

Facebook Mood Experiment

Sebastian Caldas

Slides based on those by Liam Li and Nicholay Topin (Fall 2018)

Related Article:

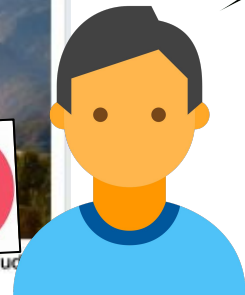
“Everything We Know About Facebook's Secret Mood Manipulation Experiment | It was probably legal. But was it ethical?” by Robinson Meyer

Background

Facebook modified users' newsfeeds to see how it impacted their moods.



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Timeline

2012

- Facebook gathers data
- Cornell IRB approves analysis

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2013

- Paper written by FB / Cornell researchers
- Submitted to PNAS

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2014

- Paper published in PNAS
- Media reaction and users' outrage (June 2014)

Detractors vs. Proponents

Detractors present the following concerns:

Facebook
manipulated
its users' moods

Users were unable
to provide
informed consent

The **IBR approval**
was **conditioned**
on Facebook's
approval

the following concerns:

Facebook
manipulated
its users' mood

Previous emotional
contagion studies
had been limited to
crawling news feeds,
without modifying them.

Users were unable
to provide
informed consent

The **IBR approval**
was **conditioned**
on Facebook's
approval

Detractors present

Facebook
manipulated
its users' mood

Users were unable
to provide
informed consent

- According to the APA, informed consent should be obtained using reasonably understandable language.
- Participants should be able to withdraw their data.

The **IBR approval**
was **conditioned**
on Facebook's
approval

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approval

the researchers' "revision letter said they had Cornell IRB approval as a 'pre-existing dataset' presumably from FB, who seems to have reviewed it as well in some unspecified way..." - Dr. Fiske

Meanwhile, **proponents** present the following arguments:

The use of the data
is **legal** under
Facebook's
terms of service

The experiment
helps Facebook
improve its service

The **impact** on users
was **small** and went
unnoticed

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“Facebook users relinquish the
use of their data for data
analysis, testing, and
research.” - Facebook's TOS

The experiment
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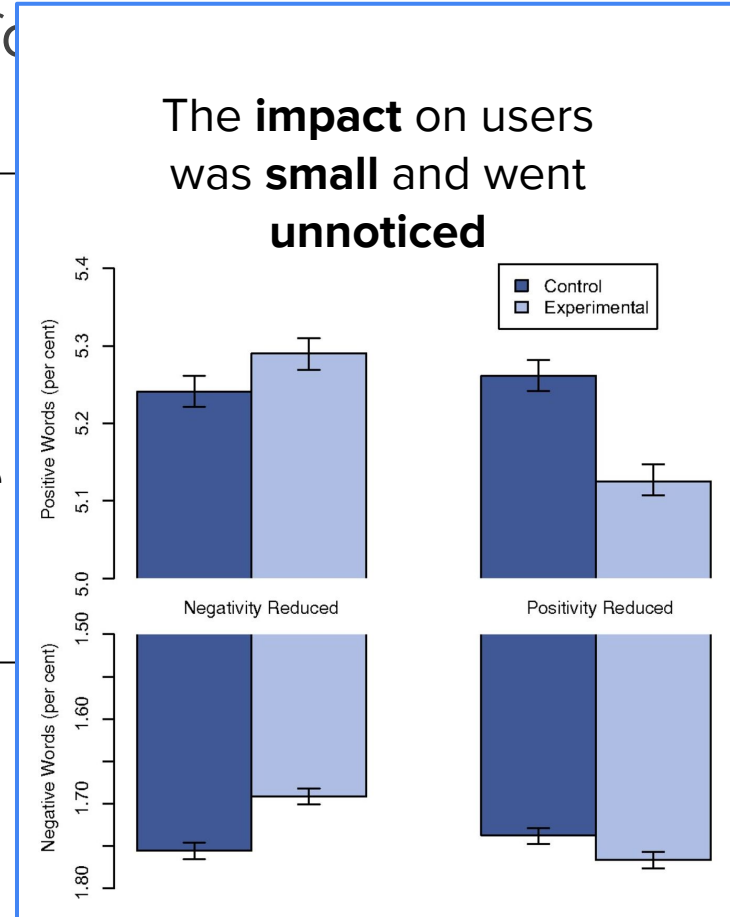
“We do research to ... make the content people see on Facebook as relevant and engaging as possible. A big part of this is understanding how people respond to different types of content.” - Facebook

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Discussion

Do you believe something unethical was done?

Was the data collection justified?

Should researchers use data collected in similar manners?

Why is informed consent necessary in this situation and not for for A/B testing on ads?

My opinion

Do you believe something unethical was done?

- If ethics are a social construct, then the public outcry may mean something unethical was indeed done.
- The root of the problem seems to be the perceived potential Facebook has to modify our behavior.
- Opting out is a must in this type of experiments.

Was the data collection justified?

- The motivation for the study is vague.
- Facebook may be underplaying the results.
- Although emotional contagion studies are common, they had never been performed at this scale.

Should researchers use data collected in similar manners?

- I don't know.
- On one hand, the data may already be there. But do we want to encourage similar endeavours?

Why is informed consent necessary in this situation and not for for A/B testing on ads?

- Reactions to ads and emotional responses are different.