

# Facebook Apologizes For Manipulation; Data Research Likely To Go On

by AARTI SHAHANI

July 04, 2014 5:05 AM ET

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Morning Edition

1 min 52 sec

A mood study that Facebook conducted on unwitting users has been criticized. Data science plays an integral role at Facebook — for bottom line reasons, and in collaboration with academic researchers.

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DAVID GREENE, HOST:

And where has evolution brought us now? The era of Facebook. News broke this week that Facebook manipulated nearly 700,000 of its users for a study about how emotions work in an online or digital setting. The move angered plenty of people, but the academic world was far less shocked by what the social media site did. Here's NPR's Aarti Shahani.

AARTI SHAHANI, BYLINE: Edward Miguel is an economist at the University of California Berkeley who manipulates human subjects all the time.

EDWARD MIGUEL: When scientists and social scientists talk about manipulation, it does not have a negative connotation.

SHAHANI: Facebook decided to highlight upbeat or depressing messages in newsfeeds to see if humans got happier or sadder. They

didn't ask first, but lots of studies manipulate people without explicit consent. Researchers send black and Latino workers to job interviews to see if unknowing employers discriminate. In politics, Miguel says...

MIGUEL: Voters aren't necessarily aware they're being manipulated, but social scientists have sent them particular newspapers with certain ideological slants.

SHAHANI: Now, there is one really important difference. Economics and political science are established fields that use widely accepted sources, like labor statistics. The controversial Facebook research came from its data science division. Internet users are the data, and the ethical norms are up in the air.

MIGUEL: I think it's a new field, and a lot of us are trying to figure out exactly what it is.

SHAHANI: Miguel is more curious than outraged. Meanwhile, a watch dog in Great Britain is investigating Facebook for potential violation of data protection laws. And the company is managing a public relations disaster, expressing sympathy to users, but not saying it's going to pull the reins on data science. Aarti Shahani, NPR News.

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