

Facebook's Role in the "Unite the Right" Conflict

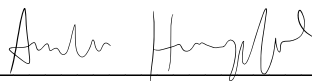
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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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Introduction

In August 2017, hundreds of white supremacists gathered in Charlottesville, Virginia for a two-day protest they called “Unite the Right.” This rally, organized by a Facebook event, was sparked over controversy surrounding the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue in Emancipation Park (Anti-Defamation League, n.d.-b). As the group made their way to the park, several fights with counter protestors broke out. About 30 minutes before the rally’s original start time of 12pm, the police declared the rally an unlawful assembly due to the sheer amount of conflict that had already broke out (Bigea, 2018). As people were dispersing, avowed neo-Nazi James Field drove his Dodge deliberately into a crowd of counter protestors, killing Heather Heyer and injuring 19 other counter protesters (Ingber, 2019).

The role of social media in the organization of hate and terrorist activity must not be overlooked. In the same way that Facebook allows ordinary users to build online communities, Facebook provides a platform for the alt right to recruit and organize. The effect of this community of hate materialized as the “Unite the Right” rally in August 2017.

Many scholars have analyzed the role of the internet in the recruitment and organization of alt right and other hate groups. Some even analyze on the “Unite the Right” rally, focusing on social media’s role in the instigation and escalation of the event. These analyses are important in understanding the relationship between hate groups and social media, but fall short of providing an understanding of the ethical responsibility of social media platforms in monitoring hate content. These scholars focus mainly on how hate groups utilize social media platforms, without taking the design of the platforms into consideration. Without evaluating the technological design of social media platforms, it is difficult to understand how the “Unite the Right” rally

came to fruition. I seek to provide a better understanding of the relationship between social media and the alt right by evaluating Facebook's ethical responsibility in the events that lead to the tragedy in Charlottesville,

Using the lens of care ethics, I will evaluate the actions of Facebook surrounding the "Unite the Right" rally to show that Facebook is morally responsible for creating safe online communities. I will illustrate this claim by showing that Facebook fails the four sub-elements of care; attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness.

Literature Review

Many scholars have studied the relationship between the internet and the white supremacy community. These analyses emphasize the fact that the internet provides hate groups with many more opportunities for recruitment and organization. However, these analyses focus primarily on the ways in which individuals use the technology, and not on the design of the platform itself.

The "Unite the Right" event is just a small glimpse of a much larger community of terrorism present online. A 2013 study titled *Radicalisation in the Digital Era* explores the role of the internet in fifteen cases of radicalization in the UK through interviews with police and the individuals themselves. The study includes ten convicted terrorists, referred to as A1-10, and five individuals deemed at risk for radicalization, referred to as B1-5. These fifteen cases were analyzed against five different hypotheses, with the following results: (1) In every case analyzed, the internet proved to create more opportunities for radicalization. (2) In the majority of the cases, the internet also served as an "echo chamber," further reinforcing the extremist ideas already present within these individuals. (3) The study shows that the internet enables

radicalization, but was unable to prove a role in the acceleration of radicalization. (4) This study also failed to show that the internet allows radicalization to occur without physical contact, since most of the cases involved offline activity that could have played a role in the individual's radicalization. (5) The study showed that the internet does not increase opportunities for self-radicalization, as most cases of 'online self-radicalization' involve virtual communication and interaction with others. (Von Behr et al., 2013)

This study depicts the large role that social media plays in radicalization. Although unable to prove all five hypotheses, the study clearly demonstrates that social media is used to spread hateful ideas and content. Several of the individuals studied referenced the internet being a helpful tool in recruitment and organization, and a few specifically mention Facebook as a common platform of use. As described by A3, "The internet is like a fishing net, catching surface fish, not bottom fish. We used to catch one at a time, now we catch 100- 200 in a year" (Von Behr et al., 2013, p. 26). In A3's situation, the internet permitted easier recruitment. The internet and social media sites are largely important in the recruitment and organization of terrorism as it exists today. All fifteen individuals have utilized the internet to spread hate. This study provides definitive proof that the internet and social media sites are used in the recruitment and organization of terrorism. This study, although four years before the rally in Charlottesville, clearly establishes the role of social media as a tool of radicalization.

