

Data Collection Ethics

Shawn Zhu, age 16,

Downingtown STEM Academy, Downingtown, Pennsylvania, USA

Cambridge Analytica and Facebook were outed in 2018 for scandalous behavior. Cambridge Analytica was a political consulting firm that had unlawful access to the personal data of 87 million Facebook users through a third-party app which had access to not only the data of its users but also their friends, who were never notified of their data being collected. Using this data, Cambridge Analytica built profiles on users to help target voters during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Campaigners were able to craft specific messages to efficiently target voters with data-supported adverts more likely to resonate with the voter's beliefs. This breach of privacy called into question the ethics of data collection and whether allowing companies to use our personal information is beneficial or harmful.

Proponents of data collection cite its potential for efficiency and optimization. They cite how data plays a major role in optimizing processes since user information can indicate certain trends and behaviors. Outside its political scope, data collection can be useful in many other ways, such as helping financial organizations in future predictive analysis, helping the public health sector track disease outbreaks, and training artificial intelligence models that can be applied to almost any field.

Critics of data collection cite issues of misuse. Collecting millions of users' data without explicit permission on how their data is used and who has access to it subsequently breaks consumer trust due to a violation of privacy and data use agreements. Some argue that allowing companies to hold data actually enables higher data security risks, like in the case of Cambridge Analytica where Facebook's improper data security measures allowed third-party access. This increases the risk of personal data being used in harmful ways such as identity theft, fraud, and blackmail, by unauthorized personnel.

Discussion Questions

1. Is data collection inherently unethical, or does its ethical status depend on how it is used?
2. How can the public be better protected against the misuse of their data?
3. What level of accountability should social media platforms (like Facebook) have in ensuring third-party apps handle user data ethically?