
Facebook admits plan to access patient data



Facebook seems to be embroiled in yet another controversy. The social media giant has confirmed a news report about its negotiation with U.S. medical institutions to access patient data for a proposed research project, which Facebook now claims has been put on hold.

The report, from CNBC, said Facebook planned to use "hashing" to match individuals who existed in both data sets – which would be anonymised – to glean insights that would improve healthcare, initially in cardiovascular health.

Facebook was in talks with healthcare organisations, including the American College of Cardiology (ACC) and Stanford Medical School, as recently as last month, negotiating to gain access to anonymised information such as patients' diagnoses and medications.

However, the new project "has not progressed past the planning phase, and we have not received, shared, or analysed anyone's data," a Facebook spokesperson told CNBC.

The social network provided a statement from the interim CEO of the American College of Cardiology Cathleen Gates in support of the plan.

"For the first time in history, people are sharing information about themselves online in ways that may help determine how to improve their health," Gates said.

"As part of its mission to transform cardiovascular care and improve heart health, the American College of Cardiology has been engaged in discussions with Facebook around the use of anonymised Facebook data, coupled with anonymised ACC data, to further scientific research on the ways social media can aid in the prevention and treatment of heart disease –the #1 cause of death in the world. This partnership is in the very early phases as we work on both sides to ensure privacy, transparency and scientific rigor. No data has been shared between any parties."

The news comes as Facebook VP Sheryl Sandberg said the company is still unable to confirm what happened to the data obtained by Cambridge Analytica, the data analytics firm hired by the Trump presidential campaign, because it needs to wait until the UK information commissioner completes an investigation.

"To this day, we still don't know what data Cambridge Analytica have," Sandberg said.

The Observer revealed that the personal data of millions of Facebook users – possibly as many as 87 million, the social network admitted – had been harvested and improperly shared with the political data-mining firm Cambridge Analytica.

Following this most recent revelation about Facebook's proposed medical research project, ACC president Michael Valentine told The Guardian no data had been shared and the health group is committed the U.S.'s strict health privacy legislation.

In response to CNBC's queries about the healthcare data sharing discussions, Facebook said in a statement:

"Last month we decided that we should pause these discussions so we can focus on other important work, including doing a better job of protecting people's data and being clearer with them about how that data is used in our products and services."

Founder and chief executive Mark Zuckerberg is set to testify before the United States Congress this month.

Source: [Healthcare IT News](#)

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