Georgiana Bigea analyzes the relationship between hate groups and social media, exploring the role of new media in the "Unite the Right" rally using conflict analysis. She employs Randal Collin's escalation and de-escalation models, along with Bernard Mayer's Triangle of Conflict and Conflict Root-Cause Analysis Mode to argue that new media-intensified polarization and social media were the principal drivers that allowed the conflict to transform

from potential to actualized. New media enabled both involved parties to gather, attract allies, and rattle each other. In the aftermath of the conflict, social media provided a platform for both sides to attract sympathy and followers. New media-instigated polarization fostered an element of group solidarity, while social media provided resource for mobilization. (Bigea, 2018)

This analysis is important in establishing the key role social media played in the “Unite the Right” rally. Bigea’s analysis distinguishes social media as a leading cause of the conflict in Charlottesville, demonstrating its role in instigating and propagating the event. Similar to the previous study, Bigea focuses on the ways in which media is used and perceived, not the actual design of media platforms. This study establishes social media as a major instigator and propagator of the conflict in Charlottesville.

The first study analyzed the relationship between radicalization and social media in 2013. Bigea presents information on the escalation of conflict via social media in relation to the events of Charlottesville in August 2017. Both of these works are important in understanding the way hate groups utilize social media to spread and organize hate. By evaluating the design of the technology, along with the ways individuals use it, I aim to provide a more complete understanding of Facebook’s role in the “Unite the Right” rally.

Conceptual Framework

The morality of Facebook can be analyzed using the theory of care ethics as it relates to the relationships of care that Facebook owes to its users and the community. Care ethics, initially inspired by the work of Carol Gilligan, is a type of virtue based ethics that emphasizes the importance of relationships over learning general moral principles. Determining what is good and bad involves considering others and their emotions surrounding the situation. The

connections between people are key, “By recognizing the vulnerability of the other and by placing yourself in his or her shoes to understand his or her emotions, you can learn what is good or bad at that particular time.” Care ethics pays special attention to the nature of the relationship in question; the relationship between children, parents, friends, and colleagues are all unique and should be evaluated as such. Recognition of vulnerability and dependence have an important role in care ethics, especially in situations when the relationship is asymmetrical. (van de Poel & Royakkers, 2011, pp. 102–103)

Joan Tronto defined four sub-elements of care: attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness. Attentiveness refers to becoming aware of need. Responsibility is defined as responding to and caring for need, while competence is providing good and successful care. Responsiveness takes into account the power dynamics of the relationship. (Sander-Staudt, n.d.)

In what follows I will examine Facebook through the lens of care ethics by first establishing the relationship between Facebook, users, and the community in the context of care. Facebook will be evaluated against the concepts of attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness to determine their morality regarding the Charlottesville conflict.

Analysis

Care ethics will be used to determine Facebook’s ethical responsibility in the events that occurred in Charlottesville the summer of 2017. The relationship between Facebook, users, and the community is unique, and must be evaluated as such.

The role of social media in the spread of hate is vast and constantly changing. As discussed previously, social media not only facilitates the organization and recruitment of hate groups, but also creates polarization within populations, which further propagates extreme ideas.

For the purposes of this paper, I will focus solely on social media's role in terrorist recruitment and organization and not its polarization-intensification effects.

Facebook is a platform with more than 2 billion users. With over a quarter of the world's population on the platform, it becomes hard to distinguish the general public from Facebook users. For this reason, I will define Facebook's relationship of care as one with the global community. In this situation, the "Unite the Right" rally harmed the Charlottesville community, including people on and off the Facebook platform. I argue that Facebook, as a giant worldwide company, owes a duty of care not just to its own users but to all global communities.

