**Case Study: Inappropriate Use of Surveys**

**Background: The Cambridge Analytica Scandal**

In 2018, Cambridge Analytica, a political consulting firm, was exposed for harvesting personal data from over 87 million Facebook users without explicit consent (*Confessore, 2018*). The data were collected via seemingly harmless personality quizzes and “What type of person are you?” surveys shared through Facebook apps.

These surveys were developed by a third-party researcher using Facebook’s API, which—at that time—allowed app developers to collect not only data from participants but also from their entire friend networks. The information included personal details, likes, and social connections, which were later used to build psychographic profiles to micro-target political advertisements during the 2016 US presidential election and the Brexit campaign.

Why It Was Used

Cambridge Analytica leveraged survey data for:

* Behavioural profiling – to predict voting preferences and psychological traits.
* Micro-targeted political advertising – to influence voter opinion.
* Commercial gain – selling analytics services to political campaigns.

This case illustrates how research tools (surveys) can be repurposed for manipulation when ethical boundaries and informed consent are ignored.

**Additional Example 1: TikTok “User Opinion” Surveys**

TikTok has faced criticism for TikTok's data collection practices that could lead to children experiencing harms, such as data being leaked or spending "more time than is healthy" on the platform (*BBC News, 2025*). Some surveys linked to in-app rewards were later found to collect device identifiers and geolocation data, raising concerns about covert profiling and targeted advertising toward minors.

Ethical Concern: Lack of informed consent and opacity in data handling.

Social Impact: Exploitation of young users who perceive surveys as games.

Legal Aspect: Potential violations of GDPR Article 8 (processing of children’s data) in the EU.

Professional Issue: Failure to uphold transparency and respect for user autonomy, contrary to BCS and ACM codes of ethics.

**Additional Example 2: Google “Opinion Rewards” Data Monetisation**

The mobile app called “Google Opinion Rewards” (GOR), which is used as a data collection tool in market research and academic research. Developed by Google Surveys, GOR deals with voluntary participation of app users in data sharing in return for rewards (Çelik and Talay, 2023). Although participation is voluntary, multiple reports have highlighted that user responses, location data, and behavioural metadata were combined to refine ad-targeting algorithms—blurring the line between research and commercial surveillance.

Ethical Concern: Participants are not fully aware of secondary data uses.

Social Impact: Contributes to erosion of digital privacy and normalization of data commodification.

Legal Aspect: Compliance risks under GDPR’s purpose limitation principle.

Professional Issue: Misalignment between user expectations and corporate data monetisation practices, violating ethical norms of honesty and accountability.

Reflection: Lessons for Computing Professionals

These cases illustrate that data collection ethics extend beyond technical compliance. They demand proactive integrity—ensuring participants truly understand how their data will be used and that consent remains informed throughout the process.

For computing professionals, this reinforces the importance of:

* Applying the BCS and ACM Codes of Ethics, prioritising public interest over organisational gain.
* Designing transparent, opt-in consent processes with clear withdrawal options.
* Ensuring data minimisation—collecting only what is necessary for the stated purpose.
* Engaging in ethical review and oversight when conducting user research or deploying surveys.

Reflecting on these examples reminds me that data-driven innovation must be grounded in trust and accountability. As a future IT professional and researcher, I must uphold ethical principles in every stage of research design, especially when collecting or analysing personal data.

**References**

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