

Cameron Cassani

PHIL335E

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## **Facebook's Role in Information Warfare: Ethical Implications**

### **Introduction**

In "What Facebook Did to American Democracy," Alexis C. Madrigal delves into the complex role Facebook played in shaping political discourse and influencing public opinion during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Madrigal's analysis reveals how Facebook's algorithms and ad-targeting capabilities were exploited for political ends, raising questions about the platform's impact on democracy. Using the ethical framework of contractarianism, this case analysis will argue that Facebook did engage in information warfare, albeit unintentionally, due to its algorithmic structures and ad policies that allowed for the manipulation of information. Furthermore, it will be argued that Facebook was partly responsible for the outcome of the 2016 election because its platform became a tool for spreading misinformation and shaping voter perceptions. This analysis will incorporate critical concepts from Jarred Prier's "Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare" and Keith Scott's "A Second Amendment for Cyber? Possession, Prohibition and Personal Liberty for the Information Age" to support these arguments.

### **Analysis using Prier's Concepts**

In his insightful work, Jarred Prier highlights the transformative role of social media in the realm of information warfare. This concept is crucial to understanding Facebook's role in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Prier's analysis centers on the idea that social media platforms, like Facebook, are not just passive conduits of information but active players in shaping

narratives and influencing public opinion. This is particularly evident in the way Facebook's algorithms prioritize content that is likely to engage users, often favoring sensationalist or polarizing material. This algorithmic bias inadvertently creates an environment ripe for the spread of misinformation and propaganda, aligning perfectly with Prier's notion of social media as a battleground in information warfare.

In the context of the 2016 election, Facebook's platform was exploited by various actors to disseminate targeted political messaging, some of which was misleading or outright false. The ease with which these actors could use Facebook's ad-targeting capabilities to reach specific demographics turned the platform into a powerful tool for shaping voter perceptions and influencing political discourse. This manipulation of information aligns with Prier's observations about the strategic use of social media for influence operations. The platform's design, which emphasizes content that generates user engagement, inadvertently amplified divisive and misleading content, thereby exacerbating the polarization of political discourse.

From a contractarian perspective, which emphasizes the importance of agreements and rules that rational individuals would accept for mutual benefit, Facebook's approach to content management during this period can be seen as a violation of an implicit social contract. In a democratic society, there is an expectation that platforms like Facebook will uphold certain norms and standards, particularly in the context of political discourse. These norms include preventing the spread of misinformation and protecting the integrity of democratic processes. By failing to regulate the misuse of its platform adequately, Facebook neglected its responsibility to its users and the broader public. The contractarian view would suggest that Facebook had a moral obligation to enforce standards that prevent harm and misinformation, thereby upholding democratic values and ensuring a fair and informed public discourse. This analysis underscores

the ethical challenges social media platforms face and the importance of responsible content management in the digital age.

### **Analysis using Scott's Concepts**

Keith Scott's exploration of the ethical dimensions of information freedom and control in the digital age provides a critical lens through which to examine Facebook's role in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Scott's work, particularly his discussion on the balance between personal liberty and regulation in cyberspace, is highly relevant to understanding the complexities of Facebook's situation. He posits that in the information age, there is a pressing need to find a middle ground between allowing free expression and ensuring that this freedom does not harm the public good. This balance is crucial in the context of social media platforms, where the dissemination of information can have far-reaching consequences.

Applying Scott's concepts to the Facebook case, it becomes evident that the platform struggled to strike this balance. Facebook's initial hands-off approach to content regulation and its powerful algorithms and ad-targeting tools created a fertile environment for spreading misinformation and propaganda. This situation perfectly encapsulates Scott's concerns regarding the management of digital platforms. While Facebook provided an unprecedented avenue for free expression and communication, it also inadvertently facilitated the manipulation of public opinion by allowing misleading and false information to proliferate.

From a contractarian perspective, Facebook's actions—or lack thereof—can be scrutinized for their ethical implications. Contractarianism, with its focus on mutual agreements and the establishment of rules for the benefit of all, suggests that Facebook had a moral obligation to safeguard its platform against misuse. This obligation includes protecting the democratic process from being undermined by information warfare. By not adequately balancing

the freedom of speech with the responsibility to prevent the platform's weaponization, Facebook failed to uphold its part of the social contract. The platform should have implemented more robust measures to detect and mitigate the spread of false information, especially given its significant influence on public discourse.

In summary, through the lens of Scott's concepts, Facebook's role in the 2016 election can be seen as a failure to responsibly manage the powerful tool that social media represents. This analysis highlights the ethical challenges inherent in balancing freedom and control in the digital age and underscores the need for platforms like Facebook to take a more proactive role in ensuring their services are not used to the detriment of public good and democratic processes. The case of Facebook in the 2016 election serves as a cautionary tale about the potential consequences of failing to find this balance, emphasizing the need for ethical guidelines and responsible management in digital platforms.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, through the lens of contractarianism and the insights of Prier and Scott, it is evident that Facebook played a significant, albeit unintentional, role in information warfare during the 2016 U.S. election. The platform's algorithmic biases and lack of effective content regulation facilitated the spread of misinformation, impacting public opinion and potentially the election outcome. While recognizing the challenges in regulating online speech, Facebook had a moral responsibility to safeguard its platform against misuse. This case highlights the broader ethical implications of social media in democratic societies and the need for a balanced approach to digital freedom and responsibility. Future considerations should include the development of ethical guidelines for social media platforms, ensuring they contribute positively to the democratic process rather than undermining it.