The Coming Conflicts Will Be Tweeted

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David Patrikarakos’s new book, “War in 140 Characters: How Social Media Is Reshaping Conflict in the Twenty-First Century,” could not be timelier. The Arab Spring, Russian aggression in Donbas and Crimea, the emergence of the Islamic State, the election of Donald Trump, Russian disinformation operations aimed at American voters in 2016: In all of these critical geopolitical events of the last five to 10 years, social media and cyber-attacks have played an integral role.

It’s not a surprise, then, that an August 2017 Pew poll found that over 71 percent of Americans view cyberattacks from other countries as a major threat, second only to the Islamic State. The rise of social media, social media manipulation and all forms of cyberattacks have also happened against a larger backdrop of global and geopolitical turmoil: the “stepping back” of the United States from at least part of its anchoring role in the global political order; the emergence of China as an economic, political, and security power on the world stage; the re-emergence of great power challenge by Russia, among others, to the post-Cold War stability and American hegemony; and reduced trust both in the Western democracies and in their ideals of liberal democracies and market economies.

These and related changes have led some (not without reason) to call this period the “greatest crisis facing liberal democracies since the 1930’s.” Some have argued that the new communications technologies underlying social media act as political accelerants upon changes in the international political order, magnifying and leveraging them. And looming on the horizon of emerging technologies, artificial intelligence in particular promises to have large disruptive effects on the world’s economies and governance. Thus, the relevance and importance of the central questions raised in “War in 140 Characters”—how have social media and communication technologies changed contentious politics, domestic and international conflict, and war, and what the future portends—is hard to overstate. Yet questions of undeniable consequence and gravity can invite answers that are excessively dramatic and over-sweeping. And, unfortunately, in some important matters the book falls into that category.

Notwithstanding the value of the questions that Patrikarakos raises, the book is
undercut by its broad, unsubstantiated claims that, in many instances, are directly contradicted by more careful studies and evidence.

There are two broad camps that scholars and pundits fall into when thinking about the political effects of social media—roughly speaking the “optimists” and the “pessimists.” Optimists, such as Larry Diamond, Clay Shirky, and Mark Zuckerberg each argue that, for all its foibles and distortions, social media gives ordinary people the ability to speak and share their ideas—or at least the ability to share them more easily and more widely than ordinary people, as individuals, have ever been able to do in the past. In that sense, social media is a “liberation technology.” Pessimists and skeptics of this view, however, such as Evgeny Morozov, point out that in addition to giving ordinary people voice—and particularly giving protestors new tools to organize and communicate—social media technologies also give autocrats and governments the ability to more easily monitor and censor them.

Patrikarakos’s argument is situated most closely in the pessimist camp. “War in 140 Characters” makes five bold claims about the effects of social media: First, social media has led to the dismantling of the traditional media and its associated hierarchies. Second, this dismantling of traditional media information gatekeeping and control has had the knock-on effect of weakening the traditional nation-state. Third, social media has led to the death of “objective truth” and the rise of a post-truth discourse that sows division among social media’s many echo chambers. Fourth, the emergence of Homo digitalis—a digitally connected, “hyper-empowered individual” has changed the way not just that political arguments and conflicts take place, but even the way actual war is fought. Fifth, all of these elements work together to increase social and political instability and ultimately lead to a world more “conducive to wide-scale conflict than at any time since 1945.”

Bottom line? The world of Homo digitalis in Patrikarakos’s book is a scary place and only getting scarier—and social media is at the root of it. Unfortunately for readers seeking to understand the social and political effects of new communication