Cambridge-Analytica / Facebook

What Happened

In 2014, researcher Aleksandr Kogan created a Facebook personality quiz called “This Is Your Digital Life.” The political consultancy Cambridge Analytica later used data from this quiz to collect information from millions of users and their online contacts. Users were told their answers were for academic research. In reality, the app also accessed data from their Facebook friends through Facebook’s API.

As a result, data from about 87 million users was collected. Many of these people had never given consent. The information was later used for psychological profiling and political advertising. It played a role in influencing voting behaviour during the 2016 United States presidential election and the United Kingdom’s Brexit referendum.

Reports by The Guardian (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, 2018) and The New York Times (Confessore, 2018) showed that Cambridge Analytica paid almost one million US dollars to gather this data. A later investigation by the UK Information Commissioner’s Office concluded that Facebook had failed to protect user data. This led to a £500,000 fine. The United States Federal Trade Commission also fined Facebook five billion US dollars for privacy violations.

The case prompted new debate about data ethics, the responsibilities of platforms using APIs and the regulation of data brokerage.

Why the Survey Method Was Used

Cambridge Analytica used a survey style quiz because it was simple, familiar and appeared trustworthy. People often complete online surveys for fun or small rewards. Most do not read consent information closely. The quiz acted as a “trojan horse.” It looked harmless but secretly collected much wider data.

Many Facebook users had open privacy settings, which allowed the app to collect data from their friends automatically. This made large-scale data collection cheap and easy. The information was later used for predictive models that linked personality traits to political persuasion.

Case Study: Misuse of Surveys in Research

Researchers have found serious problems with the quality of data gathered through online survey platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk. These platforms allow users to earn small payments for completing research tasks. However, some users submit false or automated responses to collect payment quickly.

In 2018, researchers reported a “bot panic” on Amazon Mechanical Turk when large numbers of automated accounts submitted repeated or meaningless responses, many from outside the intended participant group (Thompson, 2018).

These fraudulent or careless responses reduce the reliability of results and waste time and funding. They also harm trust in online research. To reduce these risks, researchers now include checks to confirm that participants are real, such as attention questions, IP monitoring and completion-time analysis.

2. Fabrication of Survey Data in Academia: When Contact Changes Minds

Another example of survey misuse occurred in academic research. Yoshitaka Fujii, a Japanese anaesthesiologist, admitted to fabricating data in many clinical papers over multiple years (Miller, 2012).

Investigators found that in at least 172 published studies, the data were wholly or partially made up. His work was retracted once the falsification was confirmed.

This case shows how serious data fabrication can go beyond isolated surveys. It affects scientific credibility, wastes resources and undermines trust in research methods. It reinforces the need for transparency, raw data review, replication and stronger scrutiny in peer review.

Impacts and risks: ethical, social, legal, professional

Perspective	Key Risks and Harms	Examples and Consequences
Ethical	Breach of consent, deception, misuse of trust, violation of autonomy	In Cambridge Analytica, users believed they were taking part in research, not political targeting
Social / Societal	Manipulation, weakening of democracy, loss of public trust	Data used for election targeting and political polarisation
Legal / Regulatory	Breaches of data protection and privacy laws, risk of penalties	Facebook faced fines and tighter rules on data and API access
Professional / Academic	Damage to credibility and trust in research, retractions, poor methodological standards	Fabricated studies such as the LaCour case reduced confidence in survey research

References

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