

## Case Analysis on Information Warfare

In the article “The Covert War for American Minds,” David Shedd and Ivana Stradner describe how authoritarian regimes, such as Russia, China, and Iran, have engaged in campaigns to influence American public opinion and disrupt democratic processes. These regimes employed various tactics including disinformation, fake social media accounts, AI-generated content, and using divisive narratives on platforms like TikTok and YouTube. Their operations were not random as they aimed at breaking trust in U.S. institutions causing the public to divide further and break the trust of the democracy that defines the nation. Russia has used manipulated content to grow cultural tensions. China criticized U.S. leadership through coordinated digital attacks Iran had sought to discourage voter turnout through misinformation. The intent to impact is on par with traditional tactics by targeting political ideas, but the difference stems from these tactics avoiding physical harm. In this Case Analysis, I will argue that Kantian ethics shows us that these nations did engage in information warfare against the United States because their actions involved deception and manipulation, violating the moral perspective to treat individuals honestly. Furthermore, applying the same ethical lens, I will also argue that if the United States were to engage in similar actions against Russia, China, or Iran, it too would be acting unjustly, regardless of strategic justification.

In “Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare”, by Jarred Prier, the central idea that is demonstrated is the idea of “commanding the trend”. This idea refers to the manipulation of social media algorithms and user behavior to pander toward certain topics, hashtags, or narratives, providing false information to the public. By creating bots or using numerous users to change how the algorithms behave, state and non-state actors can make an issue “trend”, causing visibility to increase on topics that have no validity or provide propaganda to the public causing ideas to be divisive. Prier explains how this technique was used not only by terrorist organizations like ISIS but also by state actors, particularly Russia, during events like the 2016 U.S. election.

In the case presented by Shedd and Stradner, Russia, China, and Iran used these types of tactics Prier describes. They fabricated narratives that focused on U.S. social issues like abortion, gun rights, and race relations pandering to democrats and republicans, trying to divide the parties even further. By using fake accounts they were able to manipulate algorithms, allowing for targeted audiences to view content and news that shaped how online users would view society. They wanted to "command the trend" and provide online discourse in ways that would exacerbate societal divisions. These campaigns often involved deception, such as posing as American citizens or organizations, in order to make their messaging appear authentic.

Applying Kantian ethics to this case requires an evaluation of the morality of these actions based on their intentions, rather than their outcomes. In the context of information warfare, using deception to manipulate how individuals perceive reality treats those individuals as mere tools when viewing it with a political standpoint. The citizens being targeted are not

being seen as normal humans with rational thought, but as objects that can be deceived and manipulated for political gain.. This, in Kantian terms, is not morally acceptable.

Furthermore, Kant's emphasis on the idea that one should only act with appropriate morals that could be practiced by all, rejects this kind of interference. If every state accepted the idea of election interference and information warfare as legitimate strategies, the result would cause a breakdown of international trust and relations. Society would not want to live in a world where the manipulation of elections by foreign powers is routine and accepted. Therefore, by Kant's standards, the actions taken by Russia, China, and Iran to influence U.S. elections through deceptive information campaigns are unethical and constitute a form of information warfare.

From the other perspective, if the United States were to engage in similar attacks against Russia, China, or Iran it would be equally unjustified under Kantian ethics. Even if these actions were taken in retaliation they would still involve treating the citizens of those nations as pawns for an end goal. From a Kantian perspective, the integrity of obtaining those results matters just as much as, if not more than, the perceived "greater good" that would come from it. The right thing to do, ethically, would be to refrain from using deceptive practices, even when other adversaries do not show the same restraint.

Kantian ethics not only helps identify these acts as unethical or unjust, but also provides a consistent argument against oppositional engagement in information warfare. It emphasizes the moral obligations that should be followed to keep society honest and foster integrity, even if there is a disadvantage for not following through with the discourse. The appropriate course of action would be to strengthen defensive measures, pursue transparent public education, and engage international partners in setting normative boundaries around digital conduct.

Valerie Morkevičius, in her chapter "Just War Thinking and Wars of Information", offers a perspective and description of traditional just war theory in light of modern tactics of conflict that do not rely on physical violence but can still cause harm. One of her key arguments explains how just in bello should include operations within the digital world, to include disinformation campaigns and manipulation of societal ideas. Morkevičius argues that just war thinking must evolve to account for information that can be weaponized, and its misuse can cause similar or greater damage to traditional warfare. She goes even further and explains how these tactics take advantage of society and targets specific parties to break the trust that they have in the political institutions, thus causing issues with misinformation and dividing society through their ideals.

When applying Morkevičius's expanded just war framework to the case described by Shedd and Stradner, it is clear that the information operations conducted by Russia, China, and Iran are a form of information warfare and violate ethical principles. These campaigns targeted the U.S. population using deception to manipulate their political opinions and voting behavior. By doing so, they violated the principle of discrimination, as civilians were weaponized against their own political system. Furthermore, the size of the effects that came about these attacks were not proportionally equal to the actions that were taken, showing the unethical premise of what occurred.

Using Kantian ethics with Morkevičius' principles, the observations can be deepened further. From a Kantian perspective, these states engaged in actions that treated U.S. citizens not as normal humans with dignity, but, instead, as tools to gain a strategic advantage. By manipulating information to deceive and cause division, they denied individuals the opportunity to make informed, rational decisions. The campaigns were not aimed at persuasion through open discussion but wanted to use manipulation to cause the parties to act through emotion and irrationally. Kant would find this unethical but also very toxic to the social ideas required for moral and just life. Even more concerning is the fact that the damage from such campaigns is difficult to recover from.

If the United States were to respond similarly by launching its own campaign of disinformation or manipulation, it would equally violate these moral and ethical principles. Kantian ethics demands consistency with its ideas, highlighting that if it is wrong for one actor to deceive and instrumentalize individuals, it is equally wrong for another to do so, regardless of justification. Morkevičius's framework reinforces this by showing that the long-term consequences of such acts are likely to be severe. Even if retaliation might seem strategically effective or emotionally satisfying, it would ultimately contribute to the normalization of information warfare.

The ethically right choice based on the information by both Morkevičius's thinking and Kantian ethics, would be for the United States to refrain from adopting these tactics and instead invest in different defensive measures to regulate online conduct in hopes of preventing information warfare. This would allow for the moral autonomy of all individuals to maintain its integrity and part within political parties, while also setting a standard of ethical leadership in a digital age. By holding itself to higher standards, the U.S. would not only act justly but also contribute to the possibility of a more stable and principled engagement within technology and information.

Actions taken by Russia, China, and Iran to influence U.S. elections through disinformation campaigns constitute a form of information warfare. Drawing on Prier's concept of "commanding the trend" and Morkevičius's extension of just war thinking to information operations, these actions can be deemed ethically unjustifiable. Using Kantian ethics, it is argued that such actions violate the dignity and autonomy of individuals by manipulating them through deception and treating them as tools to reach a goal. If the United States were to engage in similar tactics against these countries, it would be committing the same ethical violations, regardless of its motivations.

A possible objection is that democratic states might be able to justify engaging in counter-disinformation campaigns to defend against influence or to promote truthful information. While this argument provides a reasonable solution, it presents an issue ethically: where is the line between truthful public diplomacy and manipulative information warfare? Kantian ethics does not leave room for making exceptions based on the situation or the results, which can be an issue when dealing with opponents who do not live by the same moral rules. Its real strength is in how clearly it lays out what is right and its strong focus on respecting human dignity, even if it

puts democratic societies at a disadvantage. In a time when information is often used as a weapon, sticking to ethical principles in how we handle it is both essential and challenging