



Facebook tinkered with users' feeds for a massive psychology experiment

The Facebook logo, consisting of the word 'facebook' in its characteristic blue, lowercase, sans-serif font, is centered on a light gray background. The logo is partially obscured by a large, faint white smiley face watermark.

By William Hughes • Jun 27, 2014 • 3:30 PM

Scientists at Facebook have [published a paper](#) showing that they manipulated the content seen by more than 600,000 users in an attempt to determine whether this would affect their emotional state. The paper, “Experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks,” was [published in *The Proceedings Of The National Academy Of Sciences*](#). It shows how Facebook data

news feeds—specifically, researchers skewed the number of positive or negative terms seen by randomly selected users. Facebook then analyzed the future postings of those users over the course of a week to see if people responded with increased positivity or negativity of their own, thus answering the question of whether emotional states can be transmitted across a social network. Result: They can! Which is great news for Facebook data scientists hoping to prove a point about modern psychology. It's less great for the people having their emotions secretly manipulated.

In order to sign up for Facebook, users must click a box saying they agree to the [Facebook Data Use Policy](#), giving the company the right to access and use the information posted on the site. The policy lists a variety of potential uses for your data, most of them related to advertising, but there's also a bit about "internal operations, including troubleshooting, data analysis, testing, research and service improvement." In the study, the authors point out that they stayed within the data policy's liberal constraints by using machine analysis to pick out positive and negative posts, meaning no user data containing personal information was actually viewed by human researchers. And there was no need to ask study "participants" for consent, as they'd already given it by agreeing to Facebook's terms of service in the first place.

Facebook data scientist Adam Kramer is listed as the study's lead author. [In an interview the company released a few years ago](#), Kramer is quoted as saying he joined Facebook because "Facebook data constitutes the largest field study in the history of the world." It's a charming reminder that Facebook isn't just the place you go to see pictures of your friends' kids or your racist uncle's latest rant against the government—it's also an exciting research lab, with all of us as potential test subjects.