

The Social Responsibility of a Social Network

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You may have participated in a published research study without even knowing it. In 2012, Facebook ran an experiment on almost 700,000 users wherein their emotions were manipulated without the participants knowing they enrolled in the study.

After the paper was published, many users inquired as to when they gave consent to participate in the study. Facebook, like many other online companies, obtains legal consent through their terms of service.

According to Facebook's Data Use Policy, "We may use the information we receive about you ... for internal operations, including troubleshooting, data analysis, testing, research, and service improvement." Therefore, any of the participants involved in this study legally consented to having their data used for research purposes. But was this consent informed?

The Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, also known as the Common Rule requires informed consent to involve an explanation of the research and any procedures that may be experimental, foreseeable risks, contact information for debriefing and possible injury, and a statement, which explicitly states that participation is voluntary. Facebook's Data Use Policy is far from the Common Rule.

However, the Common Rule only applies to federally funded research, which should make Facebook exempt. However, Facebook was not the only institution responsible for this study.

Jamie Guillory from the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) and Jeffery Hancock from Cornell University were both co-authors on the study. Both UCSF and Cornell receive federal funding and therefore the study requires informed consent, voluntary participation, and debriefing.

Participants were not debriefed by the researchers and instead, Facebook News Feeds were simply returned to their original algorithms. It is possible that some participants could have been exposed to potential harms in this study. The potential risks were unknown and the researchers have no knowledge as to whether individuals were harmed. Moreover, the impact of potential harms remains unknown and it may be possible that these harms are still ongoing. The lack of debriefing on behalf of the researchers may have exposed participants to continuing damages. It would have been more prudent for the researchers to inform participants of their involvement after the study was concluded, yet this was never done.

One may call into question the level of harm involved in this study, could it really have caused long-lasting damage? It is important not to exaggerate the harm committed, but rather to elucidate that damage that could have been inflicted. The level of risk is not what is at stake here, but rather that the researchers exposed individuals to risk without informed consent.

This was an experimental study, not an observational study, as it manipulated the Newsfeeds (and as a result, emotions) of the unwitting participants. The Common Rule allows for the waiver of informed consent for research that poses "minimal risk" to participants. However, it seems that this study could not have been carried out without a waiver of informed consent.

The researchers may argue that asking for informed consent before the study would have muddled with the results. Another option could then be to ask users to opt-in to the possibility of being included in a research study once every couple months. Users could receive compensation, such as removal of advertisements or more customizable features, for agreeing to participate in the research.

Whatever the solution may be, this study clearly highlights the privilege and power Facebook and other similar companies have. With such influence, it is necessary to investigate what responsibility, if any, the technology sector has to society. Large corporations such as Walmart have been criticized for lack of corporate social responsibility; perhaps it is time to turn the lens towards Silicon Valley as well.

The standards of social responsibility must be raised for companies like Facebook that affect our daily lives.