Noah Hutchinson
JOUR 4270
Professor Skinner-Lucker
4/21/2019

<center>Social Media Ethics and Rights</center>

My experience

The Cambridge Analytica scandal shook up the word of social media and has extended its reach beyond just the realm of liking and sharing. As a rather young professional and novice to the digital media industry, I have a rather unique viewpoint on the situation than some of my other peers and partners. While I most certainly lived through the effects of mass data mining and privacy breaches like the Cambridge Analytica crisis, I haven't necessarily been fully immersed in the actions as they were taking place. As someone who's born in Generation Z, or iGen as we have been named by generations above, I've grown with social media ever since I began growing as an individual. Social media was as much of a tool to connect with others as it was a tool to reflect on myself and explore my own interests.

However, as much as social media has been ingrained in my way of life for as long as I can remember, from my experience, myself and my fellow iGen's are very responsive to trends and popularities for the different communities that live among the various platforms. Instagram is a gallery of the lives we wished we all lived, or in my case, all the trendy foods I wish I had. Twitter is for the everyday ranting, life updates, and sharing of things that make us laugh. And Facebook is for our parents - the one app that we just have to stay connected with our extended family or our favorite former school teachers. So despite being completely entrenched with the 2016 election and social media as a whole, I never personally experienced the data mining happening an app just a few clicks over that would redefine the state of social media and the fashion in which we connect with one another.

The situation

The scandal began back in 2014 with a psychological survey created by Aleksandr Kogan where the user logged in with Facebook, completed the survey, and earned a little bit of money. And as simple and seemingly ordinary it may seem, as the survey was dispersed across Facebook the simple quiz gave access to over 87 million Facebook profiles including personal information, and demographic and psychographic information that would be used by the political strategy firm Cambridge Analytica of which ties back to the Trump campaign. And as big as it may seem, that's only the tip of the iceberg. According to *The New York Times* Facebook is still in the negotiation phases with the Federal Trade Commision, or FTC, where fines could reach the highest in history.

In a piece written by Cecilia King of *The Times:* "Some F.T.C. officials have pressed for maximum penalties because of several new reports of potential privacy breaches since the start of the investigation. The agency can seek up to $41,000 for each violation found by the agency. In the case of Cambridge Analytica, 87 million people were affected." Meaning that if the FTC seeks maximum penalties and decides to count each person affected as a violation, Facebook could face charges up to 2.74 trillion dollars - 19,000 times Facebook's 2018 evaluation of 138.3 million. While chances of the commision deciding on a financial penalty of that magnitude are very slim since the highest fine so far is $22.5 million against Google for violating an agreement to protect consumer data, it begs the question as to why corporations aren't taking more responsibility and precautionary steps to prevent a scandal of this significance.

The response

In April of 2018 Facebook's CEO and Founder, Mark Zuckerberg, appeared before the Senate Judiciary Committee as well as two additional Congressional bodies to discuss the scandal and further elaborate on Facebook and data privacy. The message was clear: Facebook needs to do more to protect users. Several lawmakers set the bar for the Zuckerberg stating that if he can't implement better privacy protection precautions, Congress will mandate it by legislation. However, outside of some stern speeches from Senators and the idealized vision for Facebook from Zuckerberg, the public's main takeaway was a series of memes that flooded the internet in the hours after the hearing. From Zuckerberg's robotic and dull facial reactions to basic questions asked by numerous lawmakers that made it appear they didn't understand the concept and workings of Facebook or social media in general, the magnitude of the scandal was lost. While, the message that everyone on Capitol Hill wants regulate Facebook may not have resonated with everyone, Zuckerberg heard it loud and clear.

Following the hearings, on March 21, 2018, Mark Zuckerberg posted a blog on the Facebook Newsroom starting by stating "Protecting people's information is the most important thing we do at Facebook." Additionally, Facebook layed out six points in their plan to restore trust among users and cracking down on platform abuse:

1. Investigate all apps that had access to large amounts of information before we changed our platform in 2014 to reduce data access…
2. We will tell people affected by apps that have misused their data.
3. If someone hasn't used an app within the last three months, we will turn off the app's access to their information.
4. Reduce the data that an app can request without app review to include only name, profile photo and email address.
5. Encourage people to manage the apps they use.
6. Reward people who find vulnerabilities.

The problem

While these points may seem like a solid direction forward, the push for stricter privacy policies implemented by legislation from Congress still lingers over Facebook's head. However, upon further research, it has become more clear that it would have taken more than additional privacy laws to prevent the Cambridge Analytica scandal in the first place.

In wake of the scandal, many privacy advocates saw a perfect opportunity to grab their virtual pitchforks and demand for stricter laws. And while it is sensible to call for change after 87 million people's privacy was breached, Daniel Castro, an opinion columnist from *The Hill* points out that more regulation wouldn't have made a difference in the first place. To those that desire to reflect the stricter privacy policies of Europe, Casto calls attention to the fact that "the European Union (EU) has long bragged that its privacy rules are superior to those in the United States, yet Cambridge Analytica, a London-based firm, is the company at the heart of the controversy, and it was already subject to EU regulations." Additionally, sacrificing the freedoms of countless Americans doesn't necessarily mean that companies will abide by ethical standards. Castro equated the whole situation to another breach of trust back in 2015 by stating, "When Volkswagen cheated on its emissions tests, the solution was not to raise emission standards, but rather to ensure regulators hold companies to account for bad behavior."

