

Case Analysis on Information Warfare

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Social media has become a staple of the digital age as most individuals, particularly in countries such as the United States, have integrated social media into their lives in some form. While there are benefits from social media, such as entertainment or staying connected with individuals whom a user may otherwise be unable to interact with. However, social media has emerged as a primary method of obtaining information, as individuals can share information from both trusted and untrusted sources on a mass scale. Facebook, a key player in this digital landscape, is an organization that has undergone significant controversy surrounding its creation and business practices. It is evident that Facebook, with its millions of users and targeted distribution of information, had a considerable impact on the 2016 presidential election (Madriral, 2017). In its engagement in information warfare and unethical practices, Facebook provides a stark example from the perspective of virtue ethics. The social media platform is designed to prioritize engagement regardless of the validity of the information being spread, a practice that violates virtue ethics as Facebook acted with a lack of integrity and responsibility while spreading potentially misleading information.

Weaponizing information has long been a tool individuals and nations use to further their interests. The emergence of social media has merely increased the prominence of misinformation, disinformation, and echo chambers- a term used to describe an environment where a person only encounters information or opinions that confirm their existing beliefs, potentially leading to a lack of diverse perspectives. The 2016 presidential election is commonly referenced as an example of large-scale information warfare, not simply because it was the most consequential instance of information warfare but because it occurred in the United States, something many individuals previously believed impossible. It is a common trend for individuals

to remove themselves from issues due to assuming that they are unlikely to be affected by problems such as information warfare. However, the 2016 presidential election proved that notion to be undeniably false. The flood of disinformation that resulted from internet trolls, state actors, and radical groups proved to be devastating for the American people as politics became increasingly polarizing, and many people lost faith in trusted sources as a direct result of disinformation. Jarred Prier presents many disturbing realities throughout the article *“Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare,”* including the revelation that bad actors can hijack hashtags and trending topics to spread disinformation and create distrust in the media outlets attempting to bring the mass spread of disinformation to light (Prier, 2017, pp. 50-85). The article breaks down a domino effect in which one person's post that includes specific trends or hashtags can spread rapidly. When an individual with malicious intentions successfully spreads their messages across large groups of people, satirical or malicious disinformation will likely be adopted by individuals who believe the information to be accurate. The individuals who believe the disinformation will then be likely to spread the post to individuals they associate with and are, in turn, likely to believe said disinformation (Prier, 2017, pp. 50-85).

Information warfare is not necessarily malicious or intentional; however, in the case of Facebook, as it relates to the 2016 election, it is clear that the information warfare that was allowed to exist on the platform was a direct result of incompetence, gross negligence, and above all, corporate greed. Virtue ethics demands that an individual or organization make the best choice for a specific scenario. Facebook should strive to set an example for other organizations by ensuring that the information circulating on its platform is truthful and will not mislead others. While one may argue that Facebook acted in the interests of the organization and its shareholders, Facebook's actions were, from a particular perspective, vicious as the organization

did not know what would happen due to the unregulated distribution of information, or worse, they did not care. While this instance suggests that Facebook did not directly engage in information warfare, the organization allowed foreign entities to weaponize its platform to maximize profits (Prier, 2017, pp. 50-85). Jarred Prier discusses the nuances of cyberwarfare and how disinformation can be weaponized to destabilize a nation. Prier states that “cyber operations today target people within a society, influencing their beliefs as well as behaviors, and diminish trust in the government” (Prier, 2017, p.51). This form of warfare is concerningly effective and completely immoral from a virtue ethics perspective. Rather than utilizing social media to spread positive influences, nations use propaganda to disrupt the function of society and turn people against each other. These propaganda messages may even result in violence, particularly if an individual with a mental illness comes across these messages and acts out violently in response (Prier, 2017, pp. 50-85).

Propaganda is a long-standing method of manipulating public opinion to gain favor for a particular candidate or by nations to rally support and, sometimes, vilify other countries and their people. Social media has ushered in a new era for propaganda because it can reach a wider audience and be specifically targeted toward those an algorithm deems most susceptible. While the dangers of unrestricted online access are apparent, the solution to this problem is ethically tricky, as restricting access to information can be a slippery slope. Instead, implementing solutions such as fact-checking and alerting users when they are in contact with disinformation seems to be a far more ethical approach than banning access to said information. There is certainly an argument to be made for the free exchange of information benefiting society as it exposes individuals to opinions and perspectives that they may not have previously considered.

However, when this exchange of information is utilized for malicious intentions, there is a great possibility for harm. Keith Scott presents arguments about how the spread of information has evolved, stating, “We no longer live in a mass-media world with a few centralized choke points with just a few editors in charge, operated by commercial entities and governments” (Scott, 2018, p.3). The argument that “freedom is a double-edged sword” has likely never been more accurate as the consequences of the free spread of information have become readily apparent (Scott, 2018, p.3). While information warfare is typically viewed as adverse action, there is also an argument to be made that there was an information war during the COVID-19 pandemic in which governments and health officials attempted to combat misinformation and disinformation. This would be considered an ethical example of information warfare from a virtue ethics perspective, as health officials and governments tried to educate the general population and protect them from harm.

However, although Facebook did take measures to combat misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic, the era surrounding the 2016 presidential election was a completely different story. Organizations such as Facebook ultimately control the spread of information. According to The Atlantic, “Facebook became completely dominant as a media distributor” (Madrigal, 2017). The article portrays how a significant boost in traffic to their site came from Facebook, although this correlation was not immediately discovered. Facebook's influence was seemingly unchallenged; this trend bypassed the typical due diligence and research conducted by trusted media outlets. While Facebook may direct some users to trusted sites, there was also a mass spread of misinformation due to unchecked power (Madrigal, 2017). Virtue ethics demands that Facebook attempt to lead others toward truth and enlightenment; however, this was rarely the case, as Facebook acted in its best interest. It is also apparent that many individuals

purposefully spreading misinformation violate virtue ethics. They displayed a complete lack of compassion, fairness, and wisdom, and their actions were inherently vicious. Scott argues that individuals should complete an “online test of competence” before accessing the internet (Scott, 2018, pp. 7-8). However, this solution is not entirely ethical from the virtue ethics perspective. Rather than attempting to prevent individuals with malicious intentions from spreading disinformation or providing context to inaccurate information, this solution would impose direct restrictions on individuals' freedoms and access to information. Virtue ethics would argue that fact-checking is a healthy alternative as it sets an example and leads individuals to the truth, allowing them to grow as individuals and ideally recognize disinformation as a result.

In conclusion, Facebook engaged in information warfare due to its algorithm design to spread information based upon engagement. Facebook acted immorally as the organization had an ethical responsibility to lead others towards truth and enlightenment rather than allowing individuals to be corrupted and turned against each other. While it is difficult to determine if Facebook directly impacted the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, it is apparent that it is directly responsible for the tension and anger that was allowed to form. Allowing hateful and dishonest information to exist in a vacuum rather than an open forum was likely responsible for radicalizing groups on both sides of the political aisle. While Facebook has undeniably improved in recent years with the implementation of fact-checking the spread of awareness regarding misinformation and disinformation, the damage caused by Facebook's lack of virtue has already been done, as part of the effect of disinformation was a significant portion of their users losing faith in the trusted sources used for fact-checking,

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