

CSAI - Case Study Week 1 (30 Jan 2025)

During the first two 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.

Facebook's Emotional Contagion Experiment

In 2014 it was learned that Facebook had been experimenting on its own users' emotional manipulability, by altering the news feeds of almost 700,000 users to see whether Facebook engineers placing more positive or negative content in those feeds could create effects of positive or negative 'emotional contagion' that would spread between users. Facebook's published study, which concluded that such emotional contagion could be induced via social networks on a "massive scale".¹

Facebook's Data Use Policy, which users must agree to before creating an account, did not include the phrase "constituting informed consent for research" until four months after the study concluded. However, the company argued that their activities were still covered by the earlier data policy wording, even without the explicit reference to 'research'.²

Facebook argued in their paper that the purpose of the study was consistent with the user agreement, namely, to give Facebook knowledge it needs to provide users with a positive experience on the platform. An Editorial Expression of Concern was published on PNAS website about this paper.³ Cornell University IRB (Institutional Review Board) determined that the project did not fall under Cornell's Human Research Protection Program since the experiment was conducted by Facebook, Inc. for internal purposes. Note that two authors of the paper are affiliated with Cornell University.

Critics objected on several grounds, claiming that:

- Facebook violated long-held standards for ethical scientific research in the U.S. and Europe, which require specific and explicit informed consent from human research subjects involved in medical or psychological studies;
- That such informed consent should not in any case be implied by agreements to a generic Data Use Policy that few users are known to carefully read or understand;
- That Facebook abused users' trust by using their online data-sharing activities for an undisclosed and unexpected purpose;
- That the researchers seemingly ignored the specific harms to people that can come from emotional manipulation. For example, thousands of the 689,003 study subjects almost certainly suffer from clinical depression, anxiety, or bipolar disorder, but were not excluded from the study by those higher risk factors. The study lacked key mechanisms of research ethics that are commonly used to minimize the potential emotional harms of such a study, for example, a mechanism for debriefing unwitting subjects after the study concludes, or a mechanism to exclude participants under the age of 18 (another population especially vulnerable to emotional volatility).

¹<http://www.pnas.org/content/111/24/8788.full>

²<https://www.forbes.com/sites/kashmirhill/2014/06/30/facebook-only-got-permission-to-do-research-on-users-#f0b433a7a62d>

³<https://www.pnas.org/content/111/29/10779.1>

Discussion Questions

1. Were Facebook's users justified and reasonable in reacting negatively to the news of the study? Was the study *ethical*? Why or why not?
2. 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*?
3. Describe 2 or 3 things Facebook could have done differently, to acquire the benefits of the study in a less harmful, less reputationally damaging, and more ethical way.
4. 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?

Prepare and Submit – Groups in Wooclap

1. I will assign you a team number during class.
2. You can submit multiple answers as a group. Submit one answer per each argument.