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Facebook is arguably one of the most, if not the most, influential social media networks in the modern world due to the amount of information that is spread through it. Over the years, there has been an increase in information warfare taking place over social media due to its ability to spread information at rapid rates. Facebook is no stranger to information warfare on its platform, as its algorithm's tendency to strive for engagement over truth makes it a hotbed for the manipulation of information. This leads to Facebook playing a passive role in information warfare and influencing many within the country, including how those within the country are informed and even how they vote. In this Case Analysis I will argue that utilitarianism shows us that Facebook did engage in information warfare because its platform and algorithm were used to facilitate the spread of fake news and information, and further that they were partly responsible for the election outcome because of the misinformation spread on their platform by sources inside the US as well as the Russian government.

There are many conflicting definitions of information warfare, but most generally agree that it has to do with the manipulation, spread, and utilization of information in a way to achieve a goal, an advantage, or some other desirable outcome. Some would argue that information

warfare is moral while others may argue its immoral, but utilitarianism is an ideology that would argue that it depends on the situation and that the outcome of the situation determines whether its moral or not. Specifically, utilitarianism is the belief “...that the consequences of an action are good exactly when the consequences increase the amount of good in the world...” and that “...the right action is the one that maximizes the amount of happiness and minimizes the amount of suffering” (Canvas, 2024). So, a utilitarian perspective on the Facebook information warfare situation would determine its morality based on its outcome rather than the action itself. With this in mind, we need to discuss how information is spread on Facebook and how it may have participated in information warfare.

Facebook is one of many social media companies that make the spread of information much easier due to any user being able to post what they wish as long as it does not go against Facebook Terms of Service. Keith Scott discusses this very notion in his paper “A Second Amendment for Cyber? – Possession, Prohibition, and Personal Liberty for the Information Age”. Scott discusses how Facebook and other social media apps provides citizens with a new level of power in some senses, but also states “...they allow governments to disseminate disinformation and propaganda in the guise of ‘concerned citizens...’” (Scott, 2018). Facebook can be used by a variety of people to spread or manipulate various elements of information due to its connectivity but also its algorithm. “Facebook’s draw is the ability to give you what you want”, as the more you interact with certain types of media, the more you’ll be recommended media that is like what you interacted with (Madrigal, 2017). This means that the news received by users on Facebook is not based on the most trustworthy source or even the most viewed source, it depends on what the user themselves interacts with. Facebook is more likely to

recommend a source to a user if it matches posts or sources that the user has interacted with in the past, as Facebook's main goal is to generate and increase engagement (Madrigal, 2017).

Due to Facebook's methods of increasing engagement, this has led to various groups attempting to utilize this system to their advantage. Keith Scott describes these groups as being a splinter group of republicans who won the white house, a group of more radical democrats who oppose the new republicans, and corporations who are trying to influence politics through social media (Scott, 2018). These groups are all participating in information warfare as it was defined near the beginning of the paper and are utilizing Facebook's system to do so. Facebook is not actively participating in this informational warfare but are allowing those doing so to use their platform to participate in it, as well as profiting off it. If Facebook's system is being utilized to manipulate the spread of information for the personal gain or goals of these groups, then Facebook is participating in information warfare as well. In addition, it can be reasoned that the occurrence of this information warfare could be a bad thing from a utilitarian perspective. These three groups engaging in information warfare on Facebook "...offers the perfect medium to allow the growth and spread of multiple conflicting ideologies, leading inevitable to a position of completely incompatible positions" (Scott, 2018). If a situation like this is to lead to harm or suffering in the future, then the war of information over Facebook would be immoral under utilitarianism. If that is the case, then Facebook allowing this war to continue is immoral although the harm won't be seen until the future, so it cannot be determined as of now whether this is an immoral action.

