



Theme: Privacy Online

Topic: Facebook's mood experiment

Debate: Should Facebook have carried out a mood experiment on users, without their consent?

Project outline

Read the *Magna Carta: My Digital Rights* [Project Guide for Teachers](#) to find out more about how to use this document.

Step 1: Setting the scene

Begin by asking the group to watch the [video clip](#).

This film has been developed in partnership with [WebWeWant.org](#).

For one week in 2012 Facebook carried out a psychological experiment which aimed to manipulate the emotions of over 690,000 of its users. They did this by changing the content in users' news feeds. Some people were shown a higher number of negative posts and some were shown more positive posts. They found that users who received positive posts were more likely to respond in a positive way, while those in the negative group were more likely to then write negative posts. Facebook didn't seek consent from their users to do this experiment. They experienced criticism for the experiment and apologised, but the end result proved that Facebook could change the emotional state of its users.

Step 2: The big debate

Should Facebook have carried out a mood experiment on users without their consent?

Step 3: Making it memorable

This is the moment for you to make the process and outcome of your debate memorable. Here are some suggestions of activities to consolidate and extend the learning gained by the students during their debate:

- Students write their own individual clause for a collaborative whole-class Magna Carta for the digital age. The clause should best reflect their argument, and can be an opportunity to practise skills in summarising and synthesising ideas. Have a look at the British Library's own [Magna Carta for the digital age](#) to read the many different clauses submitted by young people around the world.
- Create a campaign poster that reflects their arguments and opinions on digital rights. This can be done as individual or small group work.
- Develop a school Magna Carta for teachers to sign.
- Use the knowledge gained to campaign for change in school or in their community. Activities could include writing to a local MP, approaching the local media or producing an article for a school newspaper.
- Use the insight and understanding gained to become involved in campaigns across the UK and internationally, with organisations such as [Amnesty International](#).

Useful Resources

Films and articles

Our [website](#) features a selection of resources which may help you and your students prepare for your debate. This includes:

- A [short film](#) introducing the issues around online privacy
- [Articles](#) exploring privacy and mass surveillance.

Prompt questions

You may want to help direct your students' research and argument development with the following questions:

- Did Facebook do anything illegal?
- Who owns your data on Facebook?
<https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook/on-facebook-people-own-and-control-their-information/54434097130> (note this was written 2009)
- Can you find anything in the [Facebook Data Policy](#) that might be useful?
- Have Facebook conducted any other experiments on users that we know of?
- If you use Facebook, have you ever looked at the user agreement that you signed?

External links

Below are some useful articles on the topic:

- <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/facebook-manipulated-users-moods-in-secret-experiment-9571004.html>
- <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/jun/30/facebook-emotion-study-breached-ethical-guidelines-researchers-say>

- http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/01/facebook-mood-study-government_n_5550555.html
- <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/07/03/sheryl-sandberg-not-sorry-for-facebook-mood-manipulation-study/>
- <https://plus.google.com/+JeffJarvis/posts/VYacoB2WwD5>

The law

- Facebook's mood experiment might have been illegal – two Law Professors from the University of Maryland allege that the social networking company may have violated a state statute:
<http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/09/facebooks-mood-manipulation-experiment-might-be-illegal/380717/>
- The UK's [Information Commissioner's Office](#) is currently investigating the issue but said it was “too early to tell exactly what part of the law Facebook may have infringed”:
- <https://nakedsecurity.sophos.com/2014/07/02/did-facebooks-emotion-experiment-break-the-law-ico-probes/>