

Data Mining: Do you know where and how your personal information is used?

Unit Rationale

Many people have no idea how their personal information is used, shared or even sold. Students in my communication classes frequently express amazement that Facebook shares their information as part of its business model (Seitel, 2014). While several students point out that advertisements for products they searched “follow” them to social media forums and other websites, there is little or no understanding of how this process works. This assignment and associated discussion increases students’ understanding and facilitates a critique of the ethics involved in data mining processes.

I propose that we need to not only generate awareness about how data mining works, but we also need to ask our students to evaluate the practices. This assignment and related lesson encourage students to: (1) learn about data mining practices; (2) develop an opinion based on facts and case studies; (3) explore how marketing practices differ from university research guidelines; (4) evaluate the ethics of covert marketing practices for specific contexts.

By incorporating data mining/covert marketing with a discussion on ethical practices, the lesson provides a multi-dimensional view that encourages students to critique the benefits and pitfalls of targeted marketing, ethical research, and ideas related to informed consent.

First, we consider some of the benefits of companies using data. Many students extol the advances of technology and seemingly free services like Facebook and Twitter as well as easy access to rewards, such as bonus coupons or incentives associated with loyalty cards. However, these services are not entirely “free” because you are involved in an exchange process in which you provide data, and in exchange the company “rewards” you for this transaction (Milne, Bahl & Rohm, 2008). These transactions are called covert marketing because customers are often unaware of the processes and cannot control whether the company sells their personal information to data brokers (Milne et al., 2008).

When students consider their personal experiences, such as experiences with the advertisements that follow them from websites to social media platforms, it gives them an opportunity to consider the ethics of such practices. Should companies be allowed to essentially stalk a person on the Internet? What ethical guidelines should companies follow? For example, should companies be required to alert consumers to covert marketing practices? Some countries have opt-in policies instead of our opt-out policies; is this something the United States should consider? What can or should companies be able to do with this data? (Note: many students will not have a problem with companies following their every move, but others will, and this could create an interesting debate.)

Students familiar with ethical research guidelines may point out that most companies do not need informed consent to sell personal data to unknown entities. For example, a dating website, OKCupid.com sells private user information, such as sexual habits, drug use and demographic information (Zwerdling, 2013, Oct. 1). Brick-and-mortar stores use

loyalty cards to better understand their customers' buying habits, lifestyle and potential future purchases (Duhigg, 2012; Zuckerkandel & Fox, 2013). Stores often combine the information gleaned from loyalty cards with personal information they purchase. For example, Target Corporation creates unique customer profiles by tracking purchases and buying demographic information from data brokers to develop specific customer profiles. Duhigg (2012) describes how one irate father berates a Target manager for sending his teenage daughter baby coupons, but later apologized when he learned his daughter was pregnant. This example and others encourage students to think about how much personal information companies can obtain.

Readings

1. First, ask students to read articles that address issues of data mining. This article tends to spark a good discussion:

Duhigg, C. (2012, Feb 19). Psst, you in aisle 5. *New York Times Magazine*, 30-37, 54-55,3.

Discussion Questions

- Does it surprise you that companies, like Target, can learn so much about you?
- Do you think there are life circumstances that should be private?
- Does this article raise any new ethical concerns? Please explain.
- Can you explain why this article connects habits and marketing practices?
- Does this article change any opinions you may have about store loyalty cards?

Milne, G., Bahl, S., & Rohm, A. (2008). Toward a framework for assessing covert marketing practices. *Journal Of Public Policy & Marketing*, 27(1), 57-62.

Discussion Questions

- Why do marketers use covert marketing practices?
- In what types of exchanges do consumers share information with companies?
- What are the potential benefits of covert marketing?
- What are the potential disadvantages, and can you think of any examples?
- At what point in the exchange process are consumers more willing to accept covert marketing?
- After reading this article, what is your opinion of covert marketing?

Chung, G., & Grimes, S. M. (2005). Data Mining the Kids: Surveillance and Market Research Strategies in Children's Online Games. *Canadian Journal Of Communication*, 30(4), 527-548.

