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Winning the war of 'Likes'

As the internet is changing war, war is also changing the internet – and we are caught in the middle

Read this interview in German or Russian.

Your forthcoming book 'LikeWar' deals with the 'Weaponization of Social Media' and discusses how the internet is changing war and politics. Can you describe the main trends?

A generation back, researchers began to realise that people were starting to try to hack the new computer networks on which we increasingly depend. They called it 'Cyberwar.' Now, we are starting to realise it has a twin which we call 'LikeWar.' Here, the information and people *on* the networks are being hacked. The book opens with some early examples of this kind of once unthinkable changes, from Donald Trump's very first tweet to ISIS's hashtag to a Chicago gangster's YouTube video that sparked a gang war. Each would seem to have little to do with each other, but they were examples of how social media was reshaping news, politics, and war. LikeWar has changed everything – what you need to do to 'win' or what we think about the most important issues in the world. And we are only at the start of it. Everything that we have seen over the last few years is but a taste of what looms.

You argue that, just as the internet is changing war, war is also changing the internet. Can you elaborate on how this is happening?

The internet, once a light and airy place of personal connection, has since morphed into the nervous system of modern commerce. It has also become a battlefield where information itself is weaponised. As integral as the internet has become to business and social life, it is now equally indispensable to militaries and governments, authoritarians and activists, spies and soldiers. They all use it to wage wars that observe no clear borders. And notably, they all use the very same tactics, all targeting us. That is, both ISIS's top recruiter and Taylor Swift were operating in the very same way, chasing after the very same audience!

You once said that we all are players in LikeWar and use similar tactics to achieve their ends. What is the role of big technologies companies like Facebook or Google?

LikeWar also means that the role of the companies that run the internet has changed. They don't just link us, they now set the rules of online war, which shapes the outcomes of everything from elections to battles. YouTube, for instance, was originally inspired by the idea of how to find a picture of Janet Jackson's nipple. It was a means to share videos without censorship. Now, the company has to figure out how to regulate everything from Neo-Nazis to Russian information operations. The consequences couldn't be more immense, and a very small number of people actually make the decisions. If Mark Zuckerberg, for instance, had put in place reforms at Facebook in 2016, instead of after the fact in 2018, we would likely have a different US President. The Brexit vote might have had a different outcome in a world where bots were banned and algorithms steered the news differently. Various terror attacks might not have occurred dependent on what kinds of messaging was allowed or not.

What is the condition of winning in this environment? Is there a comparative advantage of the Chinese state-driven approach to AI? Or can the private-driven model out of Silicon Valley compete?

Winning in Likewar, whether it is winning at an election, a battle, or a marketing war for your new music album, is about driving your message viral in a world where increasingly attention is power. But, as we explore, there are all sorts of ways to achieve this and, in turn, control this. For instance, while the early founders argued that the internet would free us all, authoritarians have managed to co-opt the once-liberating force of the social media revolution and twist it back to their own advantage.

There are old-school models like in Turkey, where governments monitor social media as a means to finding and arresting political foes, including targeting the most symbolic ones likely to go viral. But social media has also granted regimes new ways to control their own populations. In China, the government builds a 'social credit' system, which combines various forms of surveillance. For instance, the system tracks everything from your online statements to diaper purchases and hours of video game playing. It then creates a 'trustworthiness' score that determines everything from your job prospects to your likelihood of getting matched with an attractive date. What is fascinating is that, in the West, we have the same level of 'big data' tracking, but it is in the hands of a small number of companies who seek to monetise it.

Isn't the threat posed by weaponised social media overstated? Weren't there similar concerns about the rise of the printing press? What does it mean when virality beats veracity? And hasn't truth always been the first casualty of war?

Well, I would argue the opposite. The printing press was a pretty big deal historically. It spawned everything from mass literacy to Martin Luther and the Reformation, to the decades of war that followed, killing one third of Germans in that period. Indeed, the printing press spawned the whole 'news' business. Rather than overstate, we tend to understate how big of a deal it was, how much it changed the world. Now in our lifetimes, we are seeing the same kind of impact, where a new communications technology is shaping not just our social lives and businesses, but how we vote and how we fight wars, or as in the case of the US, whether we even decide to vote or fight wars.

So, yes, we are seeing a pattern of the same kind of enormous historic importance that mirrors the past, and yet with new twists. For instance, you are right that truth has always been a target of war. But now we have the rise of everything from the notion of what Trump's advisor called 'alternative facts' (which is literally an attack on the idea of truth itself) to AI driven 'deep fakes' that fuse the real and the fake in manners humans increasingly can't differentiate. And in order to be able to control this, both the military and the marketing firms are using more AI.

How can politics respond to this challenge? And what can normal citizens do not to be the pawns on that new online battleground?

Just like every real world problem, there is no one single solution. We have to approach it from the level of government, business, and the public. Just as governments have spent the last decade becoming aware of new cyber threats and have prepared to face them, so too they now need to respond to LikeWar. In this context, the US is the model of exactly what NOT to do. By contrast, there are good models like Estonia which protect their citizens and democracy from a new external and internal threat. I could go on and on, but I definitely worry that in the US system, LikeWar is right now rewarding the worst kind of behaviour. This has to change.

Business needs to better understand that their creations have become battlefields too, and it has to take more responsibility for protecting their customers. It also has to stop reacting after the fact to clear harms playing out on their networks, be it extremism or information warfare operations. They can no longer plead ignorance.

Finally, we need to become more savvy customers and citizens, especially in how we navigate a world of likes and lies. In card games,

there is the saying that if you don't know who's the 'sucker' at the table, then it is you. In turn, we need to take more responsibility for our own personal role in all of this. You determine whether facts or lies, hate or kindness ripples across your network of friends and family and then powers across the wider web. In LikeWar, you are what you share, and by what you share, you reveal who you actually are.

The interview was conducted by Tobias Fella.



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