

Facebook is one of the largest social media platforms with billions of active users. Due to its large user base and its information sharing nature. Facebook has been the target of much controversy and has begun to be a platform of Information Warfare by nation states. This became apparent to the public during the US Presidential Election of 2016 between Republican Candidate Donald Trump and Democratic Candidate Hilary Clinton. During the election a high amount of misinformation and disinformation spread throughout social media, in particular through Facebook. Due to the speed at which information could spread, the large userbase, and algorithms that could create targeted ads for a specific group. Facebook was a way to spread propaganda and ideas to other likeminded individuals. This was noticed by the Russian government and developed operations on this platform to promote their favored Candidate Donald Trump, in an attempt to manipulate the outcome of the presidential election. With the utilization of the Consequentialism Tool and use of works from both Lt Col. Jarred Prier and Keith Scott. I will argue that Facebook engaged in Information Warfare and to an extent was responsible for the outcome of the 2016 Presidential election.

In the work of Lt Col Jarred Prier's, "Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare." Prier Discusses how Russia used the platform along with twitter to spread fake news. A small group of human controlled accounts would create a network of bots in order to reach others their actual targeted demographic. They would use to their advantage the algorithms created by Facebook for their benefits. By having a large number of bots giving attention to an article in this case a piece of propaganda. The article picks up and begins to spread, getting suggested to others outside this small group and bot network. Russia had been using Facebook algorithms to their advantage to spread trending topics outside networks to reach those that have weak ties, but similar beliefs. These algorithms were created with the intent of spreading popular stories and exposing users to new posts that still align with other things users like, share, or comment on. Prier notes the limitations of this however, since the trending posts still are met with skepticism if it reaches those who have other beliefs. The goal of this information warfare appears to target those with already established beliefs and strongly reenforce those beliefs even if the information proves false. Facebook may have created this algorithm with the best intentions to bring users content they may potentially, however this algorithm could be used by other malicious actors with unintended consequences. Such as Russian interference in political elections.

Applying the Consequentialism tool and examining this through the eyes of a Utilitarianism, we can view that the consequences of Facebook's algorithm promoting fake news did not benefit society. Although Facebook may not have contributed directly to the information war, they provided a platform and tools that encouraged the spread of disinformation and misinformation. Understandably, Facebook cannot be held responsible for all their users' actions, but they have a responsibility for creating a safe environment to the best of their ability. Having false news that could potentially promote discontent in society. Facebook provides a service and an environment to it user base, and they are responsible for the safety of that environment even when those actions are a consequence of a tool they provide. If I was to create an environment, I claimed was safe for others to use, then one user exploits the tools I provide within that environment for nefarious use. While that user would be the primary responsible party, some would argue that I should be held accountable to an extent because it happened within my environment using the tools I provided. The consequences of the tool I provided created an unsafe

environment, which in the perspective of a Utilitarian would make my actions unethical. They allowed for this information to spread unregulated leading to the rise in extremist groups and views. Much of this information went against what other media outlets put out, giving the impression that the fake news was being covered up reinforcing negative beliefs. This reinforcement of beliefs encourages a higher outcome in voters during the election. It gave those that may not have voted in the first-place motivation to come out and vote. While the information war was not intended to persuade beliefs, its purpose was to cause discontent in society if a particular party was not successful. This was evident during the Capitol Hill riots, when President Donald Trump lost to Republican candidate Joe Biden. The same voters present during the 2016 election felt robbed inciting a riot.

Scott describes in his work, "A Second Amendment for Cyber? Possession, Prohibition, and Personal Liberty for the Information Age." Scott refers to Jamais Cascio's comparison of a mobile phone to an AK-47 of the 21st Century. Our perception of a weapon has changed throughout history and in order to mitigate those harms to society, governments have regulated weapon use. While we are allowed our right to bear arms in the US, the government mitigates the harm these weapons cause by implementing a system of regulating the types of weapons and who is allowed to carry a weapon. It's impossible to predict everyone's intent when they seek out a weapon to purchase, and the government understands this by attempting to mitigate the risks by employing restrictions. If we apply this to Facebook and the algorithms used to spread disinformation and misinformation during the 2016 election. By providing the tools to spread this false information, they should be in charge of regulating it's use within their environment. The government monitors the physical society in the same way Facebook monitors the digital environment of its users. It is hard to argue that these trends comprised of false information had gone unnoticed by those within Facebook. In fact, many of these trends had a serious number of views ranging in the millions. Knowing that this was occurring on their platform, yet not taking the appropriate steps make them complicit in the spread of false information. Just as the government has the capability of removing those in society that would potentially harm it, Facebook has that similar capability by removing bots, malicious users, or the false information being spread.

When we apply the Consequentialism tool to Scott's work in reference to our perception of weapons and their regulation. A Utilitarian would agree that the consequences resulting from a weapon be used in a malicious way would be unethical. The consequences of allowing everyone in society can harm that society, since not everyone in that society has the same intentions when using a weapon. The consequences can harm a society; therefore, they are unethical. Facebook allowed false information to circulate on their platform, and the results from the lack of regulating users caused distrust amongst society harming it. A Utilitarian view everyone within a society as equal, and that the greatest amount of good should be for the greater amount of people. Allowing the facilitation of false information to benefit one party while negatively impacting the rest of society is unethical. By allowing the information to spread, gave the impression to society that Facebook was a safe platform to engage in Information Warfare. The consequences of inaction negatively harmed the integrity of the US government and information we find online. The false information provided at the time benefited only the party that was perceived in a positive light within the false information. The users themselves are also victims for being deceived by the information provided to them. From a Utilitarian perspective the ethically responsible action Facebook should have taken would be to regulate the content on their platform. While this may

harm the content creators, the consequences for allowing them to continue are detrimental to society. Stopping them would benefit the greater good in the end.

In conclusion, Facebook did engage in information warfare through their inaction. To reiterate, by allowing false information to circulate unregulated within their environment. They gave the impression that this was acceptable on their platform, and by allowing their tools to be utilized in the facilitation of false information distrust reached a great range of users. Facebook was responsible contributed to the outcome of the 2016 US Presidential election, but not in the way most would think. By allowing access to a greater number of resources, the few that may not have voted in the first place had their beliefs reenforced motivating them to vote. It is difficult to persuade a person to go against their preset beliefs, but reenforcing those beliefs can result in the rise of extremist groups. Which was evident during the following election and the Capitol Hill riot associated with it. In application of the Consequentialism tool, the resulting consequences caused harm to society. False information led many to believe that other media outlets were potentially concealing information from society by not reporting on the false information they had viewed. Distrust between the government and society occurred making those reenforced by false information feel betrayed. The only ones that benefitted from the spread of misinformation were those that had been painted in a positive light by the information, and the ones who created the information for ulterior motives. Utilitarianism believes in the benefit for the majority of society and that actions are judged ethically based on the resulting consequences. With this in mind, applying this to the inaction of Facebook and the 2016 US elections. It could be conclusively argued that this was a case of unethical information warfare.