The designers of Facebook are tasked with creating a system that can serve billions of users. To do so, they deploy the use of algorithms to make decisions as to what content to display to what. Therefore, the actual decisions of Facebook surrounding the event, such as if/when to remove the event, are made by algorithms. For this reason, it is important to analyze Facebook's broader approach to combatting hate, as well as specific details of this event.

In the following sections, I will analyze how the design of the Facebook platform fails to provide adequate care to users and the community. Facebook's failure in its duty of care to users and community will be analyzed against the sub-elements of attentiveness, responsibility, competency and responsiveness to demonstrate that the platform does not do enough to prevent the spread of hate online.

Attentiveness and Responsibility

Care ethics defines attentiveness as the process of simply recognizing the needs of those around us, and responsibility as a willingness to respond to and take care of need. Evaluating the company's statements and actions during 2017 demonstrates that Facebook failed to act attentively and responsibly involving the "Unite the Right" event. Although Facebook appears

attentive to and responsible for the general issue of hate online, the rally demonstrated that in fact Facebook is neither attentive nor responsible in their duty of care.

On February 16, 2017, six months before the event in Charlottesville, Mark Zuckerberg released a note to the community entitled “Building Global Community” (Zuckerberg, 2017). This note addressed several social issues facing the platform, along with the company’s plans to address them. Zuckerberg discusses Facebook’s shift in focus, from connecting friends and family to developing social infrastructure for supportive, safe, informed, civically-engaged, and inclusive communities (Zuckerberg, 2017). In specifying the type of communities they hope to create, Zuckerberg and Facebook appear to be attentive and responsible in their duty of care. According to this public statement, Facebook is dedicated to building safe communities. In doing so, problems like hate and terrorism are incredibly important to solve. Zuckerberg explains,

We’re starting to explore ways to use AI to tell the difference between news stories about terrorism and actual terrorist propaganda so we can quickly remove anyone trying to use our services to recruit for a terrorist organization. This is technically difficult as it requires building AI that can read and understand news, but we need to work on this to help fight terrorism worldwide (Zuckerberg, 2017).

Facebook clearly recognizes terrorism as a problem facing the community, demonstrating attentiveness to the problem. In stating “we need to work on this to help fight terrorism worldwide,” Facebook also claims responsibility in solving the problem (Zuckerberg, 2017). This letter provides evidence that Facebook is both attentive to and responsible for the issues of hate and terrorism online. Thus far, it appears the Facebook is upholding its duty of care to users.

Months after the release of the letter, the “Unite the Right” rally occurred in Charlottesville. In the days following, it is revealed that the rally was organized via a Facebook

event, which was removed just one day prior (Heath, 2017). Jason Kessler, the event organizer, originally shared the event on his personal Facebook page over one month before the rally occurred (Heath, 2017). Although Facebook seemed to be attentive and responsible to the overarching issue of hate online, it failed to demonstrate the same qualities in this case. For a full month, this event was hosted on the Facebook platform, which promoted and facilitated the organization of the event. The platform spread the event to several users within the white supremacy and alt right community before its eventual removal. This direct facilitation of a hateful event caused harm to several users and the Charlottesville community, demonstrating a breach in Facebook's duty of care. By not removing the event, Facebook shows a lack of attentiveness and responsibility in caring for their users.

Some may argue that Facebook could not have been aware of the event even if it was behaving in a way which was properly attentive to users. However, Airbnb was in a situation similar to Facebook in August 2017; several white supremacists had used the platform to book a stay in Charlottesville for the "Unite the Right" rally (Anti-Defamation League, n.d.-a). Where Airbnb differs from Facebook is that they recognized the problem several days ahead of time and made an effort to cancel the reservations. Airbnb's cancelation of reservations occurred days ahead of time, meaning that there would have been ample evidence for Facebook to take down the event earlier. Nevertheless, the event remained hosted on Facebook until the day before. Airbnb demonstrates a proper duty of care for the community in cancelling the reservations of those attending the rally. Facebook, on the other hand, not only did nothing to prevent the event, but actually helped to organize it.

As a global platform, Facebook must be able to properly monitor and prevent the spread of hate online. The Building Global Communities letter is not enough to prove attentiveness or

responsibility to this situation. Facebook claims responsibility for creating safe communities, but its actions fail to uphold this promise. The company fails to uphold their duty of care in attentiveness and responsibility by allowing the event to remain on the platform for a month.

Competence

In care ethics, competence is defined as providing good and successful care. I argue that during the summer of 2017 Facebook failed to provide good and successful care to the community of Charlottesville. This failure in competence is evident in the organization of the event on Facebook and also in the communities of hate present on the site. The deep networks of hate present on Facebook demonstrate the company's inability to properly monitor and prevent hate within their platform. In fostering large hateful communities, Facebook is failing to provide care for users.

The "Unite the Right" Facebook event is a clear indication of Facebook's lack of competence in their duty of care. The rally, organized on Facebook for a month before being taken down, caused significant physical and emotional pain in the Charlottesville community. Because the event was online for a month, the platform played an active role in the organization and recruitment of the rally. In propagating the hateful message behind the event, Facebook fails to provide care for users or the community.

The event itself is not the only indication that Facebook is incompetent in creating safe communities; there is a much broader community of hate already present on Facebook. This community is identified in a project done by Megan Squire. Shortly after the rally, Squire wrote software to access the Facebook graph API and created a dataset of 1,870 different English-language and US-focused far-right groups and events. To generate this dataset, five methods were used; manual keyword searching, automating the Search API, using the

“Suggested Groups” feature within Facebook, finding Facebook Groups attached to Facebook Pages, and accessing the public group lists attached to the timelines of known extremist group leaders. The groups and events found were then organized into 10 different far right classifications depending on their ideology. Both the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and Anti Defamation League (ADL) assisted with properly classifying these data points. Using social network analysis techniques, Squire created two different graphical representations of the networks of hate present on Facebook. These graphs use a display algorithm, which places nodes closer together if they share more members in common, and centers nodes based on how many other nodes connect to them. Larger groups are represented with larger circles. The second diagram highlights which groups shared members with the Unite the Right roster. (Squire, 2018)

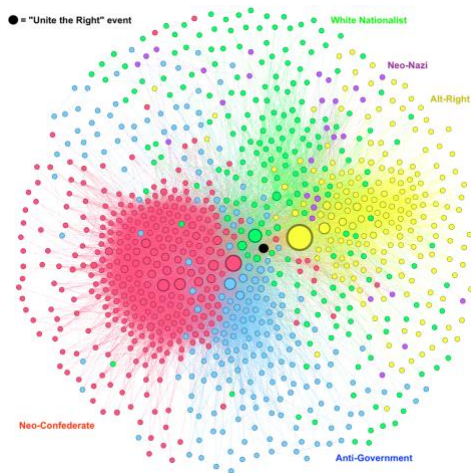


Figure 1- Network Analysis of Hate on Facebook

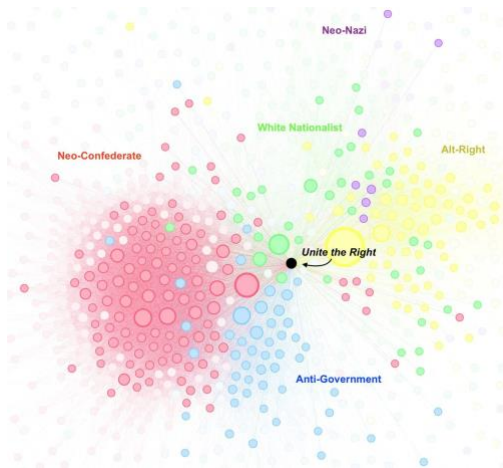


Figure 2- Network Analysis in relation to "Unite the Right" event

Squire's project presents a visual representation of the large network of hate present on Facebook, a community much larger than a single event. As illustrated by the graphs, Facebook builds communities based around similar ideologies. The online relationship between these different groups and ideologies, represented by different colors, can be understood in terms their locality on the graph. This graph clearly demonstrates a network of different hateful ideologies, all connected on the Facebook platform. There is a large and complicated community of hate present on Facebook.

The "Unite the Right" event, depicted in black, is displayed in the center of several ideologically different groups. The event aimed to bring together all these different hate groups. This positioning of the event in the center of the graphs shows that this rally was successful in attracted people from several different alt right and white supremacist ideologies. As seen in the second graph, the event was able to reach a large portion of the groups represented. This makes sense, as the goal of the Facebook platform is to connect

similar users, and present events to those who are likely to attend. The rally is just one small event, part of a much larger network of hate online.

With just a few simple searches, Squire was able to flesh out a huge network of white supremacy and hate on Facebook. Networks like these do not belong on Facebook, and demonstrate the platform's inability to adequately monitor hate. Squire's ability to identify this hateful community using just a few searches and an API suggests that Facebook should also be able to identify, and therefore monitor, hateful communities. However, in this situation the company failed to recognize or monitor the alt right community, thereby failing to competently provide care for users and the Charlottesville community.

The Facebook event organizing the rally, along with the data provided by Squire's project are more than enough evidence to determine that Facebook was incompetent in providing care for users and the Charlottesville community.

Responsiveness

Responsiveness is the aspect of care ethics that takes into consideration the power dynamic of the relationship. The relationship of care between Facebook and the community is a very unique and asymmetrical one, and must be properly understood in order to evaluate Facebook in light of care ethics. In looking at this relationship, it is important to notice both the power Facebook has in communities across the globe, and the necessity to automate decision processes within the platform.

Today, over one quarter of the world population uses the Facebook platform monthly. This huge platform reaches users in different cultures and communities across the globe. In order to be properly responsive to such a large number of users, what to display to individual users is

decided by various algorithms. These algorithms define what whole communities of people are exposed to within the platform. The goal is to present users with content they will like. The design of these algorithms, which decide the content visible to each user, is important in allowing Facebook to demonstrate responsiveness to all of its many users.

Monitoring communities on this global scale is not an easy thing to do. Much of the monitoring of content is done by algorithm, but Facebook also employs a large number of human moderators to properly determine what warrants removal from the platform in accordance to the Facebook standards. Zuckerberg explains in *Building Global Communities*, “There are billions of posts, comments and messages across our services each day, and since it's impossible to review all of them, we review content once it is reported to us (Zuckerberg, 2017).” Due to the structure of social networks that Facebook builds, providing similar content to similar individuals, simply relying on users to report inappropriate or hateful content is insufficient. Since content is shown primarily to those who are likely to like it, relying on users to report hateful or otherwise harmful content is irresponsible. By monitoring content in this way, Facebook fails its duty of care in responsiveness to users.

In this situation, the Facebook platform presented the “Unite the Right” event only to those who would be interested- the alt right. Unfortunately, this spread of the event within this hateful community succeeded, and the event circulated Facebook for a month before removal. The longevity of this event on the platform suggest that users outside this network of hate rarely encountered it. Otherwise, it can be assumed that some users would have reported it and the event would have been removed earlier. Facebook’s algorithmic presentation of content to users prevented this event from being reported and removed in a responsive manner.

Facebook must be innovative in how to be responsive to billions of users. To manage the accounts of users, Facebook deploys several algorithms to properly determine what content to display. However, reporting inappropriate content is still left up to the users. This shows that Facebook's system is not responsive enough to prevent the spread of hateful or otherwise harmful content. In this way, Facebook fails the principle of responsiveness, and its overall duty of care to users and the community.

Conclusion

Facebook's failure to uphold a duty of care to the community in the "Unite the Right" rally can be understood using the four sub elements care ethics; attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsive. In Facebook's relationship of care with the community, the company has an ethical responsibility to design a platform which creates safe communities. Studying this case provides a better understanding of the relationship between the design social media platforms and hate groups, which can be used to improve future designs of the platform.

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