

BOOK REVIEW



LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media

P. W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking*

Book review by Mark Silverman, Adviser to the ICRC's Director of Digital Transformation and Data.

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Peter W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking's book *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media* provides a concise and helpful summary of the origins of the internet and the development of social media. It explains the concept of weaponizing information, and illustrates key terms, such as memes, trolls and troll farms, bots, sock-puppets and neural networks. For anyone regularly following the news, the cases Singer and Brooking use to exemplify how information is weaponized are familiar, including the 2016 US election, the online recruitment methods of the Islamic State, and China's social credit system. As the examples are so familiar, they enable Singer and Brooking to briefly sketch the events (providing enough information to orient the reader but not getting into the weeds) and then to concentrate on why these are archetypes demonstrating changes in how conflicts are being waged, as information is leveraged by certain parties for the purposes of amassing power.

The style and format of the book is readable and accessible, and is geared towards a policy and general public audience. As such, Singer and Brooking take

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care to lay out the foundations of knowledge needed in a quick-moving and largely entertaining fashion, including an introduction to what they mean by the term “LikeWar” (Chapter 1), a short overview of the origins of the Internet (Chapter 2), and a brief recounting of the advent of social media (Chapter 3). From there, they chart the transition of the Internet from a sort of utopia where information is freely exchanged toward a dystopia: how authoritarians use censorship and disinformation to maintain power (Chapter 4) and how business rewards virality (what is getting the most attention) over veracity (what is true) (Chapter 5). They then focus on conflicts: the wars for attention and power (Chapter 6) and the conflicts that drive the web and the world (Chapter 7). The last chapters seek to define the current situation (“The New Rules and Rulers of LikeWar”, Chapter 8), and to propose ideas for a way forward (“What Do We Know, What Can We Do?”, Chapter 9). Throughout these chapters, the authors weave in examples from different contexts and conflicts.

Singer and Brooking lay out five core principles relating to how social media is being weaponized. The first principle is that the Internet is maturing and growing: it is global and instantaneous, embedded in the economic, social and political fabric of societies, but only half of the world is online. The second principle states that the Internet has become a battlefield: as much as it is used by businesses and individuals, it is also indispensable to militaries, governments and armed groups, who use it to further their interests against their adversaries. The third principle applies internet connectivity to social media, and considers how these mediums are changing the ways in which conflicts are fought. This goes hand in hand with lower rates of secrecy and an uptake in the virality of information; it seems that in the age of WikiLeaks, there is a diminishing capacity to keep information hidden, and once confidential information is dispersed, it can be disseminated widely and with wide-reaching consequences. In turn, this changes what war means, blurring the distinction between actions taken in the digital and physical realms – this is the fourth principle highlighted by the authors. The fifth principle contends that everyone is part of this new reality/new war: “If you are online, your attention is like a piece of contested territory.”¹

While propaganda, misinformation and disinformation have a long history, Singer and Brooking argue that the changes social media has wrought, in terms of speed and reach, are profound. Using an illustrative example from the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the authors explore how each side uses and responds to online activity. Building on the work of Thomas Zeitzoff, they point out how social media trends are being used to at least partially determine the patterns of armed conflict. As they note:

In the case of Israel, a sudden spike of online sympathy for Hamas *more than halved* the pace of Israeli strikes and resulted in a similarly sized leap in Israel’s own propaganda efforts. If you charted the sentiment (pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian) of these tweets on a timeline, not only could you infer what was

1 *LikeWar*, p. 22.

happening on the ground, but you could also predict what Israel would do next.²

Such an ability to read, predict and influence your adversary is a significant advantage – and gives an incentive to develop better and better capabilities in this information sphere.

Along with speed and reach, Singer and Brooking highlight the utility of information in instilling doubt and confusion, dismissing, distorting, distracting, dismaying and/or dividing.³ As they point out, increasingly, the virality of information seems to supersede its veracity. Familiarity is a key component of the uptake of viral messages. Drawing from research on the spread of disinformation and misinformation, they write: “The more you hear a claim, the less likely you are to assess it critically.”⁴ The next, dangerous, step is adding outrage – against someone or something that you perceive has done damage, or may threaten, you, your community or something important to you. “Social media algorithms work by drawing attention to content and trends on their networks, even (and especially) when people are outraged by it.”⁵ It is this combination of virality, familiarity and outrage – especially when actors can build a compelling narrative and convey a sense of authenticity – that makes such a dangerous mix, and which may lead from online activity to offline violence.

