

“Commentary to ‘Turning Virtual Public Spaces into Laboratories’”

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[371] In Bond et. al.’s 61-million-person experiment, the behavior of Facebook users was observed to determine whether political mobilization messages shared through social media can influence voting behavior. The authors raise two distinct ethical concerns with the study: that it may have inappropriately manipulated the subjects without their informed consent; and that it implicated legitimate privacy interests. While I think they are right to raise concerns about big data studies generally, the Bond study does not appear to be ethically problematic in these ways, though there may be a substantial concern with the study that the authors do not focus on.

The authors suggest that Bond inappropriately manipulated the 61 million subjects without letting them express a willingness to participate. But it is unclear why such an expression is needed. The study showed a large ‘social message’ group how many total people on Facebook clicked ‘I voted’ on Election Day, how many of their Facebook friends did, and a random selection of faces of some of these friends. An ‘informational message’ group could click ‘I voted’ and see the total number of people on Facebook who indicated they voted, but did not see pictures of Facebook friends who said they voted. Anyone in the social message or informational message groups who clicked ‘I voted’ would know that their click was being counted, and those in the social message group consented to having this information shared with their Facebook friends (which bears crucially on the ‘privacy’ claim that I discuss below) because the instructions were: “Click the ‘I Voted’ button to tell your friends you voted” (Bond et.al., Fig 1a). There was also a control group that received no message.

[372] It is true that the subjects were not aware they were being put in different groups for research purposes. One point of the study is to see whether I am more inclined to say I voted, and actually to vote (as voting records were checked as well), if I am aware my Facebook friends voted or that they would see that I said I voted. The results indicate the answer is yes. Participants were manipulated by being put in different groups that gave them a different experience. But why is this troubling? The authors hint at a broad objection to the very project of social science when they observe that human beings are not “cells and atoms” but “active agents” who “might protest or oppose when their social life is explored.” But we should ask if in *this* case such protests would be reasonable. It would not be unreasonable for a utility company to conduct an anonymized study of energy usage of its customers, even though this data might reveal what choices one makes in one’s private life; if to have value the study required usage data of most or all its customers, then requiring informed consent might be unreasonable. Of course if the study were controlled by lowering the cost of energy usage for one group as against another in order to study the elasticity of demand for energy, that would raise an ethical concern about fairness. But the authors do not explain why being put in one or the other of the three groups used in the Bond study would be unfair.

There would be ethical concerns if the study implicated legitimate privacy interests. It

would be wrong if without my consent Facebook revealed whether I voted, let alone how I voted, or kept a database with that information. But that does not appear to be what happened. Bond et.al. used methods to ensure that identifying information was anonymized and destroyed the data after they completed the analysis; and users were informed that by clicking 'I voted' they would be sharing this information with their Facebook friends.

What privacy interest could be at stake even if information was not de-anonymized and was stored rather than destroyed? It is unlikely that reputational interests are at stake when it is revealed that one voted (as opposed to how one voted) though one might have an interest in not having others know that one did not vote. An unsecure database of names with dates of birth could contribute to identity theft, which would be a serious concern. Surely dignity interests are not at stake.

I can have a legitimate interest in controlling how I present myself to others, and informational privacy can be essential for protecting that interest. But the study did not clearly implicate this interest. Anyone who was invited to share information with Facebook friends was informed that clicking 'I Voted' would make this information available to these friends, and so one still had control over how one presents oneself to others. If I understand the study's design correctly, though, it might be problematic that people in the informational message group were instructed that by clicking 'I voted' they would be telling their friends when in fact their friends would not be informed that they in particular voted; to avoid [373] ambiguity the instruction for this group should have been to click 'I voted' to be included in the tally of all people who said they voted.

The authors are right to express concern insofar as Bond et.al. checked voting records to see whether Facebook users in fact voted. But so long as the data was truly anonymized, stored securely, and destroyed when no longer needed, there is no reason to be concerned that this data implicated privacy by transgressing context-relative information norms. That I agree to tell my Facebook friends that I voted does not mean I agree to tell the government, or social scientists, or anyone else that I did; but such identifying information apparently was not made available. The authors, though, ultimately are right to express concern with big data studies because there is a risk that in the future social scientists will be less than diligent in anonymizing and securing sensitive data.

One way that Bond et.al. may have been inappropriately manipulative as social scientists is that their study might actually have affected the outcome of the Congressional election of Nov. 10, 2012 by getting 282,000 more people to vote. This may be a stronger illustration of the 'humans are not atoms' line of argument, to which I am not entirely unsympathetic. Here the concern is that the study undermines individual autonomy, as distinct from privacy.

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