uproar in which Russia was suspected of interfering with UK-EU referendum of 2016. Twitter released data in 2018 that identified roughly 3800 accounts believed to be Russian in origin and affiliated with the Internet Research Agency, which collectively sent over 10 million tweets in "an effort to spread disinformation and discord" (Field and Wright, 2018). One study sample containing over one million tweets with hashtags related to the referendum, found that almost one third of all tweets were generated by a mere one 1 percent of the 300 thousand sampled accounts. Evidence showed that both pro-Leave and pro-Remain bots existed but that hashtags for leaving the EU were most dominant. A cybersecurity firm, F-Secure, analysed tweet activity after the referendum into 2019 and found the observed patterns were consistent with those used by Russian troll farms.

Although the above is not directly survey related (from a user's perspective), I think the results—the tweets generated and read—play a similar role of questions-answers in that a question (a tweet read) has an open-ended (or guided) response (a tweet posted). In this way, it is without doubt, clear that socially, such behaviour is unethical and abhorrent. This is because manipulating society's behaviour beyond what their awareness strips them of their right to make informed decisions. Legally, it has massive implications (as seen with the EU-UK referendum) since people, politicians and leaders were forced down a path that may not (only time shall tell) have turned out in the country's best interest. Also, such behaviour raises tensions between cooperating and otherwise peaceful nations.

## References

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