

LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media

Peter W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (2018)

Reviewed by Michael Hatherell



Peter Singer and Emerson Brooking's 2018 book *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media* is a significant contribution to our understanding of the way in which social media has and could be employed in strategic competition and conflict. Singer and Brooking begin their analysis by detailing the historical development of the internet, considering not only the technology but also the social practices built around devices and applications. With the combined development of the smartphone and social media, they argue that the internet has now 'left adolescence'.¹ Building on this discussion, the remaining chapters in the book

assess how social media has become a means for: crowdsourced investigations (Chapter 3); state censorship and disinformation (Chapter 4); the fabrication of information by entrepreneurs and organised political forces (Chapter 5); the building of popularity and power by pop stars and terrorist organisations alike (Chapter 6); and a crucial second front in conflict amongst states and nonstate actors (Chapter 7).

In writing *LikeWar*, Singer and Brooking were able to draw on their own extensive experience researching and writing about national security. The nature of their research journey over five years is outlined in Chapter 1, encompassing both an analysis of events as they occurred and their interviews with key informants. The authors also note that they were able to treat 'the internet as a laboratory itself', including joining 'digital armies', setting 'traps for trolls' and 'being enlisted into the fight in new ways'.² While each of the chapters focus on distinct arguments about social media and its impact, the narrative in the book is propelled through intriguing mini-case studies of individuals, movements and organisations using social media to collect, analyse and distribute information. These case studies are not only entertaining but also illustrative of the main arguments that the authors offer about the changing nature of politics and war.

1 Peter W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), 51.

2 *Ibid.*, 20.

LikeWar could, however, be critiqued for failing to deliver on some of its loftier claims. The book is certainly not tentative in its characterisation of the changes brought about by social media, including the argument that ‘war and politics have never been so intertwined’ and that the decisions of engineers in Silicon Valley ‘shape the battlefield on which both war and politics are increasingly decided’.³ Yet, some readers may find that these claims go too far in trying to highlight the novel quality of ‘*LikeWar*’. Kori Schake, for instance, argued in her review of the book that ‘If Clausewitz would recognize it, it hasn’t changed the nature of war. *LikeWar* is a valuable guide to the innovative weapon of social media, but it doesn’t clear the bar of proving we’re in a new kind of war’.⁴

It is not necessarily a bad thing that Singer and Brooking are bold in some of the claims that they make as it challenges the reader to engage critically with their arguments. In that spirit, I think that given the likelihood of a changing social media terrain the relevance of some of their arguments and accompanying examples can be questioned. Chapter 3, for instance, discusses what the authors call the ‘end of secrets’. As examples, the live tweeting of the raid on Osama Bin Laden’s compound by

@ReallyVirtual (or Sohaib Athar as he is known in real life) and the efforts of Eliot Higgins and his project Bellingcat to investigate the shooting down of MH17 are some of the most intriguing vignettes in the whole book. They do raise the question, however, of how states and other powerful actors might respond to this use of social media to observe or investigate their actions.

Once these powerful actors come to grips with the impact of social media noted in *LikeWar*, how long will it be before access to social media in a local area is regularly blocked during operations like the raid on Bin Laden’s compound, or the information available to groups like Bellingcat is removed, or manipulated, to the point that their work is impossible? Indeed, since *LikeWar*’s release, we have seen examples of states responding to the power of social media. In Indonesia, for instance, the government recently slowed down access to influential social media services, like Instagram and Whatsapp, to prevent images and videos being shared during protests over the presidential election result.⁵ Emerging examples of this sort make it worth asking how many of the examples evident in the book will still be possible in the social media environment of 2025?

3 Ibid., 262.

4 Kori Schake, ‘Social Media as War?’, *War on the Rocks*, 5 September 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/09/social-media-as-war/>

5 Coconuts Jakarta, ‘Indonesian gov’t temporarily blocks certain features on social media to limit spread of hoaxes’, Coconuts Jakarta, 22 May 2019, <https://coconuts.co/jakarta/news/indonesian-govt-temporarily-blocks-certain-features-on-social-media-to-limit-spread-of-hoaxes/>

It would be unfair to suggest that Singer and Brooking do not consider this possibility—indeed, *LikeWar* is very conscious of the way state governments and social media companies will shape the future social media environment. Chapter 4, for instance, details the means by which states like China are already censoring social media and using it for their own purposes. Yet some of the most novel aspects of the book's analysis rely on the idea that social media currently offers a unique environment where individuals and ad hoc groups can play a role in analysing information or even shaping it. The authors boldly argue, for instance, that: 'Attacking an adversary's most important center of gravity – the spirit of its people – no longer requires massive bombing runs or reams of propaganda. All it takes is a smartphone and a few idle seconds. And anyone can do it'.⁶ It seems likely that this observation represents a momentary state of affairs before otherwise powerful actors catch up.