Discussion Questions

- Should marketers be allowed to collect data on children?
- Is it acceptable to collect information on children if it's only in aggregate form (not individually identifiable)?
- Should companies be allowed to provide kids with virtual rewards for completing surveys or providing personal information?
- Should parents be better informed about the information their children share with companies? Are there steps that the government should take to help educate

- parents and children about these practices? Should the government enact stricter guidelines for companies?
- The article discusses different types of privacy. Can you explain the different definitions and how each definition relates to data mining for kids?
 - Should the language in privacy policies change? Please describe the types of changes you recommend.
 - If children today start using the Internet as toddlers, what type of information do you think will exist on them by the time they reach adulthood? Does it bother you that children and parents may give companies, such as the Mattel example, unlimited, irrevocable rights to children's personal information?

Enyon, Fry & Schroeder, (2012). Research design and tools for internet research. In Lee, R., Fielding, N. & Blank, G. (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Online Research Methods*. (pp. 58-78). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Discussion Questions

- What are some ethical issues that might arise if you are asked to conduct Internet research for a company or organization? How would you address them?
- What other considerations would you need to make? (i.e. what will you include/exclude? Potential problems? Potential advantages? Etc.)
- Do you think we need different ethical standards for the Internet? If so, what changes do you recommend?

How will you recruit your sample? What are the advantages & disadvantages?

Combine the above reading(s) with a chapter or article about research ethics. Below is an example: (Most textbooks have a chapter on ethics.)

Polonsky, M. & Waller, D. Chapter 5. *Designing and managing a research project: A business student's guide*. 2nd ed. (pp. 65-85). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Writing Assignment

Think Piece

Think Piece Defined

This is a two-three page, double-spaced paper in which you critically analyze a topic. (Note: You need a minimum of two full pages.) This will require that you think about both positive and negative aspects of a topic, and potentially use outside resources, such as other readings, your experiences and the experiences of others to add depth to your response. This paper should include well-developed paragraphs that adhere to all of the standards of written English, and the paper should acknowledge sources in APA style.

Hint: This paper is purposely titled "think piece" to convey the need to not just summarize the material but to examine the topic and develop your own ideas that you can support with sources.

Goals of this assignment:

- Provide you with the opportunity to think critically about organizational research
- Read about issues/problems that researchers face and give you an opportunity to consider potential ethical issues
- Individually critique research methods

The readings this week all address potential ethical issues in different ways. While the specifics of each piece vary, they all share real or potential concerns related to participation. As you write your response to the readings, please consider *some or all* of the following questions: (These questions are meant to help you begin to think about key issues, but they can also be used as a jumping off point. You do not need to answer all of these questions in your response.)

- As a researcher, do you need to ask participants to engage in your research project? Are there exceptions? If so, please describe any nuances particular to the researcher/participant relationship that differ from corporate/consumer relationships.
- As a consumer, do you have any concerns about how the information you share (or don't share) with companies and organizations is used? Should there be ethical restrictions that inhibit how your information is used or shared? What should they be? Should this be a voluntary self-regulation process or something more formal (government, industry organization, etc.)?
- What ethical concerns do you have as a researcher or potential researcher? In other words, how will you protect participants in your future research? What issues arise as you consider this question? (Remember, this is a complex area so you don't have to have all of the answers, but you should show that you examined the issue to the best of your ability.)

Class Discussion

I start the conversation by showing this video:

Zuckerkandel, M. (Producer), & Fox, B. (Director). (2013). Hot on Your Trail: Privacy, Your Data, and Who Has Access to It. [Internet Video]. US: The Center for Investigative Reporting. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/series/228834185/your-digital-trail>

Discussion Questions:

- Do you think Google and other sites know too much about you?
- In what ways, do you think companies should be able to use this information? Should they sell it or share it with the government?
- What right(s) do you have to privacy?
- Is privacy an outdated concept? Do you think we need a new definition of privacy?

