# Facebook

Facebook is the world’s largest social network. Many do not realize that Facebook is a source of data for academic research. For one week in January 2012, data scientists at Facebook controlled what approximal 700,000 Facebook users saw on the news feed when they logged in. Some users were shown content with happy and positive words and content, while others were shown negative content to see how it affected their moods. After the experiment, these users had higher probability to post either positive or negative posts. The results of the experiment were published by Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. Facebook data has been used to examine emotions by researchers, but this study is different because this experiment set out to manipulate the user’s emotion.

The study concluded that manipulating the news feeds content could potentially impact the content which those users posted on their Facebook profile. This study showed that emotional states can be transferred to others via emotional contagion, leading people to experience the same emotions without their awareness. Emotional contagion is a phenomenon where a person's emotions and related behaviors directly triggers similar emotions and behaviors in other people.

Facebook’s methodology did raises serious ethical questions. In my opinion the research team bent research standards too far. Facebook exposed people to content that causes changes in psychological status. U.S. law and regulation protect participants in clinical studies by requiring informed consent. Facebook can use user data without needing to get signed consent forms as users already agreed to their data use policy. Facebook added research to its terms and conditions, four months after the experiment was conducted.

(Facebook Data Policy)

*We conduct surveys and research, test features in development, and analyze the information we have to evaluate and improve products and services, develop new products or features, and conduct audits and troubleshooting activities.*

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines *informed consent*as:

*When psychologists conduct research or provide assessment, therapy, counseling, or consulting services in person or via electronic transmission or other forms of communication, they obtain the informed consent of the individual or individuals using language that is reasonably understandable to that person or persons except when conducting such activities without consent is mandated by law or governmental regulation or as otherwise provided in this Ethics Code.*

This experiment was conducted before an institutional review board (IRB) was consulted.  The study author, Professor Jeffrey Hancock, started analyzing the results after Facebook had conducted the experiment. Hancock only had access to results and was not directly involved in human research. Before conducting experiments, Universities get approval from ethics board. Ethics boards were established to protect subjects because scientists were conducting disturbing and unethical experiments. For example, in the Milgram study, subjects believed they were shocking someone to death. For study purposes, in the Tuskegee syphilis clinical study men were allowed to live with syphilis. In this case, the experiment had already been conducted, therefore human subjects were beyond protecting.

Kord Davis points out the four aspects of big data ethics that are relevant to this situation. In this case, a user’s online identity was artificially manipulated. Facebook users granted consent to control and own personal data when signing up for Facebook services. Davis believes that "the values that you infuse into your data-handling practices can have some very real-world consequences."

Frank Buytendijk would argued that just because Facebook can piece out a customer’s emotions from their data that they should. Buytendijk believes there are two schools of ethical thinking: the consequentialist and universalist. The consequentialist school of thought judges people and actions by their consequences. The universalist school of thought judges people by intentions. Consequentialists accept white lies while universalists do not. Technology companies like Facebook should be conscious of of the consequences of data collection and reflect about the purpose beforehand.

I have a better appreciation of ethical implication involved with data collection and analysis. There are risks as well as benefits to using user data for research. Privacy is one of the biggest concern, given the amount of data that is being collected today. Consumers are arguably concerned not only about what companies do with the data it collects, but also how it will be protected from third parties. Another point to keep in mind is that ethical issues go well beyond privacy. the

Facebook is often at the center of data privacy debate. There are lots of benefits from having user data analyzed. Many companies tailor products and services to customer preferences. In my opinion, it is a company's best interest to respect people. Companies run the risk of losing consumers if they find out that a company has been spying on them and using their data unethical. This case should serve as a cautionary story.

# References

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