Facebook and the Ethics of Social Engineering Research

Poster By: Major Jarred McCoy, Major Marc Skinner, and Captain Michael McLain; Faculty: Dr. Martin Boyle, Dr. Karen Zuech, CH Thomas Brooks, Dr. Scott Cruz

Background

A Facebook study, published in 2014, revealed that emotions can spread and affect others within a group of individuals. The study involved a large pool of applicants, n=689k, with whose news feed was manipulated in order to monitor its effects on others within a users network of friends. Prior to the study, informed consent was not acquired nor had an Internal Review Board (IRB) been developed specifically for Facebook research.

The Cornell University IRB, from which two of the study researchers worked, found that Facebook’s status as a private organization and the research’s intent for ‘internal use’, deemed the project as not under Cornell’s Human Research Protection Program nor must they follow the Common Rule for research practices. Four months after the research was completed, Facebook revamped their user agreement under the guise of being more ‘transparent’, and added verbiage to include consent for ‘research’.

In October of 2014 Facebook made a statement that research would undergo “an enhanced review process before research can begin,” yet details of such a process remain unclear.

Army-Baylor Organizational Decision-Making 7-Step Method: A Facebook Perspective

1. Frame the question: Was it ethical for Facebook (us) to conduct end-user social engineering research?

2. Set out the organizational situation: Facebook is a company that profits by selling products (typically ad-space) to other organizations. With millions of users, and access the users’ personal data, Facebook can assist companies by providing targeted marketing and ad placement based on historical consumer preferences.

3. Note contextual situation: Research was conducted using Facebook user data without prior IRB approval, and without user consent. Although the research was deemed legal, its ethical practices are under question.

4. Revisit / re-frame the question: Is it ethical to conduct research without a formalized IRB or user consent?

5. Ask and answer the 12 questions:

   Can you discuss the problem with the affected parties: No, there are too many users for one-on-one discussion; however, clear communication of privacy policy and intention for use of information in research can (and should) be provided to the user.

   Are you confident your position will be valid over time: Yes, to the extent that we maintain policies that align with society’s expectation of privacy and ethical practices.

   Does your decision pass the “grandmother” test: It depends; privacy interests have changed over time, but the expectation for ethical practices remains today.

   What is the symbolic potential of your decision: Setting the standard for ethical practices within a new economic market (data collection and social media).

   Under what conditions would you allow exceptions: Data is highly valuable and cannot be obtained any other way (such as drug trials). Facebook data does not meet this criteria.

6. Weigh alternatives:

   a) Seek guidance from third-party IRB: impartial third-party will be able to weigh individual rights and interests without bias of organization good/interests.

   b) Develop internal IRB: internal IRB introduces a formalized platform for ethical reviews, but allows for potential bias with conflicting organization interests and individual rights.

7. Decide: No, Facebook must seek approval from a formalized third-party IRB prior to conducting research.

---