

Using Care Ethics to Analyze the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica Scandal

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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Introduction

In March of 2018, news broke that Cambridge Analytica was able to gather Facebook profile data of over 79 million users. They used this data to build voter personality profiles to target advertisements for the conservative presidential candidates in the 2016 election.

Aleksandr Kogan, a social psychologist at the University of Cambridge, developed a third party application that 300,000 Facebook users downloaded, allowing him to collect information on their activity, their interests, and also the information of their friends, which he illegally transferred to Cambridge Analytica. Facebook denied that it was a data breach because users technically agreed on their privacy settings. This resulted in a public apology, claiming they will do better to protect user's information (Kozłowska, 2018).

The Facebook-Cambridge Analytica Scandal has become a large debate about privacy on the growing internet. There has been little discussion, however, of the issue of transparency between Facebook and its users. This is due to the large focus on the numbers itself: 79 million profiles. Despite popular belief, Facebook does offer privacy features through its user settings. The issue is they are optional features that default to loose restrictions which are also hard to find (Kozłowska, 2018). Thus, it is more influential to look at the issue of transparency between Facebook and its users, and whether Facebook intentionally hid privacy information. In refusing to assess Facebook's actions towards its users, readers will fail to recognize the need for transparency from massive corporations.

I believe examining Facebook's actions through the lens of care ethics will provide a means to judge the morality of Facebook's relationship with its users. Specifically, I will display that Facebook's lack of transparency with its users up to and during the Cambridge Analytica

scandal was immoral due to the lack of ethical components of care: attentiveness, responsibility, competency, and responsiveness.

Background

Cambridge Analytica was a political consulting firm that collected online user data to determine voter personality traits and behavior. It then uses this data to help political campaigns target specific people. Aleksandr Kogan, a social psychologist at the University of Cambridge, created an app through Facebook called *thisisyourdigitalife*. Once users downloaded the app, it would start collecting their personal information, their activity (e.g. posts they have interacted with), and personal information of their friends. Kogan illegally gave this data to Cambridge Analytica, thus breaching his agreement with Facebook. Using this data, Cambridge Analytica targeted advertisements to influence the outcome of the 2016 Election. In 2018, the news of this data breach became public, which called into question how Kogan and Cambridge Analytica were able to gather a vast amount of information through Facebook. Facebook called it a “breach the trust,” as third-party application developers were able to gather profile information of 79 million users from only 300,000 users using the app (Kozłowska, 2018). Cambridge Analytica closed months after the news broke, and Facebook was forced to implement more ways to protect its user data.

Literature Review

Many scholars have analyzed the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal. These scholars tend to focus on Facebook’s impact on user privacy. Thus, discussing the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica situation becomes a general discussion of privacy issues within Facebook. The works

typically fail to judge Facebook's transparency with its users and how that impacts the relationship.

In *Time to log off*, Tiso discusses the calls to delete Facebook in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal. He argues that it is more concerning that Cambridge Analytica was able to collect vast amounts of user data rather than the influence it could have had on the 2016 election (Tiso, 2018). Due to the impact of capitalism on the internet, Facebook is legally allowed to have lenient privacy agreements. Protection of user data then becomes the responsibility of the user, which he explains by saying "Users of the platform are responsible for protecting not just their privacy - by operating a byzantine and ever-changing set of parameters - but also the privacy of the people they associate with" (Tiso, 2018). Thus, this emphasizes that Facebook is not doing enough to protect the privacy of the users, but fails to address the failure of Facebook to give care towards its users.

In *Privacy and user awareness on Facebook*, Nyoni and Velempini analyze users' awareness of privacy on Facebook. They conducted a study to analyze the privacy settings users had set. In a small sample size of 25 people, they showed that 22 of them never thought to set their privacy settings on Facebook. Furthermore, 94% of users were either sharing personal data daily or weekly, exemplifying the wealth of personal information on Facebook (Nyoni & Velempini, 2018). Through this, they argue that Facebook needs to provide more privacy as users' personal information could be in danger. The study focuses on the user's awareness of their privacy settings but fails to analyze the ethical relationship between Facebook and its users.

