

Ethical Dilemmas About Social Network Sites – A View From Romania**Valentina Marinescu**

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Етични дилеми относно сайтовете в социалните мрежи – поглед от Румъния**Валентина Маринеску**

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Авторът няма известен конфликт на интереси, който да разкрива.

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Abstract

In contemporary society, the ubiquity of technology has led, somewhat inevitably, to a series of theoretical and practical concerns related to the problems caused by the security of personal data in an interconnected world. The case of “Cambridge Analytica” - Facebook indicated serious legal and practical issues in protecting users’ personal data. This paper presents the previously mentioned phenomenon, its impact on the Romanian population, and the degree of information of Romanian citizens on this subject. From a methodological point of view, the method used was the survey based on a questionnaire, applied to a sample of 220 subjects in April-June 2022. The analysis results indicate that most respondents (88%) consider online data theft personally as a crime. Although 54% of respondents stated that they do not agree with the use of personal data without their consent, 51.1% of respondents considered that they do not agree that the legislation be amended to further protect against the misuse of personal data by online companies. Starting from the analysis of the obtained results, the present paper concludes in favor of public awareness and information campaigns regarding the ethical and legal measures necessary for the protection of the personal data of internet users.

Keywords: social network sites, ethics, public opinion, personal data protection

Резюме

В съвременното общество повсеместното разпространение на технологиите неизбежно доведе до поредица от теоретични и практически опасения, свързани с проблеми, причинени от сигурността на личните данни в един взаимосвързан свят. Случаят на “Cambridge Analytica” - Facebook посочи сериозни правни и практически проблеми относно защитата на личните данни на потребителите. Този случай представя споменатия по-горе феномен, неговото въздействие върху румънското население и степента на информираност на румънските граждани по този въпрос. От методологична гледна точка използваният метод е анкетно проучване, базирано на въпросник, приложен към извадка от 220 субекта през април-юни 2022 г. Резултатите от анализа показват, че повечето респонденти (88%) считат кражбата на онлайн данни за престъпление. Въпреки че 54% от анкетираните заявяват, че не са съгласни с използването на лични данни без тяхно съгласие, 51,1% от анкетираните считат, че не са съгласни законодателството да бъде изменено за допълнителна защита срещу злоупотреба с лични данни от онлайн компании. Започвайки от анализа на получените резултати, настоящата статия гравитира в полза на общественото осведомяване и на

информационни кампании, свързани с етичните и законови мерки, необходими за защита на личните данни на интернет потребителите.

Ключови думи: социални мрежи, етика, обществено мнение и защита на личните данни

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In today's increasingly digitized society, individuals and organizations must face increasingly diverse and powerful challenges to protect their data and deal with online security threats. The so-called "Facebook-Cambridge Analytica Scandal" was one of the most widely publicized of 2018-2019 following media revelations that more than 87 million people had their data collected and studied without their prior knowledge. There is an agreement regarding the use of personal data (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018). Furthermore, this data was used to produce messages tailored to specific "target groups" intended to influence people's everyday action intentions, from the decision to purchase goods to the intention to vote (Kitchgaessner, 2017).

In this article, we present both the "Facebook-Cambridge Analytica Scandal" and the impact it had on the Romanian population and the degree of information of Romanian citizens on this subject.

The general framework

The company "Cambridge Analytica" was founded in January 2015, with its registered office in Westferry Circus, London, and having only one member of staff, its director and later CEO Alexander James Ashburner Nix (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018). As a special mention, its "parent" company was "SCL Group" established in 2013 by Nigel Oakes (Richterich, 2018). The company had branches in London, New York and Washington. It was founded at the suggestion of some businessmen belonging to the American conservative party, and the initial investment was about 15 million dollars (Manokha, 2018).

According to the studies dedicated to this company (Kanakia, Shenoy & Shah, 2019), to have a cover in the use of data, "Cambridge Analytica" used the academic work of Michal Kosinski, a member of the Center of Psychometrics of the University of Cambridge. During his time at the university, Kosinski developed, together with his colleagues, a profiling system using general online data of users of this social network (especially of Facebook users). The main purpose of this research was to demonstrate that people can be very easily manipulated by activating specific mechanisms at the level of individual psychology (Richterich, 2018). The collection of demographic data helped Cambridge Analytica researchers understand consumer behavior and the types of activities they engage in online without the users being aware and informed that they are study subjects (Richterich, 2018). The results were later used by the company which popularized the fact that its analyses were correct for 44 election campaigns (Richterich, 2018). It is about the electoral campaigns in the United States of

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America, including the electoral campaign of Donald Trump (Richterich, 2018), or the famous campaign for the exit of Great Britain from the European Union - “Brexit” (Risso, 2018).

