

It's becoming increasingly clear the power that social media (and the internet as a whole) has could change the course of the planet - whether big or small. For better or worse, one large entity with enough standing could determine the fate of a nation. Which is why it comes as no surprise that Facebook, one of the largest social media networks to date, has the potential to influence presidential elections. The case presented covered the power that Facebook holds over potential or current voters, and their ability to influence votes without anyone knowing. In 2016, the race for supremacy between Trump and Clinton was intense - and Facebook appeared to lean in a particular direction, urging votes to choose one candidate over the other. It's believed that Facebook, alongside with the introduction of fake news, influenced the presidential election and skewed potential results had Facebook been more open about its ad targeting. In this Case Analysis, I will argue that Ubuntu shows us that Facebook did engage in information warfare because it abused societies interdependence on each other and technology, and further that they were partly responsible for the election outcome because it denied societies "membership" by removing individual choice.

Social media started off as platforms used to connect people across states or countries. It was a fun way for people to connect with individuals they may have never known existed. Facebook was no different, a platform created by Mark Zuckerberg to connect families and friends from across the globe - but over the years, social media, especially Facebook, have grown beyond that simple concept. In his paper, Prier points out the growing influence that social media has on the world, and its capability to influence Information Warfare. Facebook, and other social media platforms, used algorithms to "analyze words, phrases, or hashtags to create a list of topics sorted in order of popularity" (Prier, 2017) to control what content gets seen by whom. Whether or not that content is deemed real or fake, leading to the increase of "fake news" - a vague term with conflicting definitions, but mostly referring to news or information which is purposely fabricated, and became widely used during the Trump campaign. Prier found that there was an increasing number of bots, mostly foreign agents, who used these bots to spread propaganda and "fake news". This propaganda could be used to hijack trends to confuse the algorithm or be a form of dissemination propaganda. Prier goes on to analyze the 2016 presidential elections and the influence social media had.

Comparing Prier's analysis and Madrigal's longform article on Facebook's involvement, it's noticeable the bad actors that played a part in influencing the campaign - mostly from Russian propaganda. These agents utilized trend hijacking to create "fake news" articles, bombard political candidates, create memes, and fake trends - all of which seemed to favor Trump in some capacity. Despite Clinton receiving more popular votes, Trump won by electoral vote. According to Prier, it cannot be denied that "Russia launched a massive cyberwarfare campaign" that influenced the presidential elections. Madrigal's longform article agrees with much of Prier's findings because of the power that Facebook holds over voters and potential voters.

We are people through other people, according to the Ubuntu moral belief. A person is a person because they are a member of society and work within that society for other members.

That does not imply that a group is more important than a member, a key component to Ubuntu is recognizing our basis as individuals within a community. As a community, however, we should work together to form a better society, and this includes presidential votes. The reason we chose, as Americans, to vote for our leaders is so that individuals get a choice to choose what they deem necessary for our society. By flooding social media sites with propaganda and “fake news” to incentivize people to vote for a particular party removes an individual right as an individual in a community. Instead, it pushes the entire community to vote for a particular standing and denies the idea of membership and individuality. This, morally, goes against the Ubuntu code. We are no longer people through other people and begin to be people through organizations and agendas differing what is right for a community. One thing to note is that Prier found in 2017 that 72% of Americans utilize social media as a primary news source. Which means that, as of now, Americans rely solely on the news they receive from Facebook and other sites – whether that information holds sustenance or not. For the sake of our future elections and society, we need to work to either decrease the amount of propaganda and “fake news” online or decrease the amount of power Facebook and other social media sites possess. From an objective standpoint, Facebook did participate in information warfare while denying individual membership within a community by taking away objectified choice.

Cyberspace, with its major influences to control people based on information which could be true or false, is a dangerous place. It’s easy for people to get wrapped in stories that may have never existed, as seen in Prier’s article. There need to be stronger regulations, as explained by Scott. Scott found that there were problems with constant connectivity, that the “politics, bullying and cyberstalking are going to become dark and cruller” as time goes on. That with this constant connectivity, was a double-edge sword. It’s true that by having an open platform, everyone is free to be who they want to be, in spaces they find safe. But the same technology that allows this, allows a world of greater evil than our own. Scott’s sources find the internet dangerous, even going as far as to claim that phones are equivalent to AK-47s (exaggerating, in my opinion, in some respect). But it’s not to deny the dangers that the internet can hold, and the influence it has over society - making it difficult to properly defend oneself should they get in a dilemma, which is Scott’s biggest point. In America, we are free to do actions which do not harm or disrupt other individuals, so why does that not fully apply to cyberspace? Scott believes that, as people need a license to drive or to own a gun, it is not entirely impossible for the same to be applied to cyberspace.

This idea of freedom in cyberspace often gets forgotten because of the anonymity it provides – (I am not against the proposal by Scott, but I want to mention that, in retrospect, it seems unreasonable and there are far too many things to consider. While the internet is dangerous, it has provided a lot of good.) – and it can be seen in the 2016 elections when people went beyond “what is good and right” to fuel their own political agenda. They abused this idea of freedom by flooding the internet with “fake news” and trends to show support for one party while simultaneously bashing the other. This information, which was not triple checked for validity on Facebook (side note, Facebook has begun implementing possible “fake news” alerts

as of recent but it's far too late of a response), greatly influenced the voting Americans. Facebook, and other social media sites knew what they were doing and utilized information (both real and fake) to act in some form of information warfare.

Ubuntu believes that a denial of freedom within one is a denial of freedom within all. As a society, we are interdependent and should work together to improve ourselves and others. The internet tends to make this difficult. Rather than being a community or society broken apart by borders, we are all interconnected – someone across the world could change the course of another, as seen by Russian propaganda influencing the 2016 elections. As such, we've grown interdependent on everyone rather than our own individual communities. Facebook abused this interdependence by allowing propaganda, fake news, and the influx of bots to continue to spread across the platform, knowing well that if the majority believe the information being shared – the rest, being interdependent in some capacity, would follow the majority (herd mentality, in some sense). Facebook went against the moral standing, instead of respecting one's individual choice and interdependence and ability to improve a community and participated in information warfare. Had Facebook chosen to fight the influx and work in favor of the community, I would be less inclined to express this.

Whether or not Facebook participated in Information Warfare is still up for debate. The allegations against Facebook and the disagreement between their security team and their revenue team is enough to justify the power and influence Facebook has over society. In some way, Facebook did have a hand in influencing the presidential elections and giving an unfair hand to some candidates. Fortunately, it appears that most of Facebook's problems lie within their ad targeting - unfortunately, this is where the biggest hurdle in my argument stands. It can be argued that Facebook did not engage in Information Warfare because the targeted ads and algorithm are computer-based, and humans did not engage or directly mess with the data being managed. Though it may have solved most of the proceeding events, the targeted ad dilemma is not the only issue Facebook has to handle - by not properly addressing the politically targeted ads and fake news, Facebook, whether unknowingly or knowingly, did engage in a form of information warfare.

** Though not part of the paper, I want to express that I have no political opinions or affiliates while writing this. What I have stated is not meant to be used to support either party.