Privacy has become a large issue due to the rise of the internet and social media platforms like Facebook. The Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal is a prime example of unprotected

user data being mishandled. Although it is agreed that more user privacy is needed, the scholars studying the Cambridge Analytica scandal fail to judge Facebook's actions in response to it. I will focus my analysis on the relationship Facebook fosters with its users, and how it treated it in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

Conceptual Framework

The morality of the actions taken by Facebook during the Cambridge Analytica scandal can be analyzed through the lens of care ethics. Through this, the care that Facebook owed to its consumers will be examined to determine the morality of the actions it took in the wake of the scandal. Carol Gilligan's theory of care ethics states that the development of morals does not come about by learning general moral principles, but yet through our relationships. People learn values through encounters with people that have emotions. In determining the appropriate amount of care to give, it is important to contextualize the relationship and the amount of care that is expected due to that relationship. The emphasis in care ethics is on the connectedness of people and that decisions will and can be made based on the amount of empathy one has towards another (van de Poel & Royakkers, 2011).

Care ethics requires one to place themselves into another person's shoes, thus contextualizing their situation as their own. Care is defined as "a practice, value, disposition, or virtue." This allows people to understand others' vulnerabilities, and with that, grasp an understanding of what is the right and wrong action to take at the time. Its emphasis on relationships shows recognition the action expected differs depending on the empathy one holds for another. Using this, Joan Tronto created four ethical guidelines to analyze situations through

the lens of care ethics. These ethical guidelines stem from the four different phases of care. These ethical elements are attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness (Maio, 2017). Using these, it can be determined if one took ethical action in a situation.

Attentiveness is based on the initial phase of care, the recognition of need. Tronto describes it as the “quality of individuals to open themselves for the need of others” (Klaver & Baart, 2011). Responsibility is the willingness of one to respond, or take care of, a need. Competence is the actual act of giving care, where responsiveness is recognizing and adapting to the power dynamics within the relationship (Maio 2017).

To effectively show Facebook acted immorally towards its users in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica, I will first establish the relationship between Facebook and its users. Doing this will show the power structure and the expectations of care Facebook owed the users of its platform. Then, I will be able to determine whether or not Facebook gave the appropriate amount of care to the users using the different aspects of care.

Analysis

Facebook was founded on the motto of bringing the world together (Tiso, 2018). During this process, Facebook has accumulated user data from around the world, in which they have used to develop targeted advertisements. In the process, their privacy guidelines have become less restricted, and have shifted responsibility to the user to protect their data. In the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, it became obvious that users were unaware of Facebook’s loose privacy restrictions, nor that they had consented to it (Nichol, 2019). Based on various definitions of care, the relationship between Facebook and its users constituted the need for care.

The inability of Facebook to protect its users' data and their response in the wake of the scandal allows us to study this through the lens of care ethics. In the following sections, I will display how Facebook failed to appropriately respond to the scandal during all phases of care, using the ethical components of each stage: attentiveness, competence, responsibility, and responsiveness.

Attentiveness

Attentiveness is defined as the ability to recognize the need for care. In a relationship, it is required for one entity to stop taking their self-interest to consider the needs of the other entity. This is addressed by Tronto as the first stage of care, and thus failing to do so is a failure to provide appropriate care within a relationship. Facebook failed to provide attentiveness to its users when it focused on building a stronger relationship with advertisers than the user base.

I have already established that there is a relationship between Facebook and its users exist which requires care. It is important to consider whether or not Facebook was aware of the need for care. In the case of the Cambridge Analytica, the need for care is the need for more transparency. Some would argue the need is within actually providing privacy for the users, but according to Kozłowska, there are ways in which users could protect their data. The issue is that the users do not know they need to protect their data. This is due to the lack of transparency in how Facebook uses its data and sets up its platform (Kozłowska, 2019). Facebook has long user agreement policies that are either too long or too technical for the standard user to read and understand. Thus, users across the globe are agreeing to these privacy standards fully believing that Facebook has their best interest in mind.

