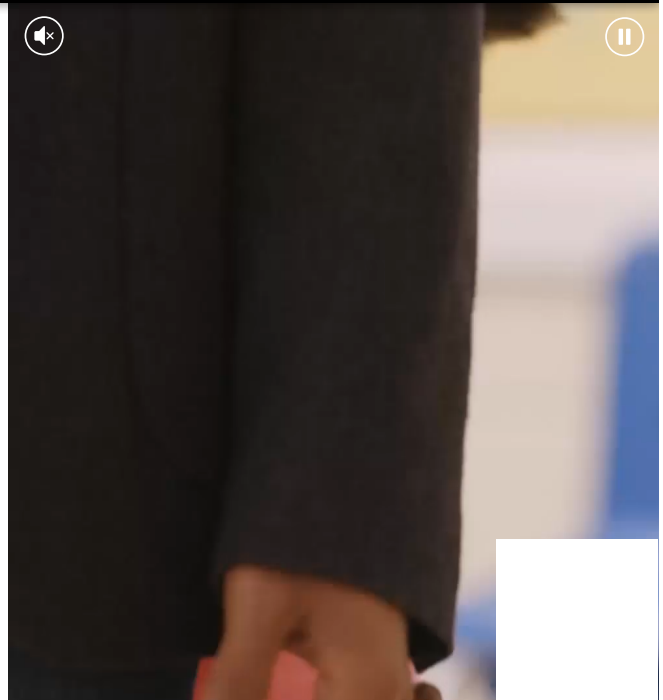


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MICHELLE N. MEYER | OPINION 06.30.103:22 PM

Everything You Need to Know About Facebook's Controversial Emotion Experiment



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social engineering study came to actually consenting to participate was signing up for the service. Facebook's Data Use Policy warns users that Facebook “may use the information we receive about you...for internal operations, including troubleshooting, data analysis, testing, research and service improvement.” This has led to charges that the study violated laws designed to protect human research subjects. But it turns out that those laws don't apply to the study, and even if they did, it could have been approved, perhaps with some tweaks. Why this is the case requires a bit of explanation.

Michelle N. Meyer

About

[Michelle N. Meyer](<http://www.michellenmeyer.com/>) is an Assistant Professor and Director of Bioethics Policy in the Union Graduate College-Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Bioethics Program, where she writes and teaches at the intersection of law, science, and philosophy. She is a member of the board of three non-profit organizations devoted to scientific research, including the Board of Directors of [PersonalGenomes.org](<http://personalgenomes.org/>).

The Study: Unpredictable and Overstated Results

For one week in 2012, Facebook altered the algorithms it uses to determine which status updates appeared in the News Feed of 689,003 randomly selected users (about 1 of every 2,500 Facebook users). The results of this study were just published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS).

As the authors explain, “[b]ecause people's friends frequently produce much more content than one person can view,” Facebook ordinarily filters News Feed content “via a ranking algorithm that Facebook continually develops and tests in the interest of showing viewers the content they will find most relevant and engaging.” In this study, the algorithm filtered content based on its emotional content. A post was identified as “positive” or “negative” if it used at least one word identified as positive or negative by software (run automatically without researchers accessing users' text).

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