

By [Gail Sullivan](#)

Facebook's controversial study that manipulated users' newsfeeds was not pre-approved by Cornell University's ethics board, and Facebook may not have had "implied" user permission to conduct the study as researchers previously claimed.

In the study, researchers at Facebook tweaked what hundreds of thousands of users saw in their news feeds, skewing content to be more positive or negative than normal in an attempt to manipulate their mood. Then they checked users' status updates to see if the content affected what they wrote. They found that, yes, Facebook users' moods are affected by what they see in their news feeds. Users who saw more negative posts would write more negative things on their own walls, and likewise for positive posts.

(For a refresher on the controversy, check out [The Washington Post's story](#) from Monday).

Ethics board consulted after the fact

As reported by The Post and other news outlets, Princeton University psychology professor Susan Fiske [told the Atlantic](#) that an independent ethics committee, Cornell University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), had approved use of Facebook's "pre-existing data set" in the experiment. Fiske edited the study, which was published in the June 17 issue of Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

A [statement](#) issued Monday by Cornell University clarified the experiment was conducted before the IRB was consulted. A Cornell professor, Jeffrey Hancock, and doctoral student Jamie Guillory worked with Facebook on the study, but the university made a point of distancing itself from the research. Its statement said:

Professor Hancock and Dr. Guillory did not participate in data collection and did not have access to user data. Their work was limited to initial discussions, analyzing the research results and working with colleagues from Facebook to prepare the peer-reviewed paper "Experimental Evidence of Massive-Scale Emotional Contagion through Social Networks," published online June 2 in Proceedings of the National Academy of Science-Social Science.

Because the research was conducted independently by Facebook and Professor Hancock had access only to results – and not to any data