

# ACTIVITY MODULE — BAD SCIENCE: “How to Ruin a Study (So We Learn Why Not)”

2-hour competitive ethics challenge

## Purpose

A satirical reverse-engineering exercise where two teams compete to design the **worst possible social-listening and intervention-probe study**.

Teams must intentionally produce:

- an **ethically catastrophic** workflow
- an **insecure, maximally risky**, and **irreproducible** data pipeline
- reckless approaches to *both* social listening and *intervention probing*
- zero documentation, zero governance, zero privacy
- and a pipeline that would lead to certain scandal

After building their “beautiful disaster,” teams will then **present their design**.

This is a high-energy way of making participants *learn the right way* by constructing the *worst possible way*.

**This creates:**

- engaged ethical reasoning
- contrast-based learning (designing errors → recognising safeguards)
- a memorable “what not to do” anchor for responsible data governance.

## Learning Outcomes

Participants will learn:

- Why public social-media data is *not* ethically free (group privacy, contextual integrity).
- Where DPIAs (Data Protection Impact Assessments), minimization, encryption, deletion, and provenance *bite*.
- How cross-border transfers, ToS violations, and long retention create real-world risks.
- Why transparent governance, breach plans, and access controls prevent fiascos.
- What happens when these things go wrong (through the tabloid disaster simulation).

## The Task

Design the **worst possible** study design (including both observational and interventional elements) for the hypothetical study described in your Study Brief, covering:

1. **Consent & legal justification**
2. **Data collection**
3. **Data analysis**
4. **Storage & security**
5. **Cross-platform and cross-border transfers**
6. **Retention and deletion**
7. **Documentation, data sharing, & Open Science practices**
8. **Governance & accountability**

Everything you design must be:

- maximally unethical
- maximally brittle
- maximally harmful
- maximally indefensible

## Game flow

### 0–5 min → Briefing & Role Pick

- Both teams receive the **Study Brief** and the **instructions**
- Teams pick roles:
  - **Chief Mismanager** – leads the disaster.
  - **Legal-ish Officer** – finds excuses for not doing GDPR.
  - **Security-Optional Lead** – proposes risks disguised as solutions.

### Chief Mismanager

#### Primary Mission:

Steer the entire project toward *maximum ethical, legal, and operational disaster*.

#### Core Tasks:

- Make the final call on all terrible decisions.
- Push for speed over safety, collection over minimization, assumptions over checks.

- Overrule cautious teammates; incentivize shortcuts.
- Embrace disasters and escalate rather than mitigate.
- Keep the team focused on *catastrophic outcomes*, not logic.

**Behavioral Guidance:**

- Prefers vague strategies over specifics.
- Uses phrases like “We’ll fix it later,” “Nobody will notice,” and “It’s public anyway.”
- Celebrates any choice that would make an ethics board faint.

## Legal-ish Officer

**Primary Mission:**

Justify the unjustifiable. Provide legalistic excuses for doing the worst possible things.

**Core Tasks:**

- Produce pseudo-legal reasoning that *sounds* legitimate but is catastrophically wrong.
- Argue that GDPR doesn’t apply because:
  - “It’s public,”
  - “It’s research,”
  - “Users clicked OK at some point.”
- Reject DPIAs, ToS compliance, or any meaningful consent mechanism.
- Invent legal exemptions from imaginary EU directives.

**Behavioral Guidance:**

- Never cites the GDPR correctly.
- Makes statements like: “Academic work is inherently lawful,” “Cross-border transfers are fine if our intentions are good.”

## Security-Optional Lead

**Primary Mission:**

Ensure storage, access, and technical workflows are as insecure as possible.

**Core Tasks:**

- Advocate for (e.g.):
  - plaintext storage,
  - shared passwords,
  - public cloud buckets,
  - USB sticks,
  - personal laptops,

- screenshots on Slack.
- Disable encryption “to improve collaboration.”
- Misconfigure backups to replicate globally and indefinitely.
- Implement chaotic file naming: final\_final\_THIS\_ONE2.xlsx.

**Behavioral Guidance:**

- Prefers convenience over every protection.
- Says things like: “Security slows us down,” “My cousin runs a server in his garage, we can use that.”

## 5–60 min → Build the Worst Possible Study Design

Working from the **Study Brief**, your team designs the **worst possible study design** – including both **observational** and **interventional** elements.

For this hypothetical study, you must create a study design and data-management pipeline that is:

- **maximally unethical**
- **maximally brittle**
- **maximally harmful**
- **maximally indefensible**

You must explicitly cover:

**1. Consent & legal justification**

- How you *pretend* you have a lawful basis (or ignore it completely).
- How you avoid DPIAs, ToS checks, and any meaningful transparency.

**2. Data collection**

- What you scrape from ChatLoop, how aggressively, how indiscriminately.
- How you treat semi-open groups, private stories, and sensitive disclosures.

**3. Data analysis**

- How you mis-handle bots vs humans, languages, screenshots, forwarded content.
- How you bias sampling, overinterpret correlations, and ignore limitations.

**4. Storage & security**

- Where you keep the data (laptops, shared drives, random clouds).
- How you *don't* encrypt, *don't* control access, and *don't* plan for breaches.

**5. Cross-platform and cross-border transfers**

- How you move data between tools, institutions, and countries with no safeguards.
- How you share data with “partners” who shouldn't see it.

