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The modern digital age has created a new front in warfare, information warfare. While warfare is traditionally waged by nation states and political organizations, we have seen an uptick in large tech companies using their large influence to conduct and allow Information warfare on their platforms. In his analysis, Alexis C. Madrigal explores the complex landscape of Facebook's influence on American democracy, particularly through its role in the spread of misinformation during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. Madrigal shines a spotlight on how Facebook's sophisticated algorithms and vast reach enabled targeted political advertising and the unchecked proliferation of fake news. These dynamics fostered an environment where misleading information could spread rapidly among user networks without sufficient oversight by Facebook. Although Madrigal argues that these circumstances were hard to foresee, I still believe Facebook played a role in what happened on their site in the months leading up to the 2016 election. In this Case Analysis, I will argue that Facebook did engage in information warfare because its platform was used as a tool for the systematic spread of disinformation aimed at manipulating public opinion and electoral outcomes. Further, I will argue that Facebook was partly responsible for the election outcome because its failure to adequately monitor and address the misuse of its network enabled a significant distortion of democratic engagement.

Jarred Prier, in his work "Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare" published in the Strategic Studies Quarterly in Winter 2017, delves into the strategic use of social media platforms as tools for information warfare. A central concept from Prier's analysis is the

idea of "digital wildfires," where social media platforms, like Facebook, enable rapid and widespread dissemination of both information and misinformation. Prier articulates how state and non-state actors exploit these platforms to influence public opinion, manipulate political outcomes, and create discord within our society. This is achieved through coordinated campaigns that amplify specific narratives or misinformation, often leveraging the algorithms of these platforms to maximize reach and impact. Applying Prier's concept of digital wildfires to the case of Facebook during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, we observe a clear instance of information warfare facilitated by Facebook's network. The platform's algorithms were designed to prioritize content that was engaging and likely to generate user interaction, without necessarily discriminating between truthful information and misinformation. This design flaw was exploited by various actors to spread false narratives and manipulate public opinion—a key strategy in information warfare. For instance, numerous reports and investigations have revealed how Russian-affiliated operatives used Facebook to create and promote polarizing content to sow discord and influence the election's outcome. These activities align with Prier's description of social media as battlegrounds for information warfare, where the rapid spread of misinformation can have real-world geopolitical consequences.

From a deontological ethical perspective, which focuses on adherence to a set of duties or rules regardless of the outcome, Facebook's actions can be critically assessed. Deontology prioritizes the morality of actions themselves over the consequences of those actions. Thus, even if unintended, Facebook's failure to prevent its platform from being used for information warfare does not absolve it of responsibility. The ethical duty here would involve proactive measures to ensure that their platform could not be easily misused in such a manner. This includes implementing more stringent content verification processes and altering the algorithm to reduce

the spread of false information. Facebook's duty, from a deontological standpoint, would have been to safeguard the integrity of information circulated on its platform. This means prioritizing the truthfulness and reliability of the content over user engagement or profit margins. Ethically, Facebook should have anticipated the potential misuse of its platform in a manner consistent with Prier's warnings about digital wildfires. By not doing so, Facebook neglected its ethical duty to prevent harm that its platform could—and did—cause in the context of democratic processes.

All in all, the right thing for Facebook to have done, based on a deontological assessment, would have been to take a more active role in monitoring and managing the content on its platform to guard against the misuse of its system for information warfare. Implementing comprehensive fact-checking mechanisms, adjusting algorithms to downplay sensationalist but unverified news, and responding swiftly to identified threats of information manipulation would align with their ethical duties. Such actions would demonstrate a commitment to the ethical use of technology that respects democratic values and minimizes harm, aligning with deontological ethics' emphasis on the morality of actions themselves rather than their outcomes.

Keith Scott's work, "A Second Amendment for Cyber? Possession, Prohibition and Personal Liberty for the Information Age," presented at the 17th European Conference on Cyber Warfare and Security in 2018, introduces a thought-provoking concept that could serve as a foundation for discussing and regulating the responsibilities of digital platform owners similar to how the Second Amendment addresses firearm possession. Scott proposes that just as the right to bear arms is regulated to prevent misuse while preserving individual freedoms, there should be analogous rights and responsibilities specifically tailored for digital tools and data. This

framework advocates for clear guidelines that define how digital platforms like Facebook can be used, ensuring they do not become tools for undermining democracy through the spread of misinformation or manipulation. In the context of Facebook's influence on the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, Scott's concept of digital rights suggests that Facebook had a significant responsibility similar to that of a gun owner or gun seller. The platform's vast reach and sophisticated algorithm made it a powerful tool, capable of amplifying both genuine and false narratives at scale. However, unlike the clear regulations surrounding firearm ownership and use, the oversight of digital platforms was almost non-existent during this time, allowing for their exploitation in information warfare.

Applying a deontological ethical perspective to this case, which emphasizes duty and the adherence to moral rules regardless of the consequences, we can critically assess Facebook's actions. Deontology argues that an entity or individual has a moral obligation to act according to specific ethical principles, which in Facebook's case, would involve actively ensuring that its platform is not used to deceive or mislead the public. The ethical duty includes not just avoiding harm, but actively working to prevent harm where possible. This duty becomes especially critical given the context of an election, where the integrity of the information ecosystem is paramount. Facebook's role in the dissemination of misinformation—highlighted by the proliferation of fake news and the targeted political ads funded by foreign entities—illustrates a failure to fulfill this duty. The platform's algorithms, designed to maximize engagement, favored sensationalist content, often without regard for its veracity, thereby facilitating the spread of misinformation. From the deontological standpoint, Facebook should have prioritized ethical responsibilities over business interests. This would involve implementing stronger content verification processes, transparent algorithmic operations that users can understand and trust, and a more proactive

approach in monitoring political advertisements and news to ensure they do not mislead the public. These measures would not only align with Scott's notion of digital rights but also fulfill Facebook's ethical duty to safeguard democratic discourse.

With that being said, Facebook's actions leading up to and during the 2016 election can be seen as a breach of their ethical duties from a deontological perspective. Had Facebook adhered to a framework similar to the one proposed by Scott, acknowledging digital rights and responsibilities akin to those in the Second Amendment for firearms, it could have mitigated or even prevented the misuse of its platform for information warfare. The right thing to have done, based on deontological ethics and Scott's proposal, would have been for Facebook to proactively implement stringent safeguards against misinformation, ensuring the platform remained a tool for genuine social engagement rather than a weapon in information warfare. This alignment with ethical duties would not only have protected the integrity of the electoral process but also preserved the foundational democratic values at risk in such scenarios.

In summary, the analysis of Facebook's role in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election through the lens of Jarred Prier's concept of digital wildfires and Keith Scott's framework for digital rights equivalent to the Second Amendment highlights the platform's failure in fulfilling its ethical duties. Using deontological ethics as a tool for ethical reasoning, it is clear that Facebook had a moral obligation to ensure its platform was not used to undermine democracy through the spread of misinformation and to manipulate public opinion. One might object that expecting Facebook to foresee and prevent all misuse of its platform is unrealistic, given the complexity and novelty of social media's role in politics. Critics may argue that the responsibility also lies with users to critically assess the information they consume and with government bodies

to regulate these platforms more stringently. While these points are valid, they do not absolve Facebook of its foundational responsibility to create a safe and truthful environment, especially given its awareness of the platform's power and influence. Further considerations involve comparing Facebook's situation with related cases in other tech companies, highlighting a broader issue in the tech industry's responsibility toward public discourse. The challenges tech companies face in balancing business interests with ethical responsibilities are complex and warrant careful scrutiny.