# Joe Rogan exposes Facebook’s secret 2012 emotional manipulation experiment and its ethical fallout



In a recent episode of the popular *Joe Rogan Experience* podcast, host Joe Rogan expressed his astonishment at revelations regarding Facebook’s clandestine manipulation of its users’ emotions through a secret experiment conducted in 2012. This troubling oversight involved altering the news feeds of nearly 700,000 users to assess whether exposure to positive or negative content influenced their emotional states and subsequent social media posts. The conversation featured Rebecca Lemov, a historian of science specialising in mind control, who drew parallels between Facebook's actions and techniques used in cults to manipulate thoughts and feelings.

The company justified its controversial experiment—initially disclosed to the public in 2014—claiming that the aim was to enhance the relevance and engagement of the content users saw. However, this justification fell flat amid fierce criticism, as observers accused Facebook of engaging in what many described as psychological manipulation or even "brainwashing." Lemov noted that the emotional curating of content could evoke harmful effects, stating, “It's not that it changed my thoughts, it's that it changed my feelings about my thoughts.” The chilling implications were underscored by reports of at least one user who linked their engagement with the negative news feed during the study to suicidal thoughts.

Despite public outrage following the experiment's revelation, a significant aspect remains troubling: users had unknowingly consented to such manipulation by agreeing to Facebook's terms of service, which permitted data use for research purposes. Lemov pointed out that this aspect has sparked considerable ethical debate since the study’s results indicated that emotional content indeed influenced user behaviour; individuals exposed to more positive posts tended to share optimistic updates, whereas those seeing negativity reciprocated with negative expressions.

In light of the uproar, Facebook has since reassessed its research protocols, indicating they should have approached such experiments differently. Nevertheless, the core ethical questions remain unresolved. Various independent inquiries, including those from the Electronic Privacy Information Center, highlighted the need to scrutinise Facebook's compliance with legal standards, especially concerning user consent and data privacy.

The ramifications of this secretive study have resonated beyond just Facebook. Rogan referenced related research from psychologist Robert Epstein, which suggests that the manipulation of online search results can skew public perception and influence political decisions. Citing the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Rogan noted how biased search results can shape narratives favourably or unfavourably for particular candidates, suggesting that this form of manipulation represents an unchecked power with significant implications for democracy.

As the digital landscape continues to evolve, the concerns surrounding data privacy and emotional manipulation remain critical. The discourse around these issues resonates profoundly in an era where social media platforms wield unprecedented influence over the way information is disseminated and consumed. The broader implications of Facebook's experiment raise questions about ethical responsibilities and the potential vulnerabilities in a world increasingly dominated by digital interactions.

The fallout from Facebook's experiment sheds light on the unsettling intersection of technology and psychology, reinforcing the importance of ethical considerations in research that directly affects individuals' mental states. As society grapples with the implications of such studies, it is crucial to advocate for transparency and accountability in the digital age, ensuring that users are not merely subjects of covert experimentation but respected participants in a space that acknowledges their autonomy.

### Reference Map

1. 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. 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), [[2]](https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-28051930), [[4]](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/researcher-apologizes-for-facebook-study-in-emotional-manipulation/)
3. 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), [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/oct/02/facebook-sorry-secret-psychological-experiment-users), [[6]](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/07/01/was-the-facebook-emotion-experiment-unethical/)
4. 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), [[5]](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/07/01/9-answers-about-facebooks-creepy-emotional-manipulation-experiment/), [[7]](https://www.wired.com/2014/06/everything-you-need-to-know-about-facebooks-manipulative-experiment/)
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6. 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), [[2]](https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-28051930), [[5]](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/07/01/9-answers-about-facebooks-creepy-emotional-manipulation-experiment/)
7. Paragraph 7: [[4]](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/researcher-apologizes-for-facebook-study-in-emotional-manipulation/), [[6]](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/07/01/was-the-facebook-emotion-experiment-unethical/), [[7]](https://www.wired.com/2014/06/everything-you-need-to-know-about-facebooks-manipulative-experiment/)

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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-28051930> - In 2014, Facebook faced criticism for conducting a secret psychological experiment on nearly 700,000 users without their knowledge. The study involved manipulating users' news feeds to control the emotional content they were exposed to, aiming to gauge if exposure to emotions led people to change their own posting behaviors. The research was done in collaboration with Cornell University and the University of California at San Francisco. Facebook stated that there was no unnecessary collection of people's data and that none of the data used was associated with a specific person's Facebook account.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/oct/02/facebook-sorry-secret-psychological-experiment-users> - Facebook admitted to conducting a secret psychological experiment on nearly 700,000 users without their knowledge, stating that the experiment should have been 'done differently.' The company acknowledged being 'unprepared' for the negative reactions it received and announced new guidelines for future research studies. The experiment aimed to determine whether exposure to emotions led people to change their own posting behaviors by manipulating the emotional content in users' news feeds.
4. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/researcher-apologizes-for-facebook-study-in-emotional-manipulation/> - A Facebook data scientist apologized for a study that angered many users by attempting to manipulate their emotions based on the posts they saw in their News Feeds. The study, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, involved altering the News Feeds of nearly 700,000 users to see whether a mostly positive or mostly negative News Feed would elicit different types of status updates. The study concluded that emotions expressed by others on Facebook influence our own emotions, constituting experimental evidence for massive-scale contagion via social networks.
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 nearly 700,000 users by adjusting their newsfeeds to show more positive or negative posts to study the impact on users' emotions. The method sparked outrage comparable to how users would react if major media outlets like The New York Times or ABC News had done something similar, highlighting concerns about mind manipulation and ethics. A researcher from Facebook issued an apology for the anxiety caused by the study's publication, but the company maintained that such experiments are covered under user agreements.
6. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/07/01/was-the-facebook-emotion-experiment-unethical/> - The article discusses the ethical concerns surrounding Facebook's 2012 experiment, which involved manipulating users' news feeds to study emotional contagion. It examines whether the study was deceptive, if it caused harm, and whether it produced the results claimed by the authors. The piece also explores the broader implications of such research and the responsibilities of platforms like Facebook in conducting studies that affect users' emotions and behaviors.
7. <https://www.wired.com/2014/06/everything-you-need-to-know-about-facebooks-manipulative-experiment/> - This article provides an in-depth look at Facebook's controversial 2012 experiment, which involved manipulating the emotional content of users' news feeds to study emotional contagion. It discusses the methodology of the study, the reactions it provoked, and the ethical considerations involved. The piece also examines the broader implications of such research and the responsibilities of social media platforms in conducting studies that affect users' emotions and behaviors.