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Like War: The Weaponization of Social Media

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Like War: The Weaponization of Social Media, by P. W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2018. 416 pages. \$28.

An old adage states that truth is the first casualty of war. P. W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking argue in *Like War* that this is especially true of social media wars. Singer and Brooking detail the systematic ways in which both state and nonstate actors use social media to alter the accepted narrative of truth—with profound implications for international and domestic politics. Drawing from psychology, sociology, and the history of technology, the authors trace the rise of social media, offer an explanation for its power, and look at its political effects. In their final chapters, they examine the business model of social media firms, looking at the difficulties it poses for states seeking to defend against social media information and disinformation campaigns and how it makes change unlikely.

The goal of weaponized social media is not to replace the truth with a single, coherent lie. Instead, it is to sow doubt and confusion about what is true and what is not. Referring specifically to Russian disinformation efforts, one expert describes the goal as “fomenting confusion, chaos, and distrust. They spin up their audience to chase myths, believe in fantasies, and listen to faux . . . ‘experts’ until the audience simply tunes out” (p. 108). This theme emerges consistently as one of the most powerful aspects of social media: the ability to obscure objectivity and enable exploitation of preexisting biases.

The title of the book is a two-level pun, alluding to both the competition for social media “likes” and the similarities in political effect between social media and military campaigns. The authors focus on how social media can be used to affect the “will” leg of the Clausewitzian trinity of force, chance, and will. They detail efforts of authoritarian regimes, including those of China, Russia, and Syria, to control domestic and international political messaging through social media. They document the role of social media in recruiting fighters and raising money for Daesh (ISIS, ISIL)—and the way in which states and advocacy groups have used social media to undercut Daesh’s Internet messaging and entice fighters away from the group. They provide a detailed account of Russia’s disinformation efforts using government-employed “trolls” and quasi-media organizations, such as Russia Today (RT). Citing an expert from the Atlantic Council, the authors identify four principles of Russian disinformation: “dismiss the critic, distort the facts, distract from the main issue, and dismay the audience” (p. 107). To these “4 Ds” the authors add a fifth to describe Russia’s political warfare campaigns: divide the target population. Anyone who has engaged in a political argument on social media will recognize these principles—which highlights the success of these efforts in shaping U.S. political discourse.

The analogy to war is not limited to the domain of will, however. Singer and Brooking chronicle the very real contributions of social media campaigns to battlefield outcomes in Israel, Ukraine, and Syria. They also

document the way in which China is incorporating social media into the work of its security services, creating a socially enabled totalitarianism.

Like War is a work of journalism, not social science. Readers seeking original research or big-data analysis in support of the authors' conclusions will be disappointed. The book's source notes frequently cite blog posts alongside peer-reviewed studies, with no obvious distinction in how much weight is given to each. Still, Singer and Brooking have done thorough research into the psychology and sociology of how and why messages become viral and what gives viral messages power, as well as numerous interviews with a variety of actors in the social media space. They have assembled a compelling anecdotal narrative with short, evocative profiles and vignettes that bring texture and life to their story.

The most disappointing omission from the book is any concrete sense of what can be done to counter the pernicious effects of social media. The authors conclude with a call for readers to be discerning consumers of news—a call that feels both pro forma and inadequate to the threat they describe. Singer and Brooking have illuminated an important problem but offer little cause for hope or optimism about its resolution.

Like War enters a crowded field of books on the political impact of social media. It is distinguished by its readability and thorough research. I highly recommend it to policy makers and military officers seeking a better understanding of the information forces that are shaping contemporary and future battles.

DOYLE HODGES



Champion of the Quarterdeck: Admiral Sir Erasmus Gower (1742–1814), by Ian M. Bates. Pomona, QLD, Austral.: Sage Old Books, 2017. 384 pages. \$38.

Admiral Sir Erasmus Gower is, perhaps, the least known of all the British admirals during the age of Nelson. Although little known today as a naval officer, his name is indeed on the map: Cape Gower in China, Gower Harbour in Papua New Guinea, Gower Island in the Solomon Islands, Gower Lake in Newfoundland, Gower Point in British Columbia, and Gower Street in Saint John's, Newfoundland. A man of such note is undoubtedly worthy of a biographical study. Ian M. Bates, who retired after a career with Australia's Department of External Territories in the public service of Papua New Guinea, has taken up the challenge and produced this extensively researched study of Gower's naval career.

A modest man, Erasmus Gower left neither a memoir nor personal files of correspondence, leaving Bates to ferret through masses of archival material to piece the story together from official documents to verify and expand on the few printed notices of his life that appeared in the contemporary *Naval Chronicle*. Born in Wales in 1742, Gower joined the Royal Navy at the age of thirteen in 1756 and served until 1807, when he retired as a vice admiral, and later rose to admiral of the white on the retired list. Bates has summarized Gower's varied and extensive career in the following lines: "No other contemporary officer approached his accumulated experience or could claim to have completed two circumnavigations of the world. Crossed the equator eighteen