Students discuss their reactions to the video, response to the papers, and we discuss issues related to informed consent. Additionally, you can use the discussion questions

listed under each reading above to prompt students to think critically about the readings. If you have a small class, you may want to divide them into groups and ask them to work on responses to several of the questions, which can later be shared as part of the class discussion.

Additionally, I tie this into a discussion about research in a university setting, and I introduce students to the instructional review board (IRB) and specific cases involving informed consent. This may or may not be appropriate for all classes, but it seems to enrich the discussion because students can consider ethics in a broader context. After our discussion, I ask my graduate students to complete a portion of the IRB training offered through the CITI Program.

I use the following rubric to grade the Think Piece assignment.

Grading Rubric

	Excellent	Good	Average	Weak
Presentation- correctly formatted and free of imperfections (smudges, handwritten notes, etc.)				
Courteous- addresses people and organizations in a professional manner				
Accuracy- names are spelled correctly, dates verified, etc.				
Appropriate for audience				
Concise- does not use wordy phrases, repeat info, or provide too much info.				
Transitions/organization- reader can move logically and effortlessly from paragraph to paragraph				
Well-organized paragraphs- includes topic sentence and reader can easily understand the info.				
Sentence Structure				
Grammar, spelling, word choice				
Language- active verbs, expresses points clearly				
Shows graduate-level thinking				
Responds to assignment- content is appropriate & meets readers' needs				
Using Sources- Sources are cited				

both in the text AND in the reference list. Additionally, students properly paraphrase. (See links for more info.)				
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Reading List

Chung, G., & Grimes, S. M. (2005). Data Mining the Kids: Surveillance and Market Research Strategies in Children's Online Games. *Canadian Journal Of Communication*, 30(4), 527-548.

Duhigg, C. (2012, Feb 19). Psst, you in aisle 5. *New York Times Magazine*, 30-37, 54-55,3.

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Polonsky, M. & Waller, D. Chapter 5. *Designing and managing a research project: A business student's guide*. 2nd ed. (pp. 65-85). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Rawassizadeh, R. (2012). Towards sharing life-log information with society. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 31(11), 1057-1067.
doi:10.1080/0144929X.2010.510208

Zuckerkandel, M. (Producer), & Fox, B. (Director). (2013). Hot on Your Trail: Privacy, Your Data, and Who Has Access to It. [Internet Video]. US: The Center for Investigative Reporting. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/series/228834185/your-digital-trail>

Optional: I recommend students listen to these podcasts if they are interested in learning more about the topic. They can also be helpful for teachers discussing this topic for the first time.

Zwerdling, D. and Schulz, G.W. (2013, Sept. 30). Your Digital Trail, And How It Can Be Used Against You. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/blogs/alltechconsidered/2013/09/30/226835934/your-digital-trail-and-how-it-can-be-used-against-you>

Zwerdling, D. (2013, Oct. 1). Your Digital Trail: Private Company Access. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/blogs/alltechconsidered/2013/10/01/227776072/your-digital-trail-private-company-access>

Zwerdling, D. (2013, Oct. 2). Your Digital Trail: Does The Fourth Amendment Protect Us? Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/blogs/alltechconsidered/2013/10/02/228134269/your-digital-trail-does-the-fourth-amendment-protect-us>

Zwerdling, D. (2013, Oct. 3). Your Digital Trail: Data Fuels Political And Legal Agendas. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/blogs/alltechconsidered/2013/10/04/228199021/your-digital-trail-data-fuels-political-and-legal-agendas>

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Seitel, Fraser. P. (2014). *The practice of public relations. 12th edition*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Zuckerandel, M. (Producer), & Fox, B. (Director). (2013). Hot on Your Trail: Privacy, Your Data, and Who Has Access to It. [Internet Video]. US: The Center for Investigative Reporting. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/series/228834185/your-digital-trail>

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Biography

Allison Weidhaas is an Assistant Professor in the Communication and Journalism Department at Rider University. She teaches courses in Rider's MA in Business

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