

Reflective Activity 2: Case Study - Inappropriate Use of Surveys

Full disclosure: I was hired by Cambridge Analytica to launch their American subsidiary to provide services to the US federal government (SCL Group, Inc, and then rebranded as Anaxi Solutions). I have a general disdain for politics, and certainly did not appreciate Cambridge Analytica's allegiances. However, the sheer genius of its behavioural and data scientists produced a scalable analytical capability that I had repurposed to prevent veteran suicides and drug abuse. These efforts to inspire positive behaviour change were ultimately dismantled in the aftermath of the scandal.

Cambridge Analytica's acquisition of Facebook data seemed to occur through a combination of ignorance and hubris. The company partnered with a researcher named Aleksandr Kogan and his company, Global Science Research, Ltd, who had created a survey called "Your Digital Life" (Wong et al., 2018). This was in 2014, before I was recruited to the firm. Ironically, in 2017, the data science team informed me that the Facebook data was largely useless for the purpose of developing psychographic profiles of the constituent users.

Unfortunately, surveys have been unethically used to collect data in many other occasions. Whilst conducting photographic surveys between 2008 and 2010, Google Street View cars were secretly collecting information transmitted over Wi-Fi networks (Kravets, 2012). This data included information such as usernames, passwords, phone numbers, messages, medical records, audio, and video transmitted over the network (Kravets, 2012).

Recently, prescription discount company GoodRx Holdings Inc. was fined by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) for selling user survey data, consisting primarily of sensitive medical information, for profits without client consent (Witley & Vittorio, 2023). FTC has touted this case as a warning to the medical information industry, who often provide free or discounted services in exchange for user information (Witley & Vittorio, 2023).

References

Kravets, D. (2012). *An Intentional Mistake: The Anatomy of Google's Wi-Fi Sniffing Debacle*. [online] Wired. Available at: <https://www.wired.com/2012/05/google-wifi-fcc-investigation/>. [Accessed 04 Feb. 2023].

Witley, S. & Vittorio, A. (2023). GoodRx FTC Privacy Fine Is 'Warning Shot' for Health Tech Firms. [online] Available at: <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/privacy-and-data-security/goodrx-ftc-privacy-fine-is-warning-shot-for-health-tech-firms>. [Accessed 04 Feb. 2023].

Wong, J.C., Lewis, P. and Davies, H. (2018). *How academic at centre of Facebook scandal tried – and failed – to spin personal data into gold*. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/apr/24/aleksandr-kogan-cambridge-analytica-facebook-data-business-ventures>. [Accessed 04 Feb. 2023].