While it has been determined that Facebook participated in information warfare by allowing their system to be used for its facilitation, it still must be determined whether Facebook impacted the 2016 US election. We can first look towards how Facebook's actions may have

impacted past elections, namely the 2012 US presidential election. This is discussed by Alexis C. Madrigal in her article “What Facebook Did to American Democracy”, which mainly discusses Facebook’s involvement in the 2016 election but also their influence on the 2012 election. Madrigal states “...Facebook’s get-out-the-vote message could have driven a substantial chunk of the increase in youth voter participation in the 2012 general election”, which already shows Facebook’s ability to spread information (Madrigal, 2017). If Facebook’s campaign to encourage people to vote was able to influence the 2012 election to that degree, it shows that Facebook already had the ability to disseminate information to a plethora of its users to influence an election. However, the three groups discussed earlier continued to utilize Facebook and its algorithm in between 2012 and 2016, leading to the wide dissemination of fake news throughout Facebook. Fake news generated more engagement than real news which caused it to spread faster than real news, as every source that spread fake news could be considered “...a node in the information network that helped Trump beat Clinton” (Madrigal, 2017). However, these were just the sources from America that were spreading fake news across Facebook and even the governments of other countries managed to participate in information warfare on Facebook.

Its widely known knowledge that the Russian government influenced the 2016 presidential election in some way, although the extent to which it did so and the specifics are still debated in the current day. Jarred Prier discusses this very topic in his paper “Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare”, where he states that “The techniques Russia uses today are similar to those they used during the Cold War, but dissemination is more widespread through social media” (Prier, 2017). The Russian government had meddled in American politics before using social media, but they had not influenced the outcome of an election until 2016. Their influence came from the creation and hijacking of trends, such as utilizing Hillary

Clinton's "deplorables" comment to further the spread of misinformation. Their influence worked well with right-wing sources that were already waging information warfare and these sources provided Russia "a narrative to build upon and a network of true believers on social media to spread their propaganda" (Prier, 2017). All of this allowed for the Russian government to successfully influence the outcome of the 2016 election, with Donald Trump's victory being partially attributed to the information warfare waged by Russia.

It has been shown that Russia influenced the outcome of the 2016 election, partially using social media platforms like Facebook. If this is the case, then Facebook is also partially responsible for the outcome of the 2016 election as their platform was used to facilitate information warfare coming from sources within and outside of the US. Facebook's algorithm led to these sources being able to spread fake news and misinformation, influence the views of many people, and overall influence the 2016 presidential election, meaning Facebook cannot claim innocence because their system was what partially caused this outcome. Although they may be responsible, the question remains of if their responsibility for this action is moral or immoral under utilitarianism. While it can be argued that good and bad things came from the outcome of the 2016 election, I want to focus on the harm this influence did to American politics as a whole. The misinformation campaigns of both US and Russian sources helped to destroy the faith of Americans in their news sources and has split Americans politically more than ever. It greatly influenced the way Americans voted and robbed them of the ability to make informed political decisions, all of which can be argued cause suffering. Increased division leads to increased conflict and a divided and misinformed populace cannot make rational and informed decisions, leading to an increase in suffering due to the increased amount of conflict, division,

and misinformation. Therefore, Facebook's participation in information warfare and its influencing of the 2016 US presidential election were immoral under utilitarianism.

It can be argued that Facebook did not participate in information warfare because even though their platform was used to facilitate it, they did not actively manipulate information. The spread of fake news and misinformation was performed by the three groups discussed earlier as well as the Russian government, so some may reason that Facebook could not have participated because it didn't actively attempt to engage in information warfare. However, misinformation was only able to spread as rapidly and effectively as it did because Facebook prioritized engagement rather than prioritizing correct information. They allowed this misinformation to spread and even profited off the spread of misinformation, as the increase in engagement translates to an increase in the use of Facebook by users. Even if Facebook was more of an active participant, they are still a participant by allowing their platform to be used by these various groups to spread their misinformation. The outcome of the 2016 election would have changed drastically if not for the spread of this misinformation, meaning Facebook was partially responsible for the outcome of the 2016 election even if it did not directly engage in the spread of misinformation.