

Unit 5 Reflective Activity 2 – Inappropriate Use of Surveys

Cambridge Analytica made headlines in 2018, for sharing personal data that they improperly obtained from Facebook for various reasons.

The information was gathered dishonestly, through the use of Surveys within the Facebook Application, that was put together professionally by a company called Qualtrics (Confessore, 2018). Users participating in the survey, were not aware of the real purpose of the psychological survey, and they also had to agree to share their Facebook profiles, which then allowed access to their profile and all of their connections.

This information was then used in the United States to manipulate and target people, based in part, on their political ideology for the Presidential elections, by way of a targeted campaign. It is believed that information directly obtained from the Surveys, was also used in the UK to try and manipulate the Brexit vote.

This manner of data collection is used to predict interests and beliefs, based on previous data, such as cookies held in browser history.

Whilst this was clearly unethical behaviour by Cambridge Analytica, by agreeing to share their Facebook profile, it could perhaps be argued that the Users had given permission, knowingly or not, for their data to be shared.

What is perhaps surprising, is that the reveal that this sort of thing was occurring, did not seem to put off people from continuing to participate using Facebook and other similar Social Media applications, even after calls for people to delete their profiles in protest. A study performed by Hinds et al (Hinds et al, 2020) shows that people clearly believed their understanding of analytics, and immunity to such things, to be far overstated than the reality, which is that they would likely still divulge personal information online, without adequate security protocol.

Another study (Afriat et al, 2020) even seemed to indicate that many people would actually accept such a use of personal data, as a consequence that they must accept to use online services. This approach is at odds with what the general expectation would be in a normal “offline” situation. This can be likened to the Privacy Paradox (Kokalakis, 2017), where people say that they respect their privacy, but will willingly share any information that is asked of them.

The Cambridge Analytica situation, shared personal data, internationally, as well as within the same geographic entities. This likely broke data protection rules and regulations, in each of the different jurisdictions, and would have probably led to financial consequences. In addition, it is of course, ethically immoral, to use personal data without consent.

Other inappropriate uses of surveys, are when they are performed with a motive in mind at the outset. For example, if the company performing the survey wants to lead the participant in a certain direction, the questions would be formulated in such a way – leading questions, that the result would be likely to fulfil their initial criteria (Delighted, ND). *This reference is by the same company (Qualtrics) that wrote the original survey for Cambridge Analytica - Ironic.*

A useful guideline when writing surveys, is to use the advice given by Google (Google, 2022). Any questions that are formulated against this advice, would likely be examples of inappropriate questions for one reason or another.

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