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Social Media is Politics by Other Means: A Review of LikeWar

Donald Roth

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Social Media is Politics by Other Means: A Review of LikeWar

Abstract

"The authors offer up the mantra that 'you are what you share,' and we should take that to heart."

Posting about the book *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Comments

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in things

February 19, 2020

Social Media is Politics by Other Means: A Review of *LikeWar*

Donald Roth

Title: *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*

Authors: P. W. Singer & Emerson T. Brooking

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The world is always changing, but this change came into sharp focus for P.W. Singer and Emerson Brooking as they watched what unfolded in Mosul, Iraq in the summer of 2014. A force of 1,500 jihadists overwhelmed a force of more than 10,000 defenders—with the power of a hashtag.

Even with the power of cutting-edge American military equipment at their disposal, soldiers harried by barrages of images of beheadings, torture, and the ubiquitous #AllEyesOnISIS fled their posts, abandoning Abrams tanks in the face of black-masked men in Toyota pickups. The potential of this communications revolution had been hinted at a few years earlier when, in 2011, a random local citizen in a country with only 6% of its population on-line inadvertently liveblogged the most secretive military operation of the new millennium, tweeting the events of the operation that killed Osama bin Laden in real time. This was a new world of open information, and it was possible to weaponize that platform.

These events help to frame the analysis that Singer and Brooking bring to bear in *LikeWar*, a clarion call for governments, corporations, and individuals alike to take stock of the impact of social media in our contemporary age. Even if warfare and public policy aren't your thing, Singer and Brooking's message should not be ignored.

A New Battlefield

"The goal wasn't to create an online community, but a mirror of what existed in real life."

Mark Zuckerberg's candid response in a 2013 interview echoes just what the internet has become. It has sparked a revolution by doing what no communications technology could do before: instantly connecting people—not just peer-to-peer, like a phone, or in a one-way conversation, like radio—but in a massive simultaneous world of voice, text, and images that live in our pockets and absorb more of our time than we'd like to admit.

In reaching this point, the authors argue that five key things have become true of the internet:

1. *The Internet has left adolescence.* Despite the rapid pace of change thus far, the revolution is starting to stabilize. This means that the early adopters and pioneers have blazed a trail that governments and corporations have started to understand and leverage, and we're seeing the asymmetric advantage of these first movers even out as bigger players up their game.
2. *The Internet has become a battlefield.* However, precisely because of the global reach of this technology, there is much to be gained by controlling the space, and these larger players are seeking to leverage what this new world offers to achieve their policy goals.
3. *This battlefield changes how conflicts are fought.* What is happening in this on-line space matters deeply. America now trains for war on three levels: physical, cyber (infrastructure), and social media. 80% of the fights in Chicago public schools start on-line. From individuals to nations, the implications of on-line activity can be life or death. Further, the flood of information (and disinformation) means that what is believed often matters more than what actually happened. Truth itself is a point of conflict.
4. *This battle changes what "war" means.* The famous military strategist Carl von Clausewitz revolutionized the concept of warfare by placing it on a continuum with business as usual, seeing "war as politics by other means." What has (perhaps wrongly) been dubbed the Gerasimov Doctrine takes this further, saying, "The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown. In many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in

their effectiveness.” In other words, in a world where the cost of open war between major powers may be too high, a campaign of disinformation, distraction, and disruption may be just as effective (if not more so).

5. *We're all now part of this war.* The bottom line, then, is that none of us are noncombatants in this new battlefield. We need to be aware that everything that we share, like, or otherwise engage with in the social media space is helping to move the line in a myriad of skirmishes of this ongoing war.

These five points provide an important reframing of the way that we might think about the on-line space, but they're still more oriented toward geopolitics and the big picture than our daily lives. The real reason why I think the average person should pay attention to this book is how it describes how these points play out in our daily lives.

Your Grandma is a Russian Agent.

When the tail end of the Arab Spring carried over into a push for democratic reforms in Russia as well, Vladimir Putin perceived this as a coordinated attack by the West. As this movement presented one of the most serious threats to Putin's grip on power that he'd ever faced, he took the power of social media quite seriously, and Russia rapidly developed capacity and initiatives for waging war on this new battlefield. The result was a loose network of Russian disinformation programs, a rework of the more traditional media outlet *Russia Today*, and a mandate to sow chaos and stoke partisan tensions wherever they could.

The results were significant. The Russian black propaganda campaign pushed out false stories, posed as various political and news organizations, or simply pretended to be average citizens of target countries (especially the U.S.). The goal wasn't to create whole new false narratives so much as to provide a wealth of fodder to help amplify existing narratives with false evidence, dialing up existing tensions. The strategy was wildly successful. In fact, other people saw how lucrative this could be, and other operations soon sprung up, not motivated by Russian policy goals so much as by making money. At the height of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Campaign, a young Macedonian going by "Dmitri" reportedly raked in \$10,000 a month advertising on the slew of poorly plagiarized fake news sites that he maintained.

In short, what this really reveals is that we are our own worst enemies. Our love of hearing our ideas reaffirmed and amplified leads us to seek out echo chambers, even if we're building those chambers out of straw. We all have that family member that posts stories on Facebook that stretch credulity, preaching of the evil things being done by fundamentalists on the one hand or some crazy atheists or Muslims on the other. Our endless appetite for these sorts of stories that confirm what we already "know" about

the other side is what makes the Russian efforts successful and the Macedonians rich. In a brilliant quote, the authors cite sociologist Danah Boyd, who said, “If we’re not careful, we’re going to develop the psychological equivalent of obesity.” In reality, I think the message is that far too many of us already have.

What Do We Do About It?

This is all very dramatic and probably a little scary.

So, what do we do about it?

The authors share a number of recommendations for governments, but the topmost is that they take this issue seriously, especially in democracies. They argue that information literacy is now a matter not just of education but of national security, and they’re absolutely right. They also argue that Silicon Valley must embrace their role as arbiters of truth and seek to do the job well. I’m less enthusiastic about this. The government has intentionally stayed out of regulating the internet in the U.S. because of free speech concerns. The authors essentially argue that this freedom from the restrictions of the First Amendment gives Silicon Valley not only the opportunity but the obligation to step in. The tech giants aren’t enthusiastic about this call, and with good reason. In an era where the mere fact that others hold divergent views from you can be spun into claiming that they’re causing you affirmative harm, how can anyone be expected to fairly referee this mess?

The most important part for us, though, is what this book teaches us in terms of our individual responsibility. The authors offer up the mantra that “you are what you share,” and we should take that to heart. In order to avoid psychological obesity, we should be developing our ability to critically assess the information we take in. When stories evoke an automatic response, we should become immediately wary. Simple narratives, especially those that appeal to anger, are incredibly powerful, and that’s exactly where the purveyors of chaos have been making their money. One of the best protections for this is to process information laterally; that is, when you see a story that arouses your emotions, check it against other sources, especially those that come from a different perspective from yours. Parse the conflicting reports and use the common sense experience of people around you to see if it rings true. Then you can think about whether it’s something worth sharing.

There is much more that this extensively researched book has to offer, but I think this discussion is the most important. Christians have a high calling to be lovers of Truth, and we should live that out together, helping guard one another from falsehood. In today’s

age, this task requires properly framing the space we live in and being on guard as to how we act in it.