As some existing studies show (Illing, 2018), “Cambridge Analytica” used the data of Facebook users far more than any previous application used in presidential campaigns, and Alexander Nix stated on this occasion that (Illing, 2018):

“(....) Today in the United States we have about four or five thousand data points on each individual. So we shape the personality of every adult in the United States (....)”.

In its work “Cambridge Analytica” used the “Big Five” personality model as a starting point, refining “behavioural microtargeting”. In this way, the services offered by various applications were individually directed to the benefit of its customers in the political arena, governments, or different companies that needed a better and more detailed view of their “target” audience (Henriksen, 2019). User personality data was obtained from continuously conducted opinion polls. For each customer, the firm narrowed down segments based on the right personality style. The data was updated through monthly surveys that contained different information – from political preferences to the methods by which everyday decisions were made. At the same time, depending on the goods and products chosen by the user during opinion polls, “Cambridge Analytica” knew who he would vote for, because many polls had a beneficiary from the political sphere (Henriksen, 2019).

Scientists, especially specialists in political science or electoral communication, however, have long expressed skepticism about the certainty and effectiveness of the data obtained by “Cambridge Analytica” through the microtargeting method (Henriksen, 2019). According to these critics (Hersh & Schaffner, 2013), access to digital data will not provide valuable information, the value of individuals' answers is short-lived, and opinions and appreciations can be changed according to voters' preferences (ur Rehman, 2019).

We can say that the involvement of “Cambridge Analytica” was not exclusively in electoral campaigns in the US or Europe. The company also had an important activity in electoral campaigns in countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. For example, the company's services were used by politicians from India (the two big political parties “BJP” and “Congress”), Kenya (this being a secret campaign) (González et al., 2019), or Mexico (a country where the mode of operation was similar to that of USA) (González et al., 2019).

However, as Nix himself stated, the so-called *modus operandi* differed from one region to another, depending on “the quality of the voters” (González et al., 2019).

The use and collection of personal data without the permission of those involved has raised many ethical issues regarding the privacy of personal data. Outside the US, the method of obtaining data used by “Cambridge Analytica” is often considered illegal (González et al., 2019), and it must conform to strict data privacy laws (Vladeck, 2018).

Regarding the use of its users’ data, Facebook stated that at the time of registration on the online platform, users agreed that their data may be retrieved and used for other purposes (Wilson, 2019). On the other hand, the company stated that the statement given by CEO Alexander Nix is inconsistent with the policies of Facebook and that there was never such an agreement between the two companies, the data collected by “Cambridge Analytica” being improperly collected from nearly 50 million users (Persily, 2017).

The “Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal”, which was heavily publicized in 2018-2019, had immediate negative effects on the decline in the American stock exchange of Facebook company (Wilson, 2019). At the same time, the Federal Trade Commission opened an investigation into Facebook’s privacy practices (Persily, 2017). In addition, “Cambridge Analytica” has been investigated by both the US and UK authorities regarding how it collects private information and its intended use (Vladeck, 2018).

The founders of “Cambridge Analytica” revealed that all the collected information was used exclusively for electoral purposes to influence the popular vote.

The founder of the company Facebook had to give statements before the Congress of the United States of America regarding the safety of user data (González et al., 2019). Thus there was a document signed by parliamentarians that stated the following facts (González et al., 2019):

“The hearing will examine the collection and sale of personal information from more than 50 million Facebook users without their notification or consent and in violation of Facebook policy.”

Mark Zuckerberg took full responsibility, telling the US House Commerce Committee the following (González et al., 2019):

“I realized how big our responsibilities are and it was a serious error.”

In addition, he also stated that he would act in court against “Cambridge Analytica” and would do everything possible to have the existing data within this company about Facebook users deleted (González et al., 2019).

Zuckerberg further emphasized that (González et al., 2019):

“I want to update the data about the situation with the company “Cambridge Analytica”, including the measures we have already taken and will take. We have a responsibility to protect user data, and if we can't, we don't deserve to serve you. (...) I have taken measures to understand what happened and to ensure that it will not happen again. The good news is that the most important measures to avoid the repetition of these things were already taken a few years ago. But we also made mistakes, we still have things to do and we need to step up the measures (...) To avoid abusive applications, in 2014 we announced the modification of the entire platform to significantly limit the amount of data such applications can access (...)”.

The research questions of this article were:

RQ1: What were the opinions of the Romanian public about personal data protection in the online environment?

RQ2: How did the Romanian audience assess the “Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal”?

Method and materials

The present research used a quantitative methodology. The research project was based on the survey method through the questionnaire.

The survey was conducted online in the months of April-May 2022 and the sample of respondents had a final volume of 220 people. The instrument for collecting the data – the questionnaire – had 25 questions and ten socio-demographical items.

Most of the respondents (89%) were young (18-30 years old) and came from the urban environment (88.7%).

Results

Data analysis indicates that all respondents included in the sample used Facebook. Other online social networks accessed by respondents were: Instagram (57.7% of users per total sample) and TikTok (39.4% of respondents included in the analysis).

Regarding the general time spent on the Internet in a day, we could find that most of the respondents spent on average between two and four hours, while there is also a very low category that spent only one-hour surfing on the internet.

According to the data obtained, most respondents preferred to access the Internet from their personal phones or smartphones. Thus, the smartphone was used daily by 130 subjects from the total sample (91.54%). In the immediate next place was the daily access to

the Internet from the laptop (58.45% of the respondents), while at the opposite pole was the tablet, which was used daily by only 13.79% of the subjects.

Regarding the period since the subjects used the Internet, they declared in a proportion of 21.83% that they have been surfing the Internet since 2000, while at the opposite pole were those who used the Internet from 1992-1997, this period being mentioned by 4.92% of subjects.

Regarding the activities that the respondents carry out on the Internet, the answers were among the most diverse. From the perspective of the reasons behind accessing the Internet, the survey identified as the main reasons sending and receiving daily e-mails (52.81% of the subjects) and making online purchases several times a month (51.40%).

Searching for health-related information a few times a month (47.18%) and using the Internet a few times a month to search for a job (35.21%).

To the question “How often do you access Facebook?” the results showed that 94.9% of the respondents accessed the Facebook application daily. Regarding the motivation of accessing Facebook, the first option, the majority, was to facilitate the approach, to meet virtually with other people. The second place in this case was the verification of the personal wall. Other reasons given by respondents were: “*promoting products*”, “*watching what friends are doing*”, and “*relaxing*”.

Most respondents said they knew about the “Cambridge Analytica-Facebook” scandal as a result of its media coverage. A surprising result appeared in the case of the answers to the question “What do you think about this topic?”. In this case, the opinions were divided, some of the respondents (38.1%) considered that it is actually a distraction from other issues, and another part of them (27.3%) still considered it an important issue and agreed with its media coverage. It was also interesting that almost a quarter (25.2%) of the sample was not interested in the subject. Among the justifications found in this last case, we were able to record:

“I knew this for a long time, now the information was just given on the face”;

“Such companies should not be allowed”;

“It should be illegal especially to use these techniques in the political field.”

Regarding the media sources from where they learned information about this case, 32% of respondents stated that they learned about this scandal (“Cambridge Analytica-Facebook”) from television and a similar percentage (32.9%) from the online environment.

When asked, “In the wake of this scandal, have you noticed any changes in social media policy?” the responses showed that almost half of the respondents noticed the existence of the notices that any website/application displays at the time of access and regarding the acceptance of personal data processing.

Of those who said they noticed these notifications, 38.4% said they ignored all the open “windows” and clicked on what was available to make them disappear, and 12.4% said they didn't notice either. a change in this regard. At the same time, according to the data collected, 51.1% of respondents stated that they had read the new privacy notices introduced in the case of social networks.

As expected, our data indicated that most respondents consider themselves bothered that their data could be used at some point without prior consent. At the same time, the majority of respondents agree with limiting virtual freedom to protect personal data, which is in itself a contradiction.

Conclusions

Our study examined how people related to the so-called “Cambridge Analytica-Facebook Scandal”, how they understood online privacy, and whether they accepted the new rules imposed on online communication.

Our data indicated that, in general, most people were aware of the “Cambridge Analytica-Facebook Scandal” and the attempts to influence people's political preferences.

Despite expressing concern about how online organizations may use data in the future, a large proportion of them agree with fencing off online freedom to protect personal identity.

The study has several limitations. The volume of the sample was very small and did not allow us to make generalizations. Another limitation refers to the internal structure of the sample which was made mainly of young people living in urban areas. We can also add a third limitation of the study, namely the national character of the sample which also did not allow us to make international comparisons.

Despite those above-mentioned shortcomings, we believe that our results indicated that people had become more and more aware of the ethical aspects involved in their activities in the online environment. From here, in our opinion, further researches are needed to further examine the ethical aspects of online activities, and more attempts to establish new ways to encourage users to protect themselves more actively online are needed.

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