Case Study: Inappropriate Use of Surveys

In 2018, Cambridge Analytica was in the news in the United Kingdom and the USA (Confessore, 2018) for obtaining and sharing data obtained from millions of Facebook users. They obtained the data through innocuous surveys on Facebook (you may have seen this type of survey and probably participated at times). This is probably the highest profile of surveys used for alternative means and, probably, monetary gains. However, this happens often through various media.

Consider how exactly this happened and why it was used. Find one or two further examples of inappropriate use of surveys and highlight the impact of all these examples from the various ethical, social, legal and professional standpoints that apply.

Cambridge Analytica (CA) gained access to thousands of users' data due to the fact that Facebook users who had consented for their data to be used by CA's 'thisisyourdigitallife' app, also consented their friends' data to be used (Schneble, Elger & Shaw, 2018). This was considered to be a highly unusual and unethical method of obtaining data and contravened Facebook's rules (Schneble, Elger & Shaw, 2018). Rather than report the breach, Facebook merely asked CA to delete the data, which eventually resulted in the Federal Trade Comission (FTC) imposing a fine of $5 billion on Facebook (Hu, 2020). It is also suggested that a "click and forget" culture exists for Internet interfaces that should be replaced with clearer methods of presenting and obtaining data permissions for users (Schneble, Elger & Shaw, 2018).

Such clarity would no doubt have helped users of the OKCupid dating app to avoid having their data scraped in 2016 when Danish researchers accessed publicly available information pertaining to personal information such as usernames and sexual preferences (Sharma & Menon, 2020). Although the researchers technically obtained the information legally, by mapping it to a searchable database, the identities of certain individuals were guessable in such a way that the users who completed the original survey – that users completed with the aim of being more 'discoverable ' by the apps other users - would likely not have consented to (Sharma & Menon, 2020). Data that is currently anonymous may not be in the future and so more should be done to make users aware of exactly how their data could become identifiable, while researcher institutions should guide researchers towards ethical Internet-mediated research (Schneble, Elger & Shaw, 2018; ACM, 2018).

References

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