Happy and Facebook Knows It

Scenario

In 2012, Facebook altered the news feed of hundreds of thousands of users as part of an experiment on emotion. While measuring user behavior in response to a changed interface is standard practice in web development, by the standards of sociological and psychological human subject research, Facebook did not obtain informed consent from the subjects of the study. Despite this controversial approach, in the summer of 2014, the resulting study was published in PNAS, a prestigious academic journal.

Assignment

Your job is to write an essay arguing either that Facebook's actions were ethical or that they were unethical.

Your imagined audience for this essay is a fellow CS student who is not in this class. Assume they have vaguely heard class terms before but aren't intimately familiar with them, nor are they familiar with the particular situation you are writing about.

Your response should:

- be between 3,000 and 5,000 characters long
- be driven by a clear thesis
- address the questions below while remaining one coherent essay, not a series of disconnected answers
- use the resources provided (and any research you care to do on your own) to support your argument

Questions

- Are there policy vacuums (when no explicit policies are in place to cope with a new technology) or conceptual muddles (when a new technology blurs the lines between what were traditionally distinct ideas) involved in this issue?
- What novel ethical features or issues are involved, if any?
- What moral principles or rules are involved?
- What moral directives or social policies are involved?
- Is anyone being harmed by this practice?
- Does this practice promote or hinder human flourishing?

Resources

The links below will give you basic facts about the experiment. Resources from the list should be cited in-text (“According to the New York Times…”) but do not need additional citation. Any outside research should be linked at the end of the essay.

- Slate, “Unethical Experiment”
- Washington Post, “Was the Facebook Emotion Study Unethical?”
- Forbes, “Sounds Creepier than It Was”

Submission

You don't have to submit this essay. This is just the prompt for the writing assignment you will be peer reviewing. You should submit your revision of the essay via svn and grade them using the writing rubric. Instructions for using svn are available here. Remember that the deadline for peer review is Friday at 11:59pm (September 15th in this case.)