All of this to say, there is a better way. But it's up to both the company and the user to ensure that social media isn't plagued with scandals of mistrust, but instead unites all people.

The solution
  Up until this point, I've discussed the scandal itself, how Facebook has responded, and how higher powers that have oversight on large scale companies like this have pushed for the social media giant to bring in a new era of reform. And while the tendency to demand stricter privacy policies have merit, it shouldn't be our first step towards creating a more equitable and sustainable social media market.While I'm not a digital security expert by any means, after some further research and responses from professionals in the field, I've compiled a list of a few solutions to better protect the integrity of our data moving forward:
- Set a limit on large scale data mining
- Require a more transparent set of rules for 3rd parties
- Promotion of blockchain social media among social media users
- Coalition of data firms to create a standard across the industry

  The first point stems from my personal experience as a digital native. It's no secret that free services must make their money somehow, and often it's through data mining. While it has long been played off as a way to create a more personalized experience for the user, we're no dummies. And while it is true that the rapid progression of technology has allowed for a more customizable journey through the media we consume, there needs to be a limit. As our world transitions onto the digital dimension, there must be a line between personal and public information.
  Yes, we as users and consumers of social media waive our rights to a completely private life, but that doesn't mean we should have to waive our right to reduce our lives and personalities to numbers in a series of code. The world is shiting and there need to be policies set in place that protects this merging of the reality and digital dimensions. This may mean that media companies are forced to show more ads or find other sources of revenue, but it's a solution worth pursuing.

  While part of Facebook's response to the scandal included investigating apps and ensuring that apps are unknowingly accessing users' data, however, that needs to be taken a step further. By requiring social media companies to make clear what apps are mining their data and how much of their information is waived, the responsibility will shift to the user. Ultimately data collection is a necessary evil for social media sites to operate in their current state, however, the consumer should always have the option and apps must require consent after providing a transparent flow of information. This part is up to the companies. While it's one thing to say that Facebook will review an app before allowing the collection of personal information, the process and selection of apps also needs to be made clear. By simply streamlining the process directly user, skipping the middleman, the decision, and ultimately the power, is given back to the consumer.

  <u>Blockchain</u> approaches technology from a decentralized and distributed method. No centralized servers, no middleman, just the user and their data. Currently blockchain technology is used in peer to peer networks, providing a secure and private transfer of communication. While the platforms are new and mainly centered around the exchange and investment of bitcoin, there is a future for expanding its reach to platforms more resemblance of today's popular social media.

A platform that is the perfect example of giving the power back to the user is Howdoo. Calling itself "the world's first all-purpose social media," the startup currently has almost 70,000 signups. As a combination of Youtube, Instagram, Twitter, and all our other favorites, Howdoo aims to create a space powered by the blockchain, and controlled by the user.

While this point doesn't necessarily tie back into the Cambridge Analytica scandal, it still provides some insight into the future of a more private and user-centric social media. I still have a lot to learn about all the moving parts of blockchain, but I'm confident the professionals at Facebook and Google could find a way to incorporate decentralized and distributed methods like the blockchain.

While giant companies like Facebook and Google are at the epicenter of discussions about the future of data, one entity that too many often forget is the data firms themselves. While the platforms may act as a tool to collect personal information, it's the 3rd party organizations that are actually executing it.

Georgetown University's Institute of Politics and Public Service has realized the power of these firms and has begun organizing a coalition of sorts of the nations most powerful data firms. Tim Sparapani, a Georgetown fellow who is overseeing the group, spoke to *Wired* saying, "These are the firms that power all of the elections in America, and so my hope was if you can get them in a room and get them to understand the importance of the data they're using and to self-regulate, you could achieve a dramatic improvement on behalf of voters." And while the Federal Trade Commission has been pushing Congress to create more strict oversight to better regulate data brokers since 2012, there needs to be just as strong of a grip on the data collection firms as there is on the Facebooks of today's environment.

Conclusion

If anything could be more clear, it's that there is a clear and present problem casting its shadow upon nearly every American. And while there are countless ways for companies and users and Congress and official commissions to tackle the issue, the main message at hand should be transparency. In this new world of reality infused with today's digital dimension, every entity involved in the social media world needs to be more clear with how data is being collected and used. If users overwhelmingly decry the mining of their data, then the industry will have to restructure the way it is built. But continuing to deny the consumer any sort of power over their own information will ultimately lead to the death of social media as we know it. Ethics and rights go hand in hand and it's time that social media returns to its original purpose: to create a community of people from every corner of the globe to achieve the unthinkable and unite together to create a better tomorrow. In the words of Mark Zuckerberg himself, "there's more work to do."