

Facebook has long been a topic of discussion, as long as it has been in existence really. One of the advantages of being the most successful social media site is that Facebook can use its status to turn more profit and garner more users. Targeted advertisements have caused heated debate since their inception, due to the ethical concerns of collecting user data and what that user data might then be used for, outside of the aforementioned advertising. The 2016 election and the months leading up to it revealed just what the algorithms we know little about can really do. Due to the worldwide usage of Facebook, coupled with its presence in American media coverage, it seems to have influenced some international actors to meddle in American politics. From North Macedonia to Russia, groups of people have been using Facebook to create misinformation and disinformation sites that they knew would gain traction quickly because of the clickbait nature of fake news. Additionally, the complacency of the Democratic party led to a more cavalier approach to online campaigns during the 2016 election, believing themselves to be “in control” of the social media presidential campaign. What they didn’t take into account was the targeted campaign ads that the Republicans took advantage of to help their own cause. In this case analysis, I will argue that virtue ethics shows us that Facebook did not engage in information warfare, but rather was a tool used by different people and groups of people for the purposes of information warfare; however, Facebook was partly responsible for the outcome of the election due to the nature of the site (the ability for news to go viral so quickly, the algorithms that can lead to confirmation bias, etc.).

In Scott’s analysis of information warfare, he brings up a fantastic point on page 4: what can those in power of a social media site like Facebook really do to control its users? And his answer is as simple and true as it gets, that answer being that there is not a whole lot Facebook as a platform can do. Facebook, as an American company, is typically associated with free speech, so long as that speech is not hate speech. People in the flesh and on the internet are free to be as stupid as they would like in the United States, and we have the constitution to defend that right. So, what Scott says really holds true, there is very little to be done on the part of Facebook in an attempt to quell overwhelming stupidity. The question posed by this case analysis is whether Facebook is guilty of information warfare, and I cannot conclude that it is because people choose what to do and how they will go about doing so. When we look at it from a virtue ethics standpoint, we cannot blame the site for the way it is programmed, being an inanimate object and all. We have to blame people. Mark Zuckerberg is the closest thing we get to Facebook as a person, and even then, I am hesitant to place the blame on him. Facebook is a platform that is constantly evolving, with one of its greatest advancements being targeted advertisements. This is where I believe that Facebook has *contributed* to information warfare but did not *engage* in information warfare. Take the debate on gun control for example, as a parallel in the eye of virtue ethics. Somebody shoots another person and kills him because he won’t surrender his wallet. Who do we blame? Some will say that if the murderer did not have access to the gun, he couldn’t have killed the poor man. But the truth is that, rather than working more or asking for financial help from somebody (both choices that would be considered virtuous), this man has decided to take another life, the worth of which he has decided is whatever cash was in the wallet. That is not a virtuous action. Going back to Facebook, can we blame the social media site for doing what it is meant to do? Just as a gun is meant to shoot a bullet, Facebook is meant to feed users news that they are likely to interact with. Just as a vicious man takes advantage of

the functions of a gun, so have vicious groups of people taken advantage of the functions of Facebook. Russians who take part in disinformation campaigns are who we should be turning the blame to, because they have decided to meddle in American elections to line their own pockets with the money they get from their Facebook-advertised sites. Looking at it from a virtue ethics standpoint, Facebook is not to blame, the people who take advantage of the mechanisms present in Facebook are. They make choices to take advantage of others and destabilize democracy in America, neither of which are virtuous actions considering the circumstances. Going back to Scott's analysis, the only thing that can be done to hamper the efforts of these malicious actors is by banning them. But there are so many ways around a social media ban, that it ultimately would be a futile effort, and Scott ends up being correct that there is nothing to really do, as Facebook is not going anywhere anytime soon.

Lieutenant Colonel Prier talks extensively about Russia's involvement in the 2016 election and moreover how it might affect the shifting landscape of information warfare in the future. On page 18, Prier compares the current tactics the Russians employ with the ones they employed during the Cold War, saying that it is even more effective now that it was back then, due to the fast-moving pace of information in today's world. Prier also talks earlier in his document about fake news and how it spreads just as easily through Facebook as the Russian disinformation campaigns. Prier says that as fake news pops up on somebody's feed and they continue to click on fake news stories, they eventually begin to trust the source and perceive it as legitimate. This sort of confirmation bias feedback loop is a dangerous and unfortunate result of how the interaction-seeking algorithms of Facebook and Twitter work; social media sites bump the pages they believe you are most likely to interact with to the top of your feed, no matter what they are. For some people, it ends up being these fake news stories which then become their real news. Virtue ethics would say that this loop is the result of a non-virtuous desire. Facebook prioritizes interactions, namely shares, comments, and likes, above all else, so whatever the algorithm deems most likely to be shared will appear at the top of the news feed for that user. While the action is not necessarily a morally wrong action, the motive is ethically questionable because Facebook is promoting its own prosperity over showing the truth. I say this is not virtuous because the motives are self-preservation at best and cutthroat at worst. On page 10, Prier brings up an alarming statistic that more than two-thirds of Americans are getting their news from online sources. Getting news from an online source is not necessarily bad in and of itself, but with the ability of online news to be filtered and misrepresented in many different ways, it becomes dangerous if somebody is unable to tell when something is misinformation or disinformation or when it is able to be taken at face value. But again, this is not the fault of Facebook when we look through the eye of virtue ethics. People make choices. Facebook does as it is programmed to do. Russians with their botnets, Republican campaign managers with targeted ad campaigns, and any other number of unethical actors are the ones who choose to misuse Facebook, a tool which has the potential to be a wonderful source for news that any user is interested in. The Russian information warfare specialists know what they are doing and they are making a conscious choice to use Facebook for their own personal gain at the expense of others, which is not a choice of virtue but rather of self-centeredness and bullying. We can blame the people who spread fake news and misinformation knowingly, and even the ones who don't bother to educate themselves sufficiently, because incompetence and ignorance are not

virtuous characteristics either. We can only look as far as hoping Facebook is able to be regulated better as time goes on, and that future elections are not put in the hands of people outside the confines of the United States.

So, the question of the hour: did Facebook engage in information warfare? No, Facebook as a social media platform does not have its own agency and does not make the decision to maliciously use information. However, it is a powerful tool that was instrumental in shaping how the 2016 election went. But the true blame can only be placed on people, because they choose to act immorally and in ways that bring harm to others. In the lens of virtue ethics, Facebook is neutral because it acts only in the way that it was designed, but we can point a finger at those who designed it for self-serving purposes. If the algorithms were not designed to prioritize interactivity, and instead prioritized bringing news that is reliable and fact-checked, then it could be considered out of the hands of the creators as well. But the creators did not act in a virtuous manner by creating something so powerful without considering the ramifications of the process during an event as significant as a presidential election. In the same way, we can blame those who abuse Facebook for their own purposes, such as the Russians during the 2016 election, because according to virtue ethics, their choices were not morally sound either. This way of thinking can be taken into other debates as well, such as gun control like I mentioned earlier. I don't believe that the tool used for nefarious purposes can ever be fully to blame, because it is only fulfilling the duty it was designed to do. Facebook was designed so that people would get news they are interested in. Guns were designed to fire bullets. Phone games are designed to be addictive. The creators of these tools can be blamed if their intentions are misplaced. Humans are who we point the finger at because ultimately we are the ones who make our own decisions.