

Facebook's secret 'mood experiment' ignored ethical safeguards, says expert

July 3 2014, by Charles Anzalone

The University at Buffalo's dean of School of Social Work has canceled advertising for her Facebook pages and urged others to considering switching to other social media sites after Facebook carried out an "unethical" mood manipulation experiment on 700,000 subscribers without following proper protections for human subjects involved in psychological research.

"It's entirely possible that people who were already feeling bad, and then felt worse as a result of the experiment, may have been harmed, perhaps through increased depression, anger, anxiety or suicidality," Nancy J. Smyth wrote on her Social Work blog, "Virtual Connections."

"There might even have been increased self-harm episodes, out of control anger, or dare I say it, suicide attempts or suicides that resulted from the experimental manipulation. Did this experiment create harm? The problem is, we will never know, because the protections for human subjects were never put into place."

Smyth, whose administration has emphasized how social workers can cultivate cyberspace to serve their clients better, was commenting on a widely discussed article in The Atlantic disclosing how for one week in January 2012, data scientists skewed what almost 700,000 Facebook users saw when they logged into its service.

Some people were shown content saturated with happy and positive words; some were shown content analyzed as sadder than average. At the

end of the week, these users subjected to skewed data were more likely to post either especially positive or negative messages and news themselves.

The cyberspace stunt was legal, according to the Atlantic article. But observers familiar with professional standards for social research – including Smyth – found the experiment irresponsible and objectionable.

Smyth wrote she has a presence on Facebook, mostly to keep current with her friends, family, colleagues and school alumni.

"But I am hoping that more people will join me on other platforms, as I would gladly give up Facebook," Smyth wrote. "For now, as a first step, I will be canceling the advertising that I do there for one of the pages that I maintain."

Smyth suggested Google+ as an alternative to Facebook. "It allows you to limit and vary postings for privacy," according to her blog, "and, as far as I know, doesn't manipulate your news feed, has some awesome photo services and the best interfaces for communities I've seen."

More information: Visit Smyth's "Virtual Connections" post critical of Facebook's rogue social experimenting at [njsmyth.wordpress.com/2014/06/ ... eate-harm/#more-1706](http://njsmyth.wordpress.com/2014/06/...eate-harm/#more-1706).

Provided by University at Buffalo

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