Unit 5: - Reflective Activity 2: Inappropriate Use of Surveys Case Study

The Cambridge Analytica scandal unfolded in 2018 when The New York Times, in collaboration with The Observer and The Guardian, exposed how Cambridge Analytica, a data firm principally owned by right-wing donor Robert Mercer, improperly obtained and used data from millions of Facebook users (Confessore, 2018). They obtained the Facebook data through a third-party app "This Is Your Digital Life," which not only collected information from quiz takers but also their friends. This data was then used to create psychographic profiles for American voters during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, primarily for political purposes, including influencing voter behaviour and targeted political advertising (Confessore, 2018). There were also suspicions of financial gains as firms like Cambridge Analytica could offer their services to political campaigns and businesses. This data collection violated Facebook's policies, and most users were unaware of their data being harvested (Confessore, 2018).

Similar cases of inappropriate use of surveys include: Online personality tests whereby there have been numerous online personality tests and quizzes that have been used to collect personal information for various purposes (Isaak & Hanna, 2018). For example, a seemingly harmless quiz that claims to reveal your ideal vacation destination may ask for access to your social media profile, potentially harvesting personal data for marketing or other undisclosed purposes.

Another example is misleading market research. Even though many of the market research surveys are good, there exists badly constructed ones, whereby, some companies conduct surveys that are designed to manipulate consumer perceptions (Fisher & Kordupleski, 2018). They may ask leading questions or provide false

information to steer respondents toward desired responses, creating a distorted view of consumer preferences (Fisher & Kordupleski, 2018). Thus, resulting to unethical marketing strategies and product development (Fisher & Kordupleski, 2018).

The impact of these scandals and cases of misuse of surveys can be critically examined from various ethical, social, legal, and professional standpoints:

Ethical Impact:

Data Misuse: Cambridge Analytica's unethical data collection practices involved using a Facebook app to gather data without informed user consent, breaching privacy and trust (Isaak & Hanna, 2018).

Manipulation: The firm aimed to manipulate individuals through targeted political advertising based on psychological profiling, raising ethical concerns about the use of data for political manipulation (Fisher & Kordupleski, 2018); (Islam, et al., 2020).

Transparency: Failure to protect user data and its slow response to the issue raised ethical questions about the responsibility of tech companies to safeguard user information (legislation.gov.uk, 2018); (CEPR, 2021); (Turillli & Floridi, 2009).

Privacy violation: In all these cases, the fundamental ethical concern is the violation of individuals' privacy. Users' personal data is collected without their informed consent, leading to a breach of trust (legislation.gov.uk, 2018).

Social Impact:

Manipulation of opinion and Influence: Concerns arose about the role of misinformation in shaping and influencing political outcomes, potentially undermining democratic

processes, mislead public opinions, and threaten both public and social stability (Islam, et al., 2020); (Aïmeur, et al., 2023).

Consumer Deception: Inappropriately used surveys and quizzes can deceive individuals, leading them to share personal information under false pretences, which erodes trust in online platforms (Fisher & Kordupleski, 2018).

Disinformation: The scandal highlighted the broader issue of disinformation and the spread of fake news on social media platforms (Islam, et al., 2020).

Legal Impact:

Data Protection Laws: If not done surveys ae not done rights, data protection laws like GDPR can be violated (legislation.gov.uk, 2018) For instance when regulatory actions against both Cambridge Analytica and Facebook was taken (Confessore, 2018).

Legal Violations: Collecting and using personal data without informed consent may violate data protection laws and regulations, potentially subjecting the organizations involved to legal actions and penalties (Ishii & Komukai , 2016).

Professional Impact:

Reputation Damage: Organizations that engage in unethical survey practices can suffer severe damage to their reputations, which can impact their long-term success and trustworthiness (Oz, 1992).

Professional Standards: Professionals involved in data collection and analysis, such as data scientists and market researchers, may face ethical dilemmas regarding the responsible use of data (Bott, 2014).

In conclusion, these cases underscore the significance of ethical data collection and survey methods, emphasizing the importance of informed consent. They also reveal the repercussions of misusing surveys for purposes such as political manipulation or consumer deception (Fisher & Kordupleski, 2018). These instances have sparked debates about the responsibilities of tech companies and professionals in protecting user data and upholding ethical standards, highlighting the vital role of legal and professional standards in ensuring accountability in today's data-driven landscape (Turillli & Floridi, 2009).

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