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Module 7: Complete Case Analysis on Information Warfare

Introduction

In “What Facebook Did to American Democracy And Why It Was So Hard to See It Coming” by Alexis C. Madrigal, he delves into the profound impact Facebook had on the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Madrigal examines how Facebook's algorithms and business model, which prioritize user engagement and advertising revenue, inadvertently facilitated the spread of misinformation and divisive content. This environment allowed foreign and domestic actors to manipulate public opinion and influence the political landscape. The article highlights how Facebook's design and policies enabled the dissemination of false information, creating echo chambers and amplifying polarized views. From a deontological perspective, Facebook had a duty to ensure the integrity of the information on its platform and to prevent harm to the democratic process. Here I will argue that deontology shows us that Facebook engaged in information warfare because it failed to uphold its duty to prevent the spread of misinformation and disinformation, and further that they were partly responsible for the election outcome due to their negligence in managing their platform.

Analysis Using Prier’s Framework

Central Concepts from Prier

Jarred Prier, in his work “Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare,” discusses the strategic use of social media platforms to influence public opinion and manipulate information. Prier discusses several key concepts, including the manipulation of

trending algorithms, the use of bots and fake accounts to amplify messages, and the creation of echo chambers where misinformation can thrive unchecked. He argues that these tactics constitute a form of information warfare, aimed at destabilizing societies and influencing political outcomes.

Prier's analysis gives major focus to the exploitation of social media algorithms to create and sustain trends. By understanding and manipulating these algorithms, actors can ensure that specific content gains visibility and spreads rapidly across the platform. This creates a feedback loop where the content's popularity further reinforces its visibility, making it appear more credible and widely accepted than it actually is.

The use of bots and fake accounts to amplify messages also makes up a substantial portion of Prier's work. These automated and often anonymous accounts can generate a high volume of posts and interactions, creating the illusion of widespread support or outrage. This tactic not only magnifies the impact of certain messages but also can intimidate or silence opposing voices by overwhelming them with coordinated attacks.

Analyzing the Case through Prier's Framework

Applying Prier's concepts to Facebook's role in the 2016 election, it becomes evident that the platform was a battleground for information warfare. Facebook's algorithms, designed to maximize user engagement and advertising revenue, were exploited by actors seeking to manipulate public opinion. The prioritization of trending content, regardless of its veracity, allowed misinformation and divisive content to gain traction and influence the political discourse.

The use of bots and fake accounts further exacerbated this issue. These accounts were able to flood the platform with specific narratives, creating the illusion of widespread support and influencing real users' perceptions. Facebook's lack of robust measures to identify and counteract these tactics enabled the manipulation of its platform, contributing to the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

From a deontological perspective, Facebook had a duty to prevent harm and ensure the integrity of the information on its platform. By failing to implement effective safeguards against these manipulative tactics, Facebook neglected its ethical responsibilities. Deontological ethics emphasize the importance of adhering to moral duties and principles, regardless of the consequences. In this case, Facebook's duty to prevent harm and maintain the integrity of information was compromised by its focus on maximizing engagement and revenue.

Ethical Assessment Using Deontology

Deontology focuses on the adherence to moral duties and principles. In the context of Facebook's actions during the 2016 election, their primary duty was to ensure the integrity of the information disseminated on their platform and to prevent harm to the democratic process. By prioritizing profit and engagement over these ethical duties, Facebook violated deontological principles.

Facebook's algorithms, designed to maximize user engagement, inadvertently prioritized sensational and often misleading content. This design flaw, while profitable, undermined the ethical duty to provide accurate and reliable information. The widespread dissemination of misinformation and divisive content caused significant harm, contributing to a polarized political climate and undermining public trust in the democratic process.

Moreover, Facebook's failure to adequately address the use of bots and fake accounts represents a neglect of their duty to prevent harm. These accounts manipulated public opinion and amplified misinformation and disinformation, further destabilizing the political discourse. From a deontological perspective, Facebook's inaction in the face of these tactics constitutes a breach of their ethical responsibilities.

Prier's framework and deontological ethics show that Facebook engaged in information warfare by allowing their platform to be manipulated for political purposes. Their prioritization of profit over ethical responsibility and failure to implement effective safeguards against misinformation and disinformation and manipulation contributed to the outcome of the 2016 election, violating their duty to prevent harm and ensure the integrity of information.