It is well argued that the reason Facebook leaves user data unprotected is that it focuses more on their relationship with the advertising world rather than the actual world they claim to

connect. The default privacy settings are not set for privacy. By leaving more data unprotected, advertisers can gather it to target advertisements. Thus, the advertisements become more influential and are more likely to work, thus, resulting in more revenue and business for Facebook. Since advertising is Facebook's main revenue stream, they have put more effort into building that relationship rather than providing a safe platform for its users (Tiso, 2018).

Facebook's emphasis on their relationship with advertisers has blinded them from providing the necessary care towards its users. Thus, their self-interest became dominant, which resulted in their failure to see the need for transparency. Due to this lack, users were unaware of the need to restrict their privacy settings. This allowed for the Cambridge Analytica scandal to occur, where over 87 million user profiles were harvested and used to influence the 2016 presidential election. Thus, through the actions of Facebook leading up to the scandal, it is evident that they selfishly failed to provide the proper amount of care into their relationship with its users to strengthen their relationship with advertising agencies. They failed to recognize the need to care, and thus failing to uphold their end in the relationship.

Facebook failed to see the need for transparency with its users and instead built a stronger relationship with advertising firms. Despite this, Ahmet Ertugan conducted a study that displayed the effectiveness of Facebook advertising. They showed that it helped connect users with consumers and build a relationship between them. Thus, it could be concluded that although Facebook was risking user privacy, their relationship with advertisers was helping users find products that they need easily (Ertugan 2017). Although this is a strong argument, it fails to realize that the user has little knowledge of how much of their personal data is needed in order to target these ads (Nyoni & Velempini 2018).

Responsibility

The second stage of care involves responding to and caring for the need. This aligns with the ethical principle of responsibility. In a relationship, when there is an evident need from one entity, the other must respond with the appropriate action. It is what binds someone to be morally responsible in situations of care. To hold Facebook morally responsible for the leak of user data, I will look at the timeline of the Cambridge Analytica scandal and see the steps Facebook took increased its transparency with its users. This will show that throughout the scandal, Facebook was repetitively made aware of the data leaks and failed to take appropriate action.

In 2010, Facebook launched Open Graph to third-party applications so that they could reach out to users and get their personal information. It was seen as an easier way to expand the platform and give users more reasons to stay online. When released, there were concerns about expanding the number of people who could see user data, but Zuckerberg signed a consent decree with the Federal Trade Commission saying they would not share user data without their permission. In 2013, Aleksandr Kogan developed the *thisisyourdigitallife* application that was designed as a personality quiz. 300,000 users took the quiz, which, given the loose privacy settings on Facebook, allowed Kogan to harvest information on millions of Facebook profiles (Meredith, 2018).

In 2014, Facebook was made aware that Cambridge Analytica got access to some of the data that was harvested from Kogan's application. Thus, they made a small change to their privacy settings that allowed outside applications to only get access to a user's friends' profiles if the friend allowed for it. In 2015 and 2016, Cambridge Analytica was hired to work on the campaigns of Ted Cruz and Donald Trump, in which they used harvested data to build profiles on

people who could be most influenced by advertisements. They were also hired by “Vote Leave,” a pro-Brexit group. In late 2015, Facebook asked Cambridge Analytica to delete the data models they held, and although they claimed they did, they did not. In 2018, the story broke that Facebook data was used by Cambridge Analytica to enhance the 2016 election. After days of being silent, Mark Zuckerberg released an apology for not doing enough to protect user data. They then made edits to the platform to protect user data, such as making it easier to revoke apps permission to your data, revoke permission if you have not used the app in three months, among others. It was originally believed that Cambridge Analytica had access to around 50 million profiles, but the true number came to be 87 million (Meredith, 2018).

In looking at how Facebook treated its users in the timeline above, users did not know their data was being harvested by this outside organization until it was made public by the New York Times. Facebook was aware of the situation three years in advance and failed to inform the users about the problem. Their defense was, although the application was illegally harvesting the data, they did nothing wrong because users agreed to their data being shared. This seemed to place the blame of the situation on the users, but the users were unaware of the need for protecting their privacy settings. In a separate study, in the year 2018, 88% of users have not read or were unaware of Facebook’s privacy agreement (Calbalhin, 2018). Their failure to be attentive to their relationship with users followed through when they needed to become morally responsible to take action. They believed that since they were following laws that they were treating its users morally. Instead of informing the users that their data was being essentially breached, they hid behind the scenes and made small changes to the platform. The issue with just implicitly adding fixes for the direct problem that resulted from the Cambridge Analytica scandal

is they remained secretive on the issues with the users. They failed to properly inform them, and once the information broke, they reportedly send a notification to people whose data was breached, but many reported the notification disappeared after it was first viewed.

