

## **Case Study: Inappropriate Use of Surveys**

### **Introduction**

The Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2018 brought to light the potential for misuse of personal data obtained through seemingly harmless surveys on social media platforms like Facebook. The company, which was involved in political consulting and strategic communication, used an app called "This Is Your Digital Life" to collect data from millions of Facebook users without their explicit consent (Confessore, 2018). The app, created by researcher Aleksandr Kogan, presented itself as a personality quiz, but it not only collected data from the users who took the quiz but also from their Facebook friends (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, 2018). This data included personal information such as names, email addresses, and details about users' likes and interests.

### **1. Cambridge Analytica case**

Cambridge Analytica used this data to create psychographic profiles of users, which were then used to target them with personalized political advertisements during the 2016 US presidential election and the UK's Brexit referendum (Confessore, 2018). The company claimed that by analysing users' digital footprints, they could gain insights into their personality traits, such as openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (OCEAN model), and use this information to influence their voting behaviour (Gonzalez, 2017). This unprecedented use of personal data for political purposes raised serious concerns about privacy, data protection, and the integrity of democratic processes.

### **2. Other examples**

The Cambridge Analytica case is not an isolated incident of inappropriate use of surveys. In 2014, the dating app Tinder faced criticism for using a survey to collect sensitive personal information from its users, including their sexual preferences and history of drug use (Dvoskin, 2014). The app's privacy policy stated that this information could be shared with third parties for advertising purposes, which many users found invasive and unethical.

Another example of survey misuse involves the retailer Target, which used customer data collected through surveys and loyalty programs to predict whether a woman was pregnant and estimate her due date (Duhigg, 2012). Target then sent targeted advertisements for baby products to these women, which some found creepy and intrusive. This case raised questions about the ethical boundaries of data collection and the potential for companies to exploit personal information for profit.

### **3. Ethical implications**

The inappropriate use of surveys has significant ethical, social, legal, and professional implications. From an ethical standpoint, these practices violate the principles of informed consent, privacy, and data protection. Users who participate in surveys often do so without fully understanding how their data will be used or shared, and they may not have the option to opt-out of data collection (Schneble et al., 2018). This lack of transparency and control over personal information is ethically problematic and can undermine trust in online platforms and institutions.

#### **3.1. Social Implication**

Socially, the misuse of survey data can have a chilling effect on free speech and public discourse. If people feel that their personal information can be used to manipulate their beliefs and behaviours, they may be less willing to express their opinions or engage in political activities online (Isaak and Hanna, 2018). This can lead to a more polarized and less informed society, where people are trapped in echo chambers and vulnerable to propaganda and disinformation.

#### **3.2. Legal implication**

From a legal perspective, the inappropriate use of surveys may violate data protection laws and regulations, such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA). These laws require companies to obtain explicit consent from users before collecting and processing their personal data, and they give users the right to access, correct, and delete their data (Hoofnagle et al., 2019). Companies that fail to comply with these regulations can face hefty fines and legal consequences.

### **4. Other Considerations**

Finally, the misuse of surveys raises professional and ethical issues for researchers and data scientists who work with personal data. The Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) Code of Ethics and

Professional Conduct states that computing professionals should "respect privacy" and "honour confidentiality" (ACM, 2018). Researchers have a responsibility to ensure that their data collection methods are transparent, consensual, and aligned with ethical principles. They should also be aware of the potential for their work to be misused or exploited by third parties and take steps to prevent or mitigate these risks.

## Conclusion

The Cambridge Analytica scandal and other examples of inappropriate use of surveys highlight the need for greater transparency, accountability, and ethical oversight in the collection and use of personal data. As individuals, we must be cautious about sharing our information online and demand greater control over how our data is used. As a society, we must develop stronger legal and regulatory frameworks to protect privacy and prevent the misuse of personal data for political or commercial purposes. And as professionals, we must prioritize ethical considerations in our work and strive to use data in ways that benefit society as a whole.

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