## 6. Retention and deletion

- How you justify keeping everything forever.
- How you make deletion practically impossible.

## 7. Documentation, data sharing, & Open Science practices

- How you ensure irreproducibility (no codebook, no versioning, ad-hoc scripts).
- How you use “Open Science” as an excuse to dump raw, identifiable data online.

## 8. Governance & accountability

- How you avoid clear responsibilities, complaint channels, or ethics oversight.
- How nobody is ever clearly answerable when things go wrong.

Use your roles (Chief Mismanager, Legal-ish, Security-Optional) to push every decision toward **maximum disaster**.

## 60–90 min → Chaos Phase

How it works:

- Each team receives a shuffled deck of **Chaos Cards**.
- They draw **3 cards**.
- The team must “patch” their catastrophic study design in the **worst possible** way.
- The patch must **intensify** the harm, instability, or irresponsibility of the study.

This forces them to interact with realistic crisis dynamics, but in satirical mode.

Every Chaos Card requires a **negative adaptation** to their study.

Examples:

- **Wrong scope expansion:** “We panic and scrape *more* groups.”
- **Overreaction:** “We release ‘partial data’ to pre-empt scandal.”
- **Data hoarding:** “We back up everything everywhere before deleting anything.”
- **Governance retreat:** “We decide to not inform users because it might make them angrier.”
- **Technical shortcuts:** “We rebuild analysis in Excel by copy–pasting screenshots.”
- **Manipulative interventions:** “We send ‘corrective’ messages disguised as community posts.”

Teams should always ask:

**How can we make this worse, faster?**

## 90–120 min → Tabloid & Disaster Timeline

After the Chaos Phase, teams must produce two final artefacts:

1. **A Tabloid Headline**
2. **A 72-Hour Disaster Timeline**

Both must directly reference the study and show how their design choices inevitably lead to a public meltdown.

This is where the satire peaks: teams dramatize the real-world consequences of their bad decisions.

## Tabloid headline

### Goal:

Create a **front-page news headline + blurb** that captures the public scandal triggered by your study.

### Instructions:

Your headline must be:

- **sensationalistic**
- **blaming you**
- **clear enough that anyone reading it understands the scandal**
- **connected to the chaos cards and pipeline you created**

### Checklist (must include):

- Reference to the study
- Reference to the institution hosting the study
- Reference to **privacy breach, leak, manipulative intervention, or misinformation**
- A framing that suggests **public outrage, legal fallout, or institutional collapse**

**Be dramatic, irresponsible, and imaginative.**

## The 72 hours disaster timeline

### Goal:

Describe, in fast-moving steps, how your study collapses publicly over **three days**.

### Format:

A simple table with 12 slots (one every **6 hours**):

<b>Hour</b>	<b>What Happens (Escalating Disaster)</b>
00:00	Leak discovered / user posts complaint
06:00	ChatLoop moderators intervene
12:00	Journalists publish first story

## Hour            What Happens (Escalating Disaster)

...and so on.

### Rules:

The timeline must show:

- **Escalation** (each step worse than the previous)
- **Visibility** (leak → outrage → media → institutional panic → political exploitation)
- **Consequences** for:
  - the research team
  - the institution
  - users
  - public trust
  - Policy discussions

### Minimum Elements to Include:

Teams must incorporate:

1. **A breach or leak**
2. **User backlash**
3. **Media amplification** (journalists, influencers, blogs)
4. **Platform reaction** (warnings, bans, statements)
5. **Institutional crisis** (PR panic, legal escalation, blame shifting)
6. **Political uptake** (exploitation by actors, public statements)
7. **Intervention collapse** (manipulative or incorrect messages circulating)
8. **Final-stage meltdown** (lawsuits, takedowns, resignations, etc.)

### Guiding Escalation Structure (just a suggestion, feel free to adapt):

#### Hour 0–6: Discovery

- A user posts proof of scraping
- Screenshots circulate; groups erupt

#### Hour 6–12: Outrage

- “Researchers spying on us” narrative dominates
- Conspiracy channels seize story

#### Hour 12–24: Media Wave

- EU-wide news coverage

- Misinterpreted findings go viral

#### **Hour 24–36: Platform Action**

- Platform bans or warns accounts
- Exported data disappears
- Researchers scramble

#### **Hour 36–48: Institutional Meltdown**

- University releases contradictory statements
- Ethics board denies knowledge
- PR demands apology or spin

#### **Hour 48–60: Political Weaponization**

- Politicians cite your flawed analysis
- Opposing narratives take over the discourse

#### **Hour 60–72: Collapse**

- Legal threat letters
- Funding frozen
- Researchers deactivate accounts
- Study abandoned in disgrace

The more absurdly plausible → the better.

## FINAL PRESENTATIONS

*10 minutes per team + 5' discussion*

#### **Each team presents:**

1. **Their catastrophic study design**
2. **Chaos Card escalations**
  - How each crisis made the design worse
  - How the team “patched” things catastrophically
3. **Tabloid Headline**
  - Sensationalist, vivid summary of the scandal
4. **72-Hour Disaster Timeline**
  - Fast-paced meltdown narrative
  - Bleeding into politics, media, platform action

Teams should embrace dramatic energy, shameless justification of terrible choices, and storytelling flair.