Analysis Using Scott's Framework

Central Concepts from Scott

Keith Scott, in his work "A Second Amendment for Cyber? Possession, Prohibition and Personal Liberty for the Information Age," explores the ethical and legal implications of information security and personal liberty in the digital age. Scott discusses the balance between protecting individual rights and ensuring collective security, particularly in the context of cybersecurity and information warfare.

One central concept from Scott's analysis is the idea of digital sovereignty, which refers to the control and protection of information within a nation's digital borders. This concept emphasizes the responsibility of platforms and governments to safeguard the integrity of information and protect against external manipulation. Digital sovereignty is crucial in maintaining a nation's autonomy and preventing external actors from influencing its internal affairs.

Scott also discusses the ethical responsibility of platforms to act as stewards of information. Scott argues that digital platforms have a duty to prevent the misuse of their services for harmful purposes, including misinformation and cyber warfare. This duty involves implementing robust security measures and ethical guidelines to ensure that their platforms are not exploited for malicious ends. Platforms must be vigilant and proactive in detecting and mitigating threats to maintain the trust and safety of their users.

Analyzing the Case through Scott's Framework

Concerning Facebook's role in the 2016 election, it's clear that Facebook failed in its responsibility as a steward of information as far as Scott would be conserned. The platform's algorithms and policies allowed for the manipulation of information by external actors, compromising digital sovereignty and undermining the integrity of the election. This failure had far-reaching consequences, affecting public perception and the democratic process.

Facebook's prioritization of engagement over security measures allowed misinformation and disinformation to spread unchecked. This failure to implement robust safeguards against manipulation represents a neglect of their ethical responsibility to protect the integrity of information. By allowing their platform to be used for information warfare, Facebook compromised the democratic process and violated their duty as stewards of information. The company's algorithms, designed to maximize user engagement, inadvertently facilitated the spread of false and misleading information, amplifying divisive content and foreign interference.

Ethical Assessment Using Deontology

Using deontology to assess Facebook's actions reinforces the argument that the platform was ethically negligent. Deontological ethics emphasize the importance of adhering to moral duties and principles, regardless of the consequences. Facebook's primary duty was to protect the integrity of information and prevent harm to the democratic process. The principles of honesty, transparency, and responsibility should have guided Facebook's actions in safeguarding its platform against misuse.

Facebook violated deontological principles by prioritizing engagement and profit over these ethical duties. The spread of misinformation and manipulation of public opinion caused significant harm, contributing to a polarized political climate and undermining public trust in the democratic process. Facebook's failure to implement effective safeguards against these tactics represents a breach of their duty to act as stewards of information. The company's actions not only failed its users but also posed a threat to the broader societal values of truth and fairness in the democratic process.

Facebook's actions during the 2016 election were ethically negligent as seen using Scott's framework and deontological ethics. The platform's failure to protect digital sovereignty and prevent the misuse of their services for information warfare compromised the democratic process and violated their ethical responsibilities. Facebook's prioritization of profit over ethical duties and failure to implement robust security measures contributed to the spread of misinformation and manipulation, highlighting the need for greater accountability and ethical standards in digital platforms. The case underscores the importance of digital platforms upholding their moral obligations to maintain the integrity and trust of the information ecosystem.

Conclusion

Today we examined the ethical implications of Facebook's role in the 2016 U.S. presidential election using the frameworks of Prier and Scott, along with deontological ethics. Both frameworks support the argument that Facebook engaged in information warfare by allowing their platform to be manipulated for political purposes. Their prioritization of profit over ethical responsibility and failure to implement effective safeguards against misinformation and manipulation contributed to the outcome of the election, violating their duty to prevent harm and ensure the integrity of information.

Many will say that Facebook was not solely responsible for the spread of misinformation and disinformation, and this is fair, their role was not the only factor to affect election outcome. However, the ethical frameworks we explored emphasize that digital platforms have a duty to protect the integrity of information and prevent harm. Facebook's failure to uphold these duties highlights the need for greater accountability and ethical standards in digital platforms.

We have discussed here today the complexities of ethical decision-making in the digital age and the need to balance profit motives with ethical responsibilities. Facebook's experience serves as a reminder of the importance of acting according to moral principles, even in the face of competing pressures and incentives. The ethical challenges faced by digital platforms require ongoing reflection and commitment to upholding ethical standards in the rapidly evolving landscape of information and technology.