

Case Analysis: Information Warfare

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Introduction

In his article "What Facebook Did to American Democracy," Alexis C. Madrigal explores how Facebook influenced the political landscape during the 2016 United States presidential election. Madrigal looks at how algorithms and mechanisms of the platform facilitated the spread of misinformation, which played a crucial role in changing people's opinions and their voting choices (Madrigal, 2017). This case presents key ethical questions about whether and how Facebook should engage in the democratic process. This case analysis uses consequentialism, a moral theory that measures the rightness or wrongness of actions through their consequences. Consequentialism can be used to determine whether Facebook's actions led to more harm than benefits in light of the misinformation spread on social networks and its effects on broader society. I will argue why consequentialism helps us understand that Facebook was involved in information warfare since its actions had demoralizing consequences and were partly to blame for election results based on the platform's impact on the voters.

Analysis Using Prier

Central Concepts from Prier

Lt Col Jarred Prier's "Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare" further explores how social media is used for modern information warfare. According to Prier, Facebook, one of the popular social media platforms, can disseminate propaganda and sway public opinion by creating trends and sharing content. This manipulation is made possible by using algorithms that favor posting content, and this has been known to amplify questionable and sometimes, fake news. These strategies, which Prier has identified and discussed, created correlation between how Islamic State (IS) and Russia used this to effectively generate and disseminate disinformation. IS utilized social media to mobilize supporters and incite fear, while

Russia employed the same channel to interfere with the 2016 U.S. election through the production of polarizing content. Both groups took advantage of the architecture of platforms including Facebook that encouraged the distribution of content that elicited higher levels of engagement regardless of its authenticity. This exploitation shows how social media can degenerate into a war zone for influence operations where the ultimate aim is not only to sway the thoughts and actions of the public but also to do so through deception and manipulation (Prier, 2017). Using this sociocultural lens, Prier's findings confirm the susceptibility of social media to be used for evil intentions, underlining the necessity of implementing intensified defense mechanisms against such misuse.

Application to the case

Relating Prier's concepts to how Facebook influenced the 2016 election reveals the following similarities. Facebook's algorithm was designed to mostly focus on postings with many comments and shares regardless of their authenticity. This led to fake news and conspiracy theories thriving, as they were more engaging than factual news (Madrigal, 2017). For example, fake news concerning political aspirants spread rapidly and impacted the voters. Like the Islamic State and Russian strategies, Prier mentioned, these misinformation campaigns leveraged the platform's architecture to reach and influence massive audiences. One of the factors was the platform's algorithm that promoted sensational content, resulting in users being trapped in the bubble and being supplied with biased or fake data. Users were susceptible to manipulation of the information environment on Facebook, and this particularly influenced the ability of the public to make informed decisions by creating a divided voter base. The publication of fake news on Facebook shows that the platform has the capability of being an instrument of informational warfare in the modern world, allowing it to participate in the manipulation of the results of

democratic choice. Despite making engagement metrics, the primary way to determine what content would go viral, Facebook fueled dangerous narratives highlighting ethics at the core of algorithm design.

Consequentialism Assessment with Prior

Ethically, Facebook's behavior can be analyzed through the lens of consequentialism regarding the effects of its algorithmic decisions. Consequentialism asserts that the rightness or wrongfulness of an action depends on the outcome of the action (Driver, 2011). Facebook was optimizing for engagement, making fake news spread across the platform, potentially interfering with the democratic process based on voters' misinformation and polarized opinions. The negative effects have been characterized by a decrease in confidence in traditional media and democratic institutions and an increase in social divisions. Facebook was unethical because while it helped facilitate information warfare, it had harmful consequences when it promoted the spread of fake news, which was detrimental to democracy and caused social division. This assessment raises the question of whether social media platforms that rely on algorithms should take more responsibility for potential negative effects on society. Furthermore, it suggests that sites like Facebook need to address these issues, including promoting more effective fact-checking mechanisms and decreasing the reach of false information. In the long run, the failure to uphold these ethical responsibilities led to distorted public conversations and the consequent erosion of the democratic fabric of American society.

Analysis Using Scott

Central Concepts from Scott

Keith Scott's "A Second Amendment for Cyber? Possession, Prohibition and Personal Liberty for the Information Age" analyzes the concerns and risks of the integration of constant

connectivity. Scott highlights that the availability of many networked devices poses considerable threats, affecting the individual and society. He argues that as users pose potential threats to others, either as a deliberate or inadvertent act, there is a reason to justify the limitation of liberties to protect people's lives and property. This balance is important because if there is too much connection, there may be cases where wrong information and unethical harmful behaviors spread rampant throughout society. It's crucial to create policies that safeguard individual freedoms while also offering sufficient protection against the risks associated with globalization. Scott's perspective should be considered in the context of the increasing rates of cybercrimes, data leakage, and fake news, which highlight the vulnerabilities of the current digital environment. These weaknesses have raised the importance of implementing strong legal frameworks that cover the safety and privacy of the users.

Application to the case

Scott's perspective within the context of Facebook's involvement in the 2016 election demonstrates the dangers of the untamed social media space. The role of Facebook in sharing fake news highlights the necessity for regulation regarding the risk of technology being weaponized for information operations. As with the case of licensing, as Scott suggests for networked devices, the same can be done for social media platforms. Such regulation would need to include provisions for independently verifying the content posted to these sites to prevent the spread of fake news (Scott, 2018). For example, raising the level of checks on news sources and using improved algorithms to detect fake news is a step in the right direction. Additionally, introducing educational programs that increase awareness can help individuals determine between real and fake news, reducing the impact of misinformation. In other words, a strategy that combines regulation and education could become a process to mitigate the risks of the

digital age and help prevent manipulation and harm on social network platforms. It also would contribute to effective monitoring and policies to restore public trust and ensure the credibility to posted information on sites such as Facebook.

Consequentialism Assessment with Scott

Facebook's actions can also be made using the ethical tool of consequentialism. Consequentialism focuses on the consequences of an action and not the reasons behind this action (Driver, 2011). From this point of view, Facebook lacked the necessary measures to prevent the spread of fake news, which caused considerable harm to society. The lack of regulation over fake news influenced people's opinions and election outcomes, leading to a divided and misinformed public. There is a clear ethical issue with the action taken by Facebook on how a misinformed population will react, leading to no confidence in democratic institutions and increased polarization. From the consequentialist perspective, Facebook's actions were unethical because the consequences of those actions, the spread of fake news and their impact on democracy, are particularly detrimental compared to the possible positive effects of increased user engagement. The consequentialist approach highlights not only the negative effects of Facebook's policies on social justice and democracy but also the need for more responsible handling of information on social media. Analyzing these consequences will help in understanding the ethical need for intricate steps to restrict social media misuse in the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, based on Prier's and Scott's perspectives and the consequentialism ethical approach, critical ethical issues are identified regarding Facebook in the context of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Facebook failed to moderate its algorithm and the content posted on its platform, allowing fake news to thrive. The consequences of these actions tore apart families,

communities, and the broader society. This highlights the need for regulation to prevent the dissemination of unsupported information. While they cannot be solely responsible for the outcome of the 2016 election, it is clear that Facebook participated in the information warfare and contributed to at least a portion of the election results. Notably, critics observe that restrictions on social media violate freedom of speech, and users should be more careful when verifying the information. The effects of fake news on democracy require a blend between increased regulation, education, and the protection of individual freedom. This case shows that modern connectivity brings a lot of risks, and effective regulation and digital literacy are needed.

References

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