Case Study Week 1 -- Discussion Questions

Number of participants: 7

Q1. Were Facebook's users justified and reasonable in reacting negatively to the news of the study? Was the study ethical? Why or why not?

1. 💬

7 respondents

Yes. They were Justified. We consider the study was unethical. The main reasons were: Lack of transparency, which hinders autonomy. Emotional manipulation. Lack of Integrity. Lack of explicit consent.

they were justified; the study wasn't ethical; (1) participants weren't notified or able to opt out of the study, (2) no one thought of the implications that this can have on users, or particularly thinking of vulnerable groups

It could be argued that from a utilitarian perspective, there are good results for the greater good and the research revealed potentially very useful results. However, the practice of collecting the data was completely unethical, and did not adhere to the common rule. Although Facebook did not have to adhere legally, that does not mean that is right to not follow it morally. Thus, the reactions of users were certainly justified and they were reasonable in their complaints

Yes, the users reacting negatively to the news of the study is completely justified and reasonable because it was a breach of trust for the users and FaceBook violated the general rights of the people by conducting research and collecting data without any form of consent (includes both implicit and explicit). The study was completely unethical as it had no prior intimation, violated the rights of the people and the general regulations too.

Yes, the users were justified in their negative reactions to the study as essentially Facebook was using them as test subjects for a study that could affect their mental health without their consent. The study was not ethically conducted.

I think the reasonable for the users to act this way because they are not informed and consent to the research, and it is unethical to do it that way. Even considering most of the users won't read the agreement, the company should mention it at first to do this kind of study because it can have an impact to the users.

yes justified - lack of transparency, attempt to cover up, being manipulated, kids and poor mental health individuals involved, lack of consent

Q2. To what extent should those involved in the Facebook study have anticipated that the study might be ethically controversial, causing a flood of damaging media coverage and angry public commentary? If the negative reaction should have been anticipated by Facebook researchers and management, why do you think it wasn't?

2. 7 respondents

They should have anticipated, though in 2012 less people were actively thinking about responsible data practices, which reduced their chance of identifying these problems. Also Facebook dominant /monopolistic position probably made them less cautious.

they should have anticipated it but this is a clear case of the bubble effect; you are in this environment that is just different from the real world; also power dynamics from the company could come into play in these cases (outputs, targets, promotion...)

There is no way that the users could have anticipated such a thing because in general as end users we are not typically concerned with the content in our feeds. Only a small number of niche tech savvy people could have anticipated this but it is also of very low probability. The negative reaction should have been anticipated by FaceBook researchers but well they thought that it was all fair from their side and this typically happens within large tech companies.

They should have somewhat anticipated it due to how news are spread in social media, like on Facebook even. This research was unethical but it can be speculated that since the study was only 1 week long and it was a study that contributed useful information to society, Facebook didn't expect there to be backlash on this. They should have had an external audit and gotten consent from the people being used for the research through a quick pop up with the key summary of what could happen with the study (as long as that summary would not affect the research itself) and if people agreed.

They certainly should have had protocols in place for handling issues like this. With a massive company like Facebook, there should have been someone in the pipeline of the project who raises the alarm. However, perhaps it was somewhat normalised for big tech companies to conduct research like this, but Facebook thought that the

results were so significant that it would benefit society to release the results

I don't think they anticipated this kind of backlash. Facebook should have a kind of team for anticipating this, i think they are making it easy considering the length of the research and amount of users involved.

They didn't anticipate it, less tech regulations back then and this could have given precedence for bringing it in. This could be viewed by as positive due to the fact it is now brought to attention that this could happen. However, it seems from the outside that the action took priority over getting an ethical basis sorted first, either due to actual malpractice intent or because it was not common practice within the company/team

Q3. Describe 2 or 3 things Facebook could have done differently, to
3. **acquire the benefits of the study in a less harmful, less reputationally damaging, and more ethical way.**

Asking for explicit consent. Defining requirements and risk groups that shouldn't be included in the study. Compensation for the experimental subjects. Previously include in their policy that they would use people's data for research. Apologize and improve instead of defending their practices.

1. The first thing that they could have done is putting forth a request for explicit consent to the people. 2. The second thing that they could have done is including the necessary details about the research in their user license agreement to actually justify their actions in the context of arguments from professional societies (but this is still not justifiable from the user's perspective).

if they really wanted to do this study, look at past data instead of manipulating feeds, letting users know that their past data is being used for this, why, what risks/ benefits they get from it, and the possibility of opting out from the study

They should have had an external audit and gotten consent from the people being used for the research through a quick pop up with the key summary of what could happen with the study (as long as that summary would not have an effect on the research itself). They also should not have used children in the experiment due to the ethical issues with the mental health of children.

Might be difficult to acqurire the same results from an opt-in solution, due to representation bias. I would say that even still, the executive summary of terms and conditions is better than a super long form. So even if they included the proper terminology in the end-user license agreement, it would not be ethical/moral if not clear to the user. They probably could have inferred from historical data already, if they wanted to do this. The active role Facebook took meant that consent should be explicitly obtained, even owing to the issues explained above.

I think they could do something like pop-up for asking consent from the users, if they do not want to add the terms and condition. Considering the time of the research, a pop up could do. And another thing is they could have a pre-discussion about this, the consequences of the research and how they could deal with it before going out making the research and having trouble afterwards.

Should we do this? - Initial ethical thought Been more careful with regards to participants (no kids or mentally worse off) Informed consent - with summary sheet

4. Q4. Who is morally accountable for any harms caused by the study? Within a large organization like Facebook, how should responsibility for preventing unethical data conduct be distributed, and why might that be a challenge to figure out?

7 respondents

Editors for publishing and not highlighting the problems to facebook. The authors of the paper, their immediate managers. And anyone who gave explicit approval to this study.

The people that made the research and the people in power at the company should have the responsibility over the harms of the study. The people that are the owner of the company have responsibility over what their company does but realistically they aren't aware of the studies that the company does, so the responsibility should be on everyone that had enough power to make decisions about the study and that was fully aware of the study (additionally to the leader of the company), therefore the researchers, the people responsible about ethical and legal issues at the company and everyone in a high position at the company that was aware of this research.

The researchers from FaceBook are morally accountable for the harms caused due to their study and FaceBook as an organization is responsible for the actions of their researchers. There could be a Data Ethics board that could be set up to regulate the researches that are happening.

The researchers, the company (Facebook), the University (Cornell), the journal that published the work. There should be an external ethics board involved, one that the company has no power over. This is a challenge because there is no regulation around this, so companies can ultimately self-regulate and create their own ethics guidelines.

There should be accountability for the teams that made the decisions. It should be transparent for who is accountable for what, in order to make decisions about who is responsible for what. For example, the research paper highlights in its acknowledgements partially this. So these people should be held accountable for their specific role.

I think there are a lot of parties considered accountable in large organization. From the Directors who give or know the command/order, to the teams that are actually doing this directly. The responsibility for preventing this kind of thing relies between several teams and they all should be aware for this kind of thing even if they are not specialized on it. They should seek for experts in their company for this kind of thing and prevent the disaster from happen in the first place.

Zuck (orrrr the leader of the team who this research fell under, people who signed off on it, the team themselves, stakeholders who had a say - especially those with veto powers)