

PART I

Summary for the Facebook Experiment:

The article is based on a research experiment conducted by Facebook in 2012. Data Scientists at FB experimented with how the posts users see on their timeline affects their emotional state. In January 2012, for one week, a set of users were shown content that can be considered happy/positive. The other set was shown just the opposite – sad/negative content. The observed outcome was that the users were most likely to post something similar in emotion to what they saw – something either positive or negative.

While everyone agreed the conducted experiment was legal in nature; the main controversy revolving around it was if it was ethical. Facebook claimed they do such experiments to improve what the general audience sees on FB and that the content is relevant and engaging.

John Grohol, the founder of Psych Central, believes this experiment was not well designed as the tools and software used to analyse posts were better matched to analyse long text – like novels or essays. He believes using the same tools on short text seen in status or posts will not produce accurate results.

It was also found that this experiment was conducted without consulting IRB. Although it was conducted as per FB's current data policy – their policy never mentioned anything related to such research at all in the year 2012 when the experiment was conducted.

Ethics in Online Social Networks

We have discussed the experiment conducted by Facebook in 2012; the experiment raises questions about ethics in Online Social Networks. In my opinion, the experiment was conducted in a very poor and unethical manner. I understand why any social network company would want to conduct this experiment: put the most relevant and engaging content before the end-users. Still, such experiments should be strictly moderated, and the user should be aware of the data being collected or manipulated. This might become tricky for some experiments, like the one conducted by FB, as if the user is aware of the data manipulation, this would affect the outcome. In such cases, I believe the end-user should be informed at some point that they were involved in an experiment, which should be no later than when all the data is collected. It should clearly explain to the user what information has been collected, how it will be used, and what purpose. Also, the user should be given a chance to opt-out of this experiment and delete all data collected on them. In any case, the analysis should only be done after consent from every user. I firmly believe every experiment should follow this, and any experiment conducted without the user's knowledge or consent is unethical. Another question I see specific to the FB experiment is that even if it was done ethically, which monitors how the outcome is being used? We saw how easy it was to manipulate the users in an ideal scenario – FB will only use this data to perfect their algorithm, which decides what to show on the user's wall. But what if someday they decide to run propaganda through this? Manipulate the user without them knowing for an individual/organisation benefit? This is based on one experiment's outcome; many powerful results can be obtained from such experiments. We need more intense review boards to approve and monitor such experiments. There is a lot of trust and good faith shown by users towards Social Media Companies that their data will only be used for a good purpose, but we need more bodies governing them and conducting something like an audit. Even today, nothing is stopping these companies from conducting any such experiments again.

PART II

Interview Questions

1. What data does TikTok gather?

Summary:

TikTok logs which videos users watched, for how long that video was watched, private messages sent in TikTok app, country location, IP address and type of device. If given additional permission, it also logs exact location, contacts, social network connection, age, and phone number.

My views:

TikTok is a short video sharing platform; I don't understand why it needs the exact location of its users. Personalised Ads can be served with an estimated location from the IP address. The app gathers a lot of information for just a short video sharing platform.

2. Does the TikTok app do anything shady?

Summary:

The app was caught into controversy when Mysk discovered that TikTok is copying the user's clipboard on iPhone even when the app is running in the background. TikTok claimed this is to prevent spam. Israeli Security Researchers also found a bug in the app which could lead attackers to access personal data. TikTok has since said it has fixed both the issues.

My views:

The app copying clipboard was only stopped after TikTok was called out. I don't think this would have been the case if TikTok did not get caught. Whatever the reason was, every user should be clearly explained what and why is data being collected, and the user should have an option to opt-out. The security bug was found outside the company; TikTok keeps collecting such sensitive data but does not work on its security to prevent attackers from gaining access.

3. What are the U.S. government's concerns about TikTok?

Summary:

TikTok is based out of China, where the government has the upper hand over most technology companies. The main concern of the US is that TikTok can and might share data of US Citizens and Military. With the Chinese government. TikTok is also under a national security review by CFIUS after the lawmakers blamed it for censoring data to comply with the Chinese Government.

My Views:

Whatever TikTok does to build confidence, I don't think the security will ever be overlooked if it is based out of China. The issue is not with the company; even if the company does everything in goodwill, what happens if the Chinese Government forces TikTok to share data with them one day?

4. Does TikTok data get stored in China?

Summary:

The company claims all its user data is stored only in the US and Singapore. Even during a test, it was found that all data is being sent to a server in these locations from the app. We cannot verify what happens to the data after that. It was also found that several references were made to IP addresses in China, although no data was transferred to them. A lawsuit in California in 2019 claimed the data is being sent to China, and part of the app code is was from Baidu and software called Lgexin, which can spy on people.

My Views:

My biggest concern is what happened to data after it is being sent to servers in US and Singapore? We can verify the first stop of the transmission, but how do we know for sure that the data is not being forwarded from those servers to another in China?

5. Can the Chinese government force TikTok to hand over your data?

Summary:

TikTok says the Chinese Government has never asked it for data, and they will deny it if it does but TikTok's own policy states that it may disclose information for government inquiries. They are not very specific to which countries government this is. Although the Chinese Government may have many other ways to gather information on Americans, TikTok stays at risk as well.

My Views:

As I said in the last answer, when the Chinese Government will actually ask for the data, what can TikTok do anyway? The government is known to control tech companies. TikTok is based out of China, can it afford to get banned in its own country just to protect the data of users in America? I don't think so.

6. Is it better or worse than Facebook?

Summary:

It can be said that TikTok is better in a way that it collects less data than Facebook. That said, TikTok also tries to hide the data it is collecting from the users.

My Views:

Just because TikTok collects less data doesn't mean it's any better than Facebook. I feel it's a question of whether you want to sell your data to the American Company or the Chinese Government? There is no true privacy in any case, but I rather have my data In America than the Chinese Government.

7. Is there anything you can do to reduce your privacy risk and keep using TikTok?

Summary:

Users can turn off personalised ads to stop the app from collecting data for that purpose, but it will still collect other data. To really protect their privacy, users should deny permissions if they are unsure about it and user throw away emails to signup for such apps.

My Views:

We should carefully read the permissions request and then evaluate accordingly instead of blindly tapping to allow permission. One should always think if it's really required for the experience they are looking for from the app. For example, if I just want to browse the videos, I don't see any reason to give access to my contact list or location.

TikTok Privacy/Security Concerns

I would personally never use this app because of the privacy risk I will face. The company is based out of China, where the government can control these companies. TikTok itself has been caught into controversies earlier where it was logging user data without a clear explanation or permission. The company has also failed to show its security strength as it was found that other research found security bugs in the app. I don't find it worth risking my data.

The app may collect less data than other social apps, but it does not reduce the risk we are getting ourselves into. I don't believe true privacy exists anywhere, but I rather sell my data to an organization that is aiming to increase their profits off me rather than a government that can use this data to go against the country.

If I really have to use it for some reason, I will make sure to take steps like using a throwaway email account to create my profile as well as giving minimal permissions.