Setting aside this point, I would argue that *LikeWar*'s most important contribution is in Chapter 6 where the authors shift their focus to the elements that determine the success of political actors in developing convincing appeals through social media: what the authors call the 'weapons that win *LikeWar*'.⁷ A case study of ISIS provides an important starting point for discussing five

key elements: narrative, emotion, authenticity, community and inundation. The authors observe that it is not just international terrorists who can draw on these elements to create convincing appeals. Indeed, one of the highlights of this part of the book is the analysis of Taylor Swift's use of Instagram and what it tells us about the power of establishing a sense of authenticity on social media.

In the supposed age of 'post-truth' politics, a high level of cynicism has emerged regarding the ease of shaping the public's perception. This theme was even reflected in the recent Marvel film, '*Spiderman: Far from Home*', in which one character argues: 'People, they need to believe. And nowadays, they'll believe anything'. Yet as Singer and Brooking remind us, being able to collect, produce and publish information is not the same as shaping ideas. Not every political actor can shape a compelling narrative, appear authentic or successfully draw on emotional connections. In this important section of *LikeWar*, the authors demonstrate that while accessing social media might only take a 'few idle seconds', developing compelling ideas takes some skill, thought and usually a significant amount of experimentation. This experimentation in a competitive ideational environment is a constant theme in many of the case studies presented by the authors.

⁶ Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: the Weaponization of Social Media*, 18.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

'Ideational competition' would have been, of course, a less sexy title than *LikeWar*, but it captures an important theme present in the book that deserves credit and further analysis. The elements of narrative, emotion, authenticity, community and inundation provide a framework to better analyse examples used in the remainder of *LikeWar*, including the online battle between the Israeli Defence Forces and Hamas on Twitter⁸ or the battle of narratives between Russian and Ukraine.⁹ One notable quote regarding the war in Ukraine, from an interview with journalist David Patrikarakos, captures the importance of ideas:

I began to understand that I was caught up in two wars: one fought on the ground with tanks and artillery, and an information war fought... through social media...and, perhaps counterintuitively, it mattered more who won the war of words and narratives than who had the most potent weaponry.¹⁰

Whether or not *LikeWar* demonstrates an enduring change in the nature of politics or war, the way in which the book discusses the resonance of ideas has significant value for the national security community in a nation like Aus-

tralia. Through concepts like political warfare, information warfare and hybrid warfare, the strategic use of information outside of major wars has again become fashionable to discuss. Yet too often, the use of these concepts focuses narrowly on information access and control rather than whether the use of information is successful in reshaping perceptions or ideas. It is worth following Singer and Brooking's lead to better understand the psychology of belief and the nature of what Carstensen and Schmidt have called 'ideational power': the power of political actors to 'influence other actors' normative and cognitive beliefs' through the use of information and ideas.¹¹ Singer and Brooking's analysis suggests that the ideational power of political actors is likely to be crucial in understanding and responding to the future security environment.

Finally, the contribution of the book is not limited to addressing the threat of '*LikeWar*'. Battles over ideas are not just about defending against foreign powers or terrorist organisations; as the work of Yuval Noah Harari has recently reminded us, they are also central to how we as humans define ourselves and develop a common sense of purpose.¹² Whether fighting a war or pursuing national political and econom-

8 Ibid., 193-201.

9 Ibid., 203-211.

10 Ibid., 205.

11 Martin B. Carstensen and Vivian A. Schmidt, 'Power through, over and in ideas: conceptualizing ideational power in discursive institutionalism', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23:3 (2016):321.

12 See: Yuval Noah Harari, *21 lessons for the 21st century*, (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2018).

ic goals, it is important to consider the shared myths that bring us together to achieve difficult tasks.

Do Australia's institutions and leaders possess the ability to develop a compelling ideational foundation, one that will sufficiently unite us in what may be an increasingly competitive ideational environment? *LikeWar* suggests that other global actors are active in exploring the use of social media to shape ideas and are learning through experimentation, making it even more important for a middle power with lofty

ambitions not to be left behind. As Lesley Seebeck has recently argued, 'Articulating a broader, more coherent strategic vision that aligns with our core values—those that people would fight for—is needed to bring others along on that path'.¹³ *LikeWar* is essential reading for understanding the contribution social media might make in establishing, debating and protecting that strategic vision within an increasingly competitive ideational environment.

13 Lesley Seebeck, 'Repositioning Australia to face its future: It's time we stepped up', APPS Policy Forum, 8 July 2019, https://www.policyforum.net/repositioning-australia-to-face-its-future/amp/?__twitter_impression=true