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Case Analysis on Information Warfare

Does interference in US elections by Russia, China, and Iran constitute information warfare, and, whether or not it is information warfare, is it justifiable? If the US were to interfere in similar ways in elections in Russia, China, or Iran, would that constitute information warfare, and, whether or not it would be information warfare, would it be justifiable?

David R. Shedd and Ivana Stradner's article "The Covert War for American Minds: How Russia, China, and Iran Seek to Spread Disinformation and Chaos in the United States" give a detailed account on how Russia, China, and Iran have attempted to interfere in US elections over the last several years. The authors describe how the authoritarian governments in charge of these countries have repeatedly conducted information operations in cyberspace to undermine the US public's faith in democracy, elections, and the US role as the leader of the free world. Russian bots run rampant on different social media platforms to spread discontent and distrust in the Democratic Party's 2024 presidential candidate, Vice President Kamala Harris. Meanwhile, Iranian-backed hackers stole and leaked the private files from former President Donald Trump's campaign in an effort to damage the Republican Party's 2024 presidential candidate. The Chinese government has even focused on down-ballot races and used social media through their Spamouflage campaign to target US politicians critical of the Chinese government's policies. Both authors advocate for why the United States should employ both defensive and offensive information warfare operations to counter the actions of these adversary nations. In this Case Analysis I will argue that utilitarianism shows us that these nations did engage in unjustified information warfare against the US because they used information warfare strategy of deception from Valerie Morkevičius's writings and the strategy of "commanding the narrative" from Lt Col Jrrred Prier's writings. Furthermore, I will argue that if the US were to engage in these activities it would also be information warfare that is unjustifiable based on utilitarianism.

Valerie Morkevičius's chapter titled "Just war thinking and wars of information" describes several concepts covering the application of information-psychological warfare in the 21st century using two strategies: denial and deception. Morkevičius briefly addresses how just war theory can or cannot justify certain actions conducted during information warfare. Morkevičius relies on classic theorists such as Augustine to describe classical just war theory. Per Augustine, so long as acts of war are done not out of a sense of vengeance but out of a sense of protecting the public, then the people carrying out these acts should be seen as "ministers of the law" and justified. This does conflict with one of Shedd and Stradner's arguments that the US should also conduct information warfare against authoritarian nations such as Russia to give them "a dose of their own medicine". This line of thinking smacks of being motivated out of vengeance, not defending the greater American public or even minimizing the greatest amount of harm. However, rather than getting caught up in the classical arguments over whether a country should go to war, Morkevičius uses a consequentialist framework to analyze how the use of 21st century technologies during information warfare are justifiable throughout the spectrum of warfare (ranging from total peace to total war) using two broad strategies: Denial and Deception.

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Shedd and Stradner could have employed the utilitarian framework from Morkevičius's writings to moderate their position on advocating for the US to go on the offensive to "exploit sensitive issues and overwhelm security apparatuses with a barrage of pervasive and relentless messaging" of adversary countries like China or Russia. Morkevičius's framework considers proportionality, orderliness, necessity, and likelihood of success. Proportionality is the metric that most aligns with utilitarianism and asks whether the positive effects outweigh the negative effects of any action. Utilitarianism evaluates the mortality of any action by looking at the consequences of them, with the overall goal of maximizing happiness or pleasure in the world because of these actions. In instances when there are only bad options, then utilitarianism dictates that a person should go with the option that decreases suffering the most or leads to the least amount of suffering. Morkevičius has no misgivings about the ethical use of denial in information warfare. Per Morkevičius, a country has no moral obligation to give their adversary's access to any kind of information and should deny them access through increased network security protocols. Shedd and Stradner's arguments for the *defensive* measures the US government can use to counter election interference broadly align with Morkevičius's concepts of denial. One example of defensive denial that Shedd and Stradner suggest is organizing joint working groups of US government experts and representatives from social media platforms to expose foreign misinformation campaigns that abuse US platforms to distort the truth or spread lies. Shedd and Stradner do acknowledge that US citizens are either wittingly or unwittingly sharing and amplifying messages from countries like Russia to spread distrust in the US democratic process. Both authors advocate that the US government should not suppress US citizens' right to free speech, but should make every effort to counter and ban foreign malign actors conducting influence operations in the US.

However, where Morkevičius's writings strongly differ with Shedd and Stradner is on whether to use deception to conduct information warfare. Morkevičius qualifies that any nation-state trying to conduct deception in information warfare should be very careful and measured when employing this strategy, whether that be through lying, spinning, or concealing the truth. Morkevičius makes the most effective arguments along utilitarian lines in regards to *lying* in information warfare. Morkevičius acknowledges that there are specific cases for when lying in warfare could be morally justified, such as a strategic lie that is made to benefit of the greater collective. One utilitarian case against lying that Morkevičius points out is that the potential harm from misinformation campaigns far outweigh their benefits. This is primarily because the people using misinformation campaigns rarely consider the second and third order effects or long-term damage that these lies can cause amongst a population. This is also the failing in Shedd and Stradner's arguments for the US conducting *offensive* information warfare to give countries like Iran "a dose of their own medicine". For all the harm caused by Russian election interference in the US that Shedd and Stradner decry, they don't clearly consider how disastrous it would be if the US government were to turn around and conduct election interference in other countries' elections. In particular, Morkevičius considers the negative effects of deception campaigns on what happens *after* a war is over, when efforts at reconciliation must be made and healing to begin. As Morkevičius points out, lying damages the one who made the lie as well the one who fell for it. From the utilitarian perspective, the negative effects of an offensive information warfare campaign that targets another country's elections would linger long after the foreign government has been deposed and the people are left with a deep

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seated distrust in the democratic process. Shedd and Stradner articulated no endgame or theory of victory for when these offensive information operations have achieved their objectives. They could have benefitted from reading Morkevičius to stop and consider what happens next when information warfare ends. Even if the government of Iran were somehow overthrown thanks to a misinformation campaign led by the US, the people of Iran would probably remain forever distrustful and resentful of the US for plunging their country into chaos if the truth of US interference became known.