Facebook's lack of transparency in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal was immoral. Releasing the story would result in hurting their public perception, so they contained it for two years when it would have been in the users' best interest to inform them. Not doing so shows a lack of commitment to its users.

Competence

Competence is related to the third stage of care, which judges the quality of the care one gives based on a need. This is related to responsibility but moralizes actions. It ensures that one is taking appropriate actions to provide care. In this context, it moralizes the actions that Facebook took to provide care to its users. This will further prove Facebook's inability to provide care through their inability to take responsibility and justify their actions.

In regards to the timeline above, Facebook ordered Cambridge Analytica to delete the data they had harvested from the *thisisyourdigitallife* test. Although Cambridge Analytica claimed to have deleted the data, they did not (Kozlowska, 2018). Facebook believed them and did not ask for further proof. In regards to care, Facebook did not do enough to ensure the user data was deleted. Doing any more than putting in the formal request would have drawn more attention to the situation, which they did not want.

When the scandal went public, Facebook defended itself on the legality of the situation. They claimed that users technically agreed to share their data, and thus there was no "breach." They focused on the legality of the situation and not morality. This approach quickly backlashed,

so they pivoted to apologizing and promising to do better (Kozłowska, 2018). Their initial mindset of “we did nothing wrong” shows that they were never prepared to effectively provide the care they needed for its users. It was when they finally got the public perception and backlash (ex. dropping stock prices) that they finally understood the approach they needed to take with the public.

Even when they began to take the right approach to the public, the changes that they introduced into their platform did not fully introduce transparency to the privacy issues. They ineffectively informed users if their information was breached, which shows they still are not committed to taking responsibility as they do not want more backlash from those who were unaware of the situation. The platform changes dealt more with changing the location of the privacy settings, but to those who were unaware that they needed to change their privacy settings, they have yet to be informed (Kozłowska, 2018). The default loose privacy settings remain intact. Their initial change (as discussed in the responsibility subsection) of third-party applications not being able to access user's friend information without their consent was grandfathered in, thus existing applications were not bound by this. The actions taking by Facebook to provide care were relatively ineffective in addressing the main issue of transparency and thus shows Facebook's did not take the correct actions to provide care.

Responsiveness

The fourth and final stage of care deals with correctly realizing the position of others and the role that dynamics have within the relationship. Facebook is a large and rich company that has a lot of control over social media. Facebook has access to great legal advice and using this, was able to craft lengthy and technical user privacy agreements that, even if a user tries to read,

would be incomprehensible. Using this imbalance of power, Facebook was able to leave their privacy settings loose to attract advertisement agencies to craft ads that target certain groups of people. Facebook intentionally provided little transparency towards protecting user data, which shows they used the power advantage to expose users for the information that is valuable to them (Kozłowska, 2018).

Facebook inappropriately used its power over its user base to misguide them in their intentions. The users trusted Facebook with their information and Facebook used that against them to strengthen their relationship with advertising agencies. Their disrespect towards the power imbalance once again shows they did not provide the appropriate amount of care within the situations, which culminated in the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

Conclusion

Facebook's treatment of its users leading up to and during the Cambridge Analytica scandal was immoral through the lens of care ethics. Throughout Tronto's four stages of care, Facebook failed to comply with the ethical components of attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness. These four ethical components provide a basis for providing care in relationships. The actions taken by Facebook showed a disregard for the care they owed its users. Instead, they focused on strengthening their relationship with advertisers at the user's expense. This case highlights the differences between acting morally and legally, as Facebook claiming they did nothing wrong was only true on legal standing. Their actions show they were unable to morally provide the appropriate amount of care to its users which resulted in the Cambridge Analytica scandal. In designing their platform, they should allow for maximum

transparency with its users so they can properly protect their information and have knowledge of the risks that come with using the platform.

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