# Facebook’s secret 2012 experiment manipulated emotions of nearly 700,000 users without consent



In a revealing episode of the Joe Rogan Experience podcast, host Joe Rogan engaged in a thought-provoking conversation with Rebecca Lemov, a historian of science and expert in the realm of mind control. This dialogue resurfaced the controversial history of a secret Facebook experiment conducted in 2012, where the company manipulated the news feeds of nearly 700,000 unsuspecting users. The emotional ramifications of this research have prompted serious ethical debates about user consent and emotional well-being.

Lemov detailed how Facebook adjusted the content seen by various users, alternating between positive and negative news articles. The primary aim was to study how such emotional exposure influenced user behaviour on the platform. The findings indicated that users who were exposed to more positive content were likely to post happier updates, while those subjected to negativity tended to share more somber reflections. What has since become a flashpoint for outrage is not only the findings but the method of execution—users were entirely unaware they were part of any research experiment. This manipulation was later publicly denounced as a form of brainwashing, with Lemov highlighting parallels to psychological tactics used in cult behaviour.

The social media giant claimed that the intent behind the experiment was to enhance user engagement by tailoring content that could better serve their needs. However, this reasoning has been met with widespread scepticism and condemnation. The outcry following the revelation of the study in 2014 included accusations of ethical violations, particularly regarding informed consent. Lemov pointed out that many users unwittingly agree to such experimental conditions when signing up for platforms like Facebook, raising ongoing concerns about the ethics of digital consent in the age of social media.

Compounding the ethical issues, reports emerged during the discussion that at least one participant claimed that their manipulated news feed contributed to suicidal thoughts. Such alarming revelations intensified calls for accountability not only from Facebook but also from the academic institutions involved—researchers from Cornell University and the University of California-San Francisco were implicated in the study. Despite the severity of the backlash, no legal action ensued in the United States, largely because the experiment fell within Facebook’s terms of service, which allowed for data use in research without explicit user consent.

The incident also triggered an investigation from the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC), a nonprofit focused on privacy rights, which alleged the company misrepresented its data practices and violated a prior Federal Trade Commission (FTC) order that emphasised user consent. Simultaneously, in the UK, the Information Commissioner's Office initiated its own inquiry into the possible breach of data protection laws, but ultimately did not impose sanctions against the company.

Rogan broadened the discussion, referencing other manipulative tactics employed in the digital space, including the influence of search engine algorithms. He cited research conducted by Robert Epstein, which indicated that results from platforms like Google can sway undecided voters through selective visibility of information. This manipulation of search results can frame public discourse in ways that serve particular political or corporate interests.

The rising concern over the ethics of emotional manipulation online continues to reverberate through scholarly discourse and public sentiment. As conversations about digital accountability persist, the implications of Facebook’s experiment stand as a poignant reminder of the potential psychological impacts of unchecked corporate power in the digital landscape. Lemov encapsulated the overarching concern succinctly, reminding us that individuals remain vulnerable to emotional manipulation online, regardless of their awareness or understanding of these platforms’ internal machinations.

As the digital world evolves, it becomes increasingly critical to foster an atmosphere of transparency and responsibility among social media giants, ensuring that user well-being is placed at the forefront of technological advancement and research.

### Reference Map

* Paragraph 1: [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-14728883/Joe-Rogan-sinister-experiment-mind-control.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-29475019)
* Paragraph 2: [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-14728883/Joe-Rogan-sinister-experiment-mind-control.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[3]](https://www.forbes.com/sites/kashmirhill/2014/06/28/facebook-manipulated-689003-users-emotions-for-science/), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/jun/30/facebook-emotion-study-breached-ethical-guidelines-researchers-say)
* Paragraph 3: [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-14728883/Joe-Rogan-sinister-experiment-mind-control.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[5]](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/07/01/9-answers-about-facebooks-creepy-emotional-manipulation-experiment/)
* Paragraph 4: [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-14728883/Joe-Rogan-sinister-experiment-mind-control.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/oct/02/facebook-sorry-secret-psychological-experiment-users)
* Paragraph 5: [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-14728883/Joe-Rogan-sinister-experiment-mind-control.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[7]](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/researcher-apologizes-for-facebook-study-in-emotional-manipulation/)
* Paragraph 6: [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-14728883/Joe-Rogan-sinister-experiment-mind-control.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-14728883/Joe-Rogan-sinister-experiment-mind-control.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-29475019> - In June 2014, Facebook faced criticism for manipulating the news feeds of nearly 700,000 users without their consent. The experiment aimed to gauge if exposure to emotions led people to change their own posting behaviors. Facebook admitted it was 'unprepared' for the backlash and stated it would change the way it conducts research on users. The Information Commissioner's Office in the UK also investigated whether Facebook breached data protection laws during the study.
3. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kashmirhill/2014/06/28/facebook-manipulated-689003-users-emotions-for-science/> - In 2012, Facebook conducted a study where it manipulated the news feeds of 689,003 users to observe how positive or negative content affected their moods. The study found that when positive expressions were reduced, users produced fewer positive posts and more negative ones, and vice versa. The experiment sparked outrage as users were unaware they were part of the study, raising ethical concerns about informed consent and emotional manipulation.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/jun/30/facebook-emotion-study-breached-ethical-guidelines-researchers-say> - Researchers condemned Facebook's 2012 experiment, which manipulated nearly 700,000 users' news feeds to see if it would affect their emotions, stating it breached ethical guidelines for 'informed consent'. The study found that users' emotions were reinforced by what they saw, termed 'emotional contagion'. Critics argued that Facebook failed to obtain informed consent from participants, violating ethical research standards.
5. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/07/01/9-answers-about-facebooks-creepy-emotional-manipulation-experiment/> - In 2012, Facebook conducted an experiment on 698,003 users by adjusting their News Feeds to display more positive or negative content to observe emotional responses. The study concluded that exposure to emotions led people to change their own posting behaviors. The experiment raised ethical questions about informed consent and the manipulation of user emotions without explicit permission.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/oct/02/facebook-sorry-secret-psychological-experiment-users> - Facebook apologized for a secret psychological experiment conducted in 2012, where it manipulated the news feeds of nearly 700,000 users to alter their emotional states. The company admitted it was 'unprepared' for the negative reactions and announced new guidelines for future research studies. The experiment aimed to determine if exposure to positive or negative content affected users' emotions and behaviors.
7. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/researcher-apologizes-for-facebook-study-in-emotional-manipulation/> - A Facebook data scientist apologized for a study that manipulated the news feeds of nearly 700,000 users to observe how positive or negative content affected their moods. The study concluded that when positive expressions were reduced, users produced fewer positive posts and more negative ones, and vice versa. The experiment raised ethical concerns about informed consent and the manipulation of user emotions without explicit permission.