Lt Col Jarred Prier's concept of "commanding the trend" uses two case studies for how a non-state actor, the Islamic State (IS), and a state-actor, Russia, used social media as a tool to wage information warfare and dominate the narrative online. Per Prier, commanding the trend involves targeting the population's opinion, perceptions, and attitudes towards a certain topic using social networks, propaganda, and information sharing. As Prier recalls, Russia has longstanding experience with waging information warfare during their time as the former Soviet Union using *aktivnyye meropriyatiya* (active measures) and *dezinformatsiya* (disinformation). What differentiated the Soviet Union from other countries' information campaigns was that active measures were meant to target the opinions of the entire populace, not just the military or government. The key factor that improved on the old-style of Soviet active measures has been the rise of social media platforms that help amplify and spread disinformation much more quickly and precisely in the 21st century. During the 2016 US election, one of Russia's information warfare branches, the Internet Research Agency, was able to deploy an army of online trolls and bot farms to reach disparate groups of susceptible people in the US who were previously disconnected or unorganized. These small, disconnected groups of users in the US were suddenly all consuming the same misinformation from Russia about widespread election fraud and distrust in the election process. In addition, they were able to connect in digital echo chambers to reinforce each other's false narratives and spread the message to more and more people. Additional efforts such as hacking and leaking emails from the Democratic National Committee helped to fuel the perception that the US political process was rigged against certain candidates like Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump in favor of others like Hillary Clinton. Unfortunately for the Russians, while these efforts certainly dominated the information narrative in the lead up to the 2016 election and divided the US populace, they did not completely affect the entire US population, and only seemed to piss off at least half the population into action against Russia.

Using utilitarianism, we can determine whether the Russian 2016 election interference increased overall happiness or at least caused the least amount of harm (from a Russian perspective). Using the Russian example, we can then try to determine whether the US would be justified in doing the same based on the possible outcome. While there is no doubt that the Russian election interference campaign of 2016 certainly helped them to "command the trend", the longer-term effects in both the US and Russia have been overwhelmingly more negative than positive. While Donald Trump (presumably the candidate that Russia preferred) winning the US election in 2016 was probably a short-term goal of the interference campaign, very large sectors of the US government and populace became highly aware of Russia's threat to US democracy. Russian election interference did not diminish US views of Russia as an adversary. On the contrary, it's

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helped wide swathes of the US to better appreciate just how big the threat Russia is to US democracy. After all, it was only in 2012 that presidential candidate Mitt Romney was mocked for claiming the Russia was the greatest geopolitical foe to the US during a debate with then President Barack Obama. The Russian election interference campaign only helped to mobilize the US even more against Russia. Russia did not fully consider the longer-term negative effects of waging their election interference campaign, and only prioritized the short-term benefit of sowing division between US political parties to decrease trust in the US democratic process. The 2020 US election saw the highest voter turnout since 1990 (when the Soviet Union still existed), and the Trump administration was replaced with the Biden administration. Even though some US politicians and parts of the US public are against sending aid to Ukraine and don't see countering Russia as a priority, the US has maintained strong bipartisan support for Ukraine ever since Russia invaded in February 2022. Over 100,000 Russian soldiers have been killed in Ukraine, and many were killed with bullets, missiles, and artillery shells sent from the US and NATO allies. There are hundreds of thousands more wounded. Even more long-term negative effects are yet to be realized for Russia, but it has led to many in the US like Shedd and Stradner to call for increased defensive efforts to counter Russia's information warfare campaigns in the US. The US is certainly technically capable of waging offensive information warfare against its adversaries, just as Shedd and Stradner desire. However, they should take great caution to call on the US to wage the same kind of election interference campaigns to give these adversaries "a dose of their own medicine". Even though Russia may have amended their term limits to let Russian President Vladimir Putin stay in power through 2035, he won't be in power forever (he's 72 years old as of 2024). Russia has become an international pariah, particularly with the Western world. Relations between the US and Russia are at their lowest since the Cold War, and an entire generation of Americans who grew up after the Cold War now view Russia as one of the most dangerous threats to democracy. Long after Putin is gone and Trump's second term ends, there will remain lingering distrust, resentment, and competition between the US and Russia. Shedd and Stradner should consider Russia's example as a case study on how not to conduct information warfare and a prime example of why the US conducting election interference is morally unjustifiable along utilitarian grounds.

This is not to say that the US should never conduct forms of information operations in other countries. Shedd and Stradner both point to the historical examples of how the US tried to subvert Soviet government control by winning over the population through American music, arts, and literature. The key difference here is that these efforts were overt examples of information operations, and the Russian people knew they were consuming American media and information. There was an honest exchange of ideas taking place, and there was no strategy of deception to achieve this goal. Furthermore, the overall affect of exchanging these ideas was to help show the Russian people that they had far more in common with Americans. Morkevičius and Prier's articles clearly show that foreign governments attempting to influence a US election are forms of information warfare waged against the US population. The Russian's use of troll farms and bots were particularly deceptive means meant to spread disinformation, sow division between Americans, and decrease trust in the US democratic process. Furthermore, the results of the Russian 2016 election interference campaign show that while the Russians were effective at "commanding the trend" and achieved some short-term gains (from the Russian perspective), the

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overall effect has led to an overall increase in harm to all parties involved. Shedd and Stradner should take heed to remember Russia's example as a cautionary tale on just how destructive morally unjustifiable offensive information warfare can be, to both the target audience and the ones waging the attack.