

The Cambridge Analytica scandal was a major incident that highlighted the misuse of data obtained from Facebook users through surveys. This incident was widely reported by various reputable news sources such as The New York Times (Cadwalladr, 2017; Rosenberg et al., 2018). Cambridge Analytica, a political consulting firm, collected personal data from over 87 million Facebook users without their explicit consent. The data was obtained through an app called "This Is Your Digital Life," which presented itself as a personality quiz and was created by an academic researcher named Aleksandr Kogan. Users who participated in the survey unknowingly allowed the app to access not only their data but also data from their Facebook friends.

The data collected through the survey included personal information, likes, and even psychological profiles. Cambridge Analytica then used this data to build targeted political advertising and messaging, attempting to influence voters during elections, such as the 2016 US Presidential election and the Brexit referendum in the UK.

The scandal raised significant concerns about user privacy, informed consent, and the potential misuse of personal data for political manipulation. It also highlighted the lack of transparency in how user data is collected and shared by third-party apps on social media platforms.

Cambridge Analytica's actions led to various investigations and legal actions against the company and Facebook. In the US, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) fined Facebook \$5 billion for violating users' privacy and failing to protect their data (United States Federal Trade Commission, 2019).

Two similar incidents are detailed below.

1. Target's Pregnancy Prediction (2012):

In 2012, Target, the US-based retail company, used data analytics to predict whether its customers were pregnant and sent them targeted advertisements accordingly (Hill, 2012). Target's data scientists analysed shopping habits to identify patterns associated with pregnancy, such as the purchase of prenatal vitamins, unscented lotions, cotton balls and large bags – big enough to double as a diaper bag. The company then sent tailored coupons and offers to expectant mothers to encourage them to shop at Target for their baby-related needs.

Target's pregnancy prediction algorithm raised concerns about data analytics invading personal privacy and using sensitive information to manipulate consumer behaviour. Some customers found the targeted ads intrusive and felt that their privacy was violated (Hill, 2012).

Target faced backlash and criticism from consumers and privacy advocates, but there were no significant legal actions taken against the company in this case.

2. The Unroll.Me Email Service (2017):

Unroll.Me is an email management service that offers users the ability to unsubscribe from unwanted email subscriptions. In 2017, it was revealed that Unroll.Me was collecting and selling users' purchase receipts and other data to third-party companies, including Uber (Bowles, 2017). Users were not aware that their data was being collected and sold, which raised concerns about transparency and data protection in online services.

While there were no major legal actions taken against Unroll.Me, the incident highlighted the need for clear and explicit data sharing policies and user consent mechanisms.

These examples demonstrate a breach of user trust and the need for companies to prioritise user privacy and obtain explicit consent for data collection and usage. From a social perspective, the incidents eroded public trust in technology companies or companies using technology and raised awareness of data privacy issues, leading to discussions about appropriate data practices. Some cases resulted in legal actions and fines, signalling the importance of adhering to data protection laws and regulations. Very importantly, the incidents highlighted the need for ethical data practices and professional responsibility among data scientists, researchers, and technology companies.

References:

Bowles, N. (2017). "Unroll.Me Service Sifts Through Users' Email, Sold Data to Uber." The New York Times. Retrieved from:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/24/technology/personal-data-firm-slice-unroll-me-backlash-uber.html>

Cadwalladr, C. (2017). "The Great British Brexit Robbery." The Guardian. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/07/the-great-british-brexit-robbery-hijacked-democracy>

Hill, K. (2012). "How Target Figured Out A Teen Girl Was Pregnant Before Her Father Did." Forbes. Retrieved from:
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/kashmirhill/2012/02/16/how-target-figured-out-a-teen-girl-was-pregnant-before-her-father-did/>

Rosenberg, M., Confessore, N., & Cadwalladr, C. (2018). "How Trump Consultants Exploited the Facebook Data of Millions." The New York Times. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/17/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-trump-campaign.html>

United States Federal Trade Commission. (2019, July 24). "FTC Imposes \$5 Billion Penalty and Sweeping New Privacy Restrictions on Facebook." Retrieved from: <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/press-releases/2019/07/ftc-imposes-5-billion-penalty-sweeping-new-privacy-restrictions>