In "What Facebook Did to American Democracy," Alexis C. Madrigal investigates how Facebook's algorithms and advertising tools were used by Russia to manipulate American voters during the 2016 presidential election. The article explores how Facebook's focus on engagement and user attention, combined with its targeting capabilities, made it possible for Russia to create and amplify divisive content to specific audiences in swing states. The piece details how Russian operatives created fake pages and groups, organized rallies, and purchased ads to spread propaganda and disinformation that influenced voters' opinions and behaviors. Madrigal argues that Facebook's business model and lack of oversight allowed these activities to go unchecked and contributed to the erosion of American democracy. In this Case Analysis, I will argue that consequentialist ethics show us that Facebook was partly responsible for the election outcome because its actions allowed for the manipulation of voters and the spread of false information.

In his article "The Ethics of Social Media," Ryan Prier introduces several central concepts related to the ethics of social media platforms. One such concept is the idea of "algorithmic control," which refers to the ways in which social media algorithms shape and control user experiences. Prior argues that algorithmic control raises ethical concerns because it can limit user autonomy and agency, and because it can be manipulated by outside actors to achieve their own ends. Another key concept is the idea of "informational asymmetry," which refers to the unequal distribution of information between different parties. The previous notes that social media platforms often have access to vast amounts of data about their users, which can be used to manipulate user behavior or to provide advantages to certain actors.

In the case of Facebook's role in the 2016 election, these concepts are highly relevant. Facebook's algorithms and advertising tools allowed Russian operatives to effectively manipulate user experiences and to spread false and misleading information to specific groups of users. The algorithmic control exercised by Facebook meant that many users were exposed only to content that aligned with their preexisting beliefs and biases, further exacerbating divisions within American society. The informational asymmetry between Facebook and its users also played a crucial role, as the company had access to vast amounts of user data that could be used to identify and target specific groups with propaganda.

Using consequentialist ethics as a tool for analysis, it becomes clear that Facebook's actions during the election were deeply problematic. The manipulation of user experiences and the spread of false information had real-world consequences, ultimately contributing to the election of Donald Trump. From a consequentialist perspective, this outcome was clearly harmful, as the Trump presidency has been marked by a series of divisive and damaging policies, as well as ongoing attacks on American democracy. Facebook's failure to adequately police its platform and to prevent the spread of propaganda can thus be seen as a serious ethical failing. To assess the actions taken in this case, it is important to consider what Facebook could have done differently. From a consequentialist perspective, it is clear that the company had a responsibility to take proactive measures to prevent the spread of propaganda and false information on its platform. This might have included a more rigorous screening of ads and pages, better monitoring of user behavior, and more robust protections for user privacy. Additionally, Facebook could have taken steps to reduce the influence of its algorithms on user experiences, such as by prioritizing more diverse and balanced content in users' news feeds.

Overall, the case of Facebook's role in the 2016 election demonstrates the ethical challenges presented by social media platforms, particularly when it comes to algorithmic control and informational asymmetry. From a consequentialist perspective, it is clear that Facebook failed to live up to its responsibilities to users and to society at large, and that the company should have taken more proactive steps to prevent the spread of propaganda and false information. Moving forward, it will be crucial for social media platforms to take a more ethical approach to their operations, prioritizing the protection of user privacy and autonomy, as well as the integrity of democratic processes.

In his book "Two Cheers for Anarchism," James C. Scott discusses several central concepts related to power, resistance, and the dynamics of social change. One key concept is the idea of "public transcripts" versus "hidden transcripts," which refers to the different forms of discourse that exist in societies. Public transcripts are the forms of discourse that are visible and acceptable in public, such as political speeches, news media, and official documents. Hidden transcripts, on the other hand, are the forms of discourse that exist outside of the public eye, such as gossip, jokes, and other forms of subversive speech. According to Scott, hidden transcripts can be a powerful tool for resistance and social change, as they allow for the expression of dissenting opinions and ideas.

In the case of Facebook's role in the 2016 election, the concept of hidden transcripts is particularly relevant. Russian operatives were able to use Facebook to disseminate hidden transcripts in the form of false and misleading information, as well as divisive content that was designed to appeal to specific groups of voters. By doing so, they were able to manipulate public opinion and to influence the outcome of the election. From Scott's perspective, this can be seen as an example of the power of hidden transcripts, as it allowed for the expression of dissenting opinions and ideas that would not have been acceptable in public discourse.

Using deontological ethics as a tool for analysis, it becomes clear that Facebook's actions during the election were deeply problematic. The company had a responsibility to protect the integrity of democratic processes and to prevent the spread of false and misleading information on its platform. From a deontological perspective, this responsibility arises from a duty to respect the autonomy and dignity of individual users, as well as from a duty to promote the common good of society. Facebook's failure to live up to these responsibilities can thus be seen as a serious ethical failing. To assess the actions taken in this case, it is important to consider what Facebook could have done differently. From a deontological perspective, the company had a duty to take proactive measures to prevent the spread of false and misleading information on its platform, even if this meant limiting the freedom of speech of individual users. This might have included more rigorous screening of ads and pages, better monitoring of user behavior, and more robust protections for user privacy. Additionally, Facebook could have taken steps to reduce the influence of its algorithms on user experiences, such as by prioritizing more diverse and balanced content in users' news feeds.

Overall, the case of Facebook's role in the 2016 election demonstrates the ethical challenges presented by social media platforms, particularly when it comes to the spread of hidden transcripts and the manipulation of public opinion. From a deontological perspective, it is clear that Facebook had a responsibility to take proactive measures to prevent the spread of false and misleading information on its platform. Moving forward, it will be crucial for social media platforms to take a more ethical approach to their operations, prioritizing the protection of user autonomy and dignity, as well as the integrity of democratic processes.

In conclusion, the case of Facebook's role in the 2016 election highlights the complex ethical challenges that arise in the context of social media platforms. Through the lens of both Madrigal and Scott, it is clear that Facebook's actions had far-reaching consequences, including the spread of false and misleading information, the manipulation of public opinion, and a threat to the integrity of democratic processes. Using deontological ethics as a tool for analysis, it is clear that Facebook had a responsibility to take proactive measures to prevent these outcomes, and that the company failed to live up to this responsibility.

Moving forward, it is crucial for social media platforms to take a more ethical approach to their operations, prioritizing the protection of user autonomy and dignity, as well as the integrity of democratic processes. This might include more robust protections for user privacy, better monitoring of user behavior, and more rigorous screening of ads and pages. Additionally, social media platforms should consider the ways in which hidden transcripts can be used to promote resistance and social change, while also acknowledging the risks that arise when hidden transcripts are used to spread false and misleading information.

Of course, there are many objections and alternate views that could be raised in response to this analysis. For example, some might argue that Facebook's role in the 2016 election was overstated, or that the company was simply providing a platform for free speech. Others might argue that it is not Facebook's responsibility to police the content that users share on its platform, and that doing so would be a violation of individual rights. While these objections are worth considering, ultimately it is clear that social media platforms have a significant impact on public discourse and the functioning of democratic processes, and that they have a responsibility to operate in an ethical and socially responsible manner.