In addition to the Israeli–Palestinian example described above, the authors provide an example focused on the role of information in relations between Russia and Ukraine. As they describe the events, Russian information operation tactics in Ukraine were allegedly used to help build the justification for the annexation of Crimea. The authors discuss the pro-Russian protests in Odessa, which led to violence, and the ensuing Russian “PR strategy”, which included publication of gory details of alleged atrocities, followed by strong statements by government officials, the infiltration of thousands of fighters, and then the annexation. The war of words and narratives led to a “violent, confusing, paralyzing mess – precisely as Russia intended”.⁶ These examples, coupled with the increased capacity to surveil populations through digital means, allow the authors to powerfully convey to readers how State and non-State actors exert control on populations, and instigate and shape conflicts.

Singer and Brooking also provide examples of how individual actors, motivated purely by economic incentives, can, in an uncoordinated way, complement and extend the operational information of one set of actors to or against another. A salient example is that of Macedonian teenagers who became millionaires by generating fake content which went viral in the United States around the 2016 elections, similar to what Russian operations seemed to be doing, but motivated only by profit.⁷

2 *Ibid.*, p. 196.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 206.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 209.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 205.

One key takeaway from Singer and Brooking's book is that the likelihood of information being weaponized will increase over time. As the Israeli–Palestinian case illustrates, States and non-State actors have a significant operational incentive to improve their capacity to utilize information in conflict. And as both the cases of Macedonia and the US election of Donald Trump show, individuals have a significant economic incentive to improve their capacity to generate viral (but not verifiable) information. Adding in the dimension of increasingly believable fake content (including images and videos), and the fact that half of the world is still to come online, the authors contend that the trend of weaponizing information is only going to become more pervasive.

While this trend-line analysis is fairly negative, Singer and Brooking do strive to present a neutral view of technology as a tool that can be used in both positive and negative ways. As they note:

Those who can manipulate this swirling tide, to steer its direction and flow, can accomplish incredible good. They can free people, expose crimes, save lives, seed far-reaching reforms. But, they can also accomplish astonishing evil. They can foment violence, stoke hate, sow falsehoods, incite wars, and even erode the pillars of democracy itself.⁸

Nevertheless, by the end of *LikeWar*, the reader is left with a relatively negative impression of where things are heading. Though that is also part of the ambition of the book: to make the reader see how big an impact the weaponization of information in the social media age can have on societies and conflicts, and thus to equip the reader to act. Thereafter, the reader can choose whether to act by simply better protecting themselves against how their information can be weaponized, and/or whether they can contribute to broader systematic changes to deal with the implications of this trend.

LikeWar is particularly important for the humanitarian sector. Even though Singer and Brooking are not looking at the issue of weaponization of social media through a predominantly humanitarian lens, they focus on security, politics and society, and in so doing make a convincing case for why anyone working in conflict settings needs to be able to understand and navigate the terrain of social media. It can be easy to dismiss social media as a purely online phenomenon, filled mainly with personal information (and cat memes). Many humanitarians will acknowledge that there are some troubling issues on social media linked to hate speech, but they may not feel this is something that should overly concern humanitarians in conflict zones dealing with life-and-death issues. The thinking may be that even if social media does impact conflict situations and humanitarian work, what can humanitarians do about it? It seems further investment is needed to explore and flesh out actionable solutions that the humanitarian sector can take on this front.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 118–121.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

In this way, *LikeWar* is similar to other works by Peter Singer, the book's co-author. He has been writing for some time about issues that humanitarians should care about – these range from private military and security companies (*Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry*, 2003) to child soldiers (*Children at War*, 2005) and technological advances in war (*Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century*, 2009).

While *LikeWar* focuses on the social, political and security-related domains, humanitarians should read the book because it sheds light on how the weaponization of social media and information is shaping conflicts today. The book provides some necessary background knowledge that will help humanitarians to better understand how these issues are impacting conflict-affected populations, and from there, to improve and/or create new programmes in order to prevent and/or mitigate the harm such changes inflict on affected populations.

