CSAI - Case Study Week 2 (12 Feb 2024)

During the first three weeks of CSAI, we have discussed Data Ethics in our lectures. During this period, you were asked to do readings from An Introduction to Data Ethics book by Prof Shannon Vallor. Now it is time to apply what we have learned so far to a specific case study. you will be working in small groups. Most of you in the group should have access to the book. We will start with an interactive session where you will contribute individually. Then, there is a set of questions to answer in groups.

TW: This case study contains mentions of mental health crises and suicide.

Crisis Text Line: The sharing of mental health data with for-profit Loris

In January 2022, Politico broke the news that Crisis Text Line (CTL), a non-profit mental health charity, was sharing data from users' interactions to a customer service software developer Loris. CTL provides mental health support by connecting young people with volunteers, allowing them to discuss topics such as suicidal ideation, violent behaviour and other incredibly sensitive topics. This chat data was being provided to Loris to better train their customer service AI to handle fraught interactions. The CTL website previously stated that their selling data was equivalent to selling t-shirts [3], but ultimately CTL ended the data sharing relationship in response to the public outcry that followed the Politico article [1].

Loris was founded by CTL's (former) CEO, Nancy Lublin, and the two companies shared office space for a year after Loris's founding. The hope was to create an additional revenue stream for CTL, who provided anonymised data to Loris with the promise of shared profit, which would help them expand their service. CTL had an ethics board, but they were not consulted on the data sharing relationship [2]. The Electronic Privacy Information Center, who CTL said had commended their data sharing practices, clarified after the news broke that they had not been made aware of the commercial data sharing and that they would have raised concerns had they known [1].

The topics discussed by service users were, by the nature of the service, highly sensitive, and could lead to ostracism, job loss etc. In a TED talk, Lublin joked that the key words "sex, Mormon" appearing on texts typically indicate a service user questioning their sexuality [3]. Such users may be ostracised from their religious community if the content of these conversations came to light.

The data sharing relationship raises a number of ethical concerns around consent and privacy.

- CTL users were informed of this data sharing relationship in the terms of service. However, it seems likely that they did not fully process this 50-paragraph document at a time of crisis meaning they did not really give *informed consent*, according to a Stanford University data policy fellow [3].

- Whilst the data was anonymised, it has been shown that even carefully anonymised data can be de-anonymised [4].

- Service users and volunteers had no way to opt out of data sharing other than not participating in the service.

Discussion Questions

1. Were service users justified and reasonable in reacting negatively to the news of the data sharing? Was the data sharing relationship *ethical*? Why or why not?

2. To what extent should those involved in orchestrating the data sharing have *anticipated* that it might be ethically controversial? Do you think the CTL and Loris boards were or were not aware of the potential for controversy? Why?

3. Can you think of a less ethically harmful way that CTL might have shared data with Loris?

4. Who is morally *accountable* for any harms caused by the data sharing relationship? How should *responsibility* for preventing unethical data conduct be distributed in an organisation?

Prepare and Submit

1. Pick a funny/original group name (so that I can refer to you).

2. Assign one person in your group as the note taker (someone with a laptop and a working wifi connection). This person will be responsible to submit your responses.

3. For each question, you should answer the questions with bullet points in a document. You should keep your answers brief.

4. Use this form to submit anonymously. Add your group name, copy/paste your answers within the boxes provided for each question. Final form question is optional, it is provided in case you want to add some more thoughts.

References

[1] Jasmine Hicks. Crisis text line stops sharing conversation data with ai company, Jan 2022.

[2] Alexandra S. Levine. Suicide hotline left ethics board out of the loop about data-sharing with for-profit spinoff.

[3] Alexandra S. Levine. Suicide hotline shares data with for-profit spinoff, raising ethical questions.

[4] Luc Rocher, Julien M. Hendrickx, and Yves-Alexandre de Montjoye. Estimating the success of re-identifications in incomplete datasets using generative models. *Nature Communications*, 10(11):3069, Jul 2019.