



Untangling research and practice: What Facebook's "emotional contagion" study teaches us *danah boyd*, 2015

Context

In 2014, Facebook published a study on "emotional contagion," where researchers manipulated users' News Feeds to test whether exposure to emotional content changes what people themselves choose to post.

The study sparked significant ethical concerns, particularly around user consent, research oversight, and the blurred line between corporate experimentation and academic research.

This paper explores the ethical issues raised by the study.

Key Insights

Embed ethics into daily practices

Implementing university or clinical trial ethics review processes are not the answer in corporate research. Instead, corporate researchers and practitioners need to be educated and trained to think about how their decisions may benefit and harm people.

Informed consent is not always informed

Whilst Facebook's users technically may have agreed to the terms of service, it's well known that most people don't fully read or understand these complicated paragraphs of text, meaning they often don't know what they are consenting to.

Transparency is essential for public trust

Whilst the manipulation raised concerns, the lack of transparency about the process also played a part in causing the outrage. Many users were seemingly unaware of the active role that Facebook played in determining what we they see on the app.

Corporate ethics requires collaboration

The author argues that a socio-technical model of ethical oversight is needed, with input from both companies and researchers, as well as dialogue between those who are manipulating the data and those who are creating the data being manipulated.

Implications

- How are you using experimentation (A/B testing or other) today? How are you obtaining informed consent?
- What ethical implications should be considered, especially considering that your consumers are making important financial decisions?
- How do you think research ethics standards should apply in corporate settings? What's being done in your organisation today?