The Facebook privacy scandal of 2018 was the culmination of Facebook’s infringement on user information. This issue ignited when the political consulting and strategic communication firm, Cambridge Analytica, harvested personal information from 87 million people in connection with the social media platform in order to “build profiles of individual voters and their political preferences to best target advertising and sway voter sentiment.” Digging out the roots of this appalling scandal, this paper examines Facebook’s privacy violations and argues for the importance of moral standards which should guide social medial platforms; through this connection, it offers a consequentialist perspective on why current practices violate both.

Daniel Solove, professor at George Washington University Law School, states that privacy encompasses the “control over personal information, freedom from surveillance [. . .] and protection from searches.” In other words, this implicit right, though excluded under probable cause and legitimate circumstances, allows people to decide what information about their lives is given to the public sector. Also, it liberates everyone from the prying eyes and unwarranted searches of other individuals and organizations.

A deeper concern for this concept is depicted by William Shaw and Vincent Barry in Moral Issues in Business: 1

Both in the workplace and in general, our concern for privacy seems to have at least three dimensions to it. First, we want to control intimate or personal information about ourselves and not permit it to be freely available to everyone [. . .] Second, we wish to keep certain thoughts, feelings, and behaviors free from scrutiny, monitoring, or observation of strangers. We don’t want our private selves to be on public display. Third, we value being able to make certain personal decisions autonomously. Privacy’s influence can be implied directly from these dimensions. Having control over personal information is necessary; not everyone should be in the position to know all the ins and outs of others. In this sense, privacy can promote safety and eliminate bias, but without it, unlimited numbers of people can acquire and disclose information, regardless of intent. This could potentially ruin lives and promote an unsafe and unfair environment in the workplace and beyond.

Furthermore, people wish to prevent having all aspects of their private lives on public display. A right to stay away from public scrutiny creates a fair system that supports an autonomous environment where people can be independent decision makers, free from illegitimate influences in all aspects of life.


The debate over this right, however, has been fueled by disagreement over how far people or companies can go before they illegitimately violate someone’s privacy. In regards to social media platforms, such as Facebook, it is important that any form of data harvesting is done with the informed consent of all users involved. This concept can be broken down into two parts: deliberation and free choice. Deliberation deals with giving out information that is readily understood by the users, and free choice is the voluntary and willing agreement to use privacy-invading procedures. With this in mind, any violation of deliberation and free choice would violate informed consent and create illegitimacy in using personal information.4

Another concept to consider are the moral standards of personality tests that online platforms can use to gain information. This is crucial because the consequences of these tests can strongly affect the well-being of humans who take the test. The concealment of facts, in particular, is an underlying issue; online platforms can potentially suppress the use and intent of the information gathered. According to William and Barry, these tests exist to “simplify the complexities of business life by reducing the amount of decision-making involved in determining whether an individual has the personal characteristics appropriate for [certain decisions].” However, if the people taking such a test are not fully knowledgeable of how their information is being passed on and who is affected, informed consent cannot be fulfilled. Therefore, it is in the best interest of online platforms and their users to be on the same page and exchange information in a way that promotes positive results and a complete understanding in accordance to the consequentialist perspective.

When looking at the source of the Facebook privacy scandal through this theoretical lens, many red flags pop up in relation to upholding of privacy and moral standards. In particular, the two concepts were violated in the passing of information gathered from the online personality tests that were offered to users on their platform in 2014:

Approximately 270,000 people used a Facebook app to take a personality test for academic research purposes. Because of Facebook’s terms of service and its application programming interface (API) at the time, however, the app’s developer, Aleksandr Kogan, was also allowed to collect information about users’ Facebook friends (a function it shut down in 2015).5

Even though Facebook made sure to ask users to grant permissions to apps, and the terms and conditions mentioned that the users’ friends could authorize access to their data, Facebook failed to regulate what Kogan did with the information afterwards.

As mentioned before, Kogan collected information from over 80 million users and gave it to an additional party, Cambridge Analytica, for political research purposes. Not only did Facebook not know of this action, but the quiz-takers and their friends had “no way of knowing that their data was being harvested” in this way. This issue was brought to light on March 17, 2018 by The Guardian, a well-known British daily newspaper. As a result, Facebook and Cambridge Analytica threatened to sue for the publication of the story and defamation. Nevertheless, the Federal Trade Commission, established to protect consumers from deceptive advertising, opened the case three days later, leading to public awareness of both parties’ egregious actions.6

Clearly, the consequences of this scandal were anything but positive. As defined in Moral Issues in Business, consequentialist theories state that “the moral rightness of an action is determined solely by the results. If the consequences are good, then the act is right; if they are bad, the act is wrong.” Consequentialists determine what is right by weighing the ratio of good to bad that an action will produce.7 Since the result of Facebook and Cambridge Analytica failing to ensure privacy and informed consent to the fullest degree was detrimental to

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4 Shaw and Berry, 440.
5 Shaw and Berry, 442.
7 Tuttle, 8.
9 Shaw and Barry, “Normative,” 56.
everyone involved, the act itself can be seen as a wrongdoing. Moreover, utilitarians (important to consequentialism) would support this claim by adding that both companies failed to provide the “greatest balance of good over bad by everyone affected by their actions” and thus prevented the maximization of overall happiness in the situation.¹⁰

These views may be debatable, but they can be supported in light of the negative effects Kogan and Cambridge Analytica had on Facebook users. The users, for one, had their right of privacy taken away the second their information was handed to the political research company. There was no way of knowing that their information was being passed on to this party. Therefore, Facebook and the two other companies failed to fulfill their duty to allow users to deliberate their options. Additionally, the users never voluntarily or willingly agreed to have their information used for political purposes. Free choice was thus abolished in the process as well.

Correspondingly, consumer outrage entered the scene, making Facebook fall to its knees and face a harsh conviction: “Facebook shares fell 7%, wiping almost $40 billion off the company’s value, and the company posted a series of subsequent losses as the scandal continued unfolding. By the end of March, Facebook had lost more than $60 billion in market capitalization.”¹¹ These events illustrate that everyone was affected negatively by the breach of users’ trust. A wrong action had bad consequences and led to a minimization of happiness. The reduction in Facebook’s wealth and reputation was a supporting factor. The users in the scandal were unhappy as well as others who sympathized with them, and did not want to continue supporting the social media platform.

Adding fuel to the fire, Cambridge Analytica faced “burning” consequences of their own, which led to the SCL Group (owner of Cambridge Analytica) dissolving on May 2, 2018. Two weeks later, the FBI and Justice Department investigated Cambridge Analytica in regards to the data harvesting and potential financial crimes during the scandal.¹² They, too, received no easy way out; their breach of privacy law and their immoral crimes needed to be put to justice for the sake of those who had their sense of autonomy and trust destroyed.

Even though there could be many other logical theories as to what determines right from wrong, the consequentialist and utilitarian views are supported by the example of this scandal. Prior to the platform’s wrongdoing, users were apparently happy with Facebook’s services until their information was used in a way that extended beyond the boundaries of the terms and conditions of the personality tests in which they participated. Unfortunately, this breach of trust caused a minimization of happiness and had a negative impact on the majority of those involved. Terrible consequences followed.

Privacy and moral standards were at the forefront of this scandal, showing the importance of people’s right to control how their information is used in a deliberate and voluntary fashion as well as the necessity to consider how certain actions can have a critical impact on others’ well-being. Without a knowledge of these important aspects and the perspective of consequentialism, companies like Facebook and Cambridge Analytica will fail to learn from their mistakes and continue to detrimentally affect consumers in this technological age.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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