e-Portfolio Activity: Reflective Activity 2

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.

Record your findings in your e-Portfolio. You can also submit your findings to your tutor for formative feedback.

Case Study: Inappropriate Use of Surveys – Cambridge Analytica

1. How exactly did this happen

The Cambridge Analytica-Facebook scandal involving Christopher Wylie revealed that data scientist and psychologist Aleksandr Kogan harvested data from 87 million Facebook users. Kogan designed a personality profiling app called "thisisyourdigitallife" that allowed users to access their profile information, including their "likes" and contact lists. This enabled Cambridge Analytica to influence voters (Hu, 2020).

According to Hinds et al. (2020), in 2018, the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal unveiled Cambridge Analytica's misuse of data to tailor advertisements for the 2016 US presidential election. Despite the scandal, a study of 30 UK university participants revealed that respondents did not delete their accounts or adjust their privacy settings, indicating that individuals often perceive themselves as immune to such ads and lack an understanding of how automated algorithms utilise their data.

The scandal involved unauthorised data harvesting from 87 million individuals, prompting global outrage and calls for people to delete their accounts. It also sparked discussions about online privacy and the need to regulate artificial intelligence (Hinds et al. 2020).

2. Why it was used

Cambridge Analytica used this data for political advertising. The data allowed the firm to create detailed profiles of users and target them with personalised political ads during the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the Brexit referendum in the UK. As Bakir (2020) highlights, the aim was to influence voter behaviour and sway the outcomes of these political events.

3. Other examples of inappropriate use of surveys

The first example by Anchustegui & Nowag (2017) highlights that in 2017, it was reported that Uber had used a program called "Hell" to track drivers working for its competitor Lyft. Uber created fake Lyft accounts and used them to track the drivers' locations. This allowed Uber to identify drivers who worked for both companies and target them with incentives to drive exclusively for Uber. Surveys and tracking were used without the drivers' knowledge or consent.

4. The impact of all these examples from the various ethical, social, legal and professional standpoints

The unethical practices of Cambridge Analytica and Uber's "Hell" software brought to light serious privacy violations. They used data for political manipulation without user consent, blatantly ignoring transparency and privacy principles. Consequently, Uber's reputation and trust among drivers suffered, sparking concerns about worker treatment in the gig economy (Anchustegui & Nowag, 2017). The fallout from the scandal included legal scrutiny and fines for Facebook, which led to regulatory changes and the implementation of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union (Ghorashi et al. 2023). Uber also faced legal challenges and fines due to its invasive tracking practices, fuelling discussions about the need for stricter regulations in the tech industry (Fitsilis, 2019). The incident underscored the importance of ethical standards in data science and analytics, prompting professionals to prioritise privacy and ethical considerations (Mirbabaie et al. 2022). The misuse of Cambridge Analytica and Uber surveys, as Milne (2000) outlined, highlighted the need for more robust ethical standards, enhanced regulatory frameworks, and increased awareness of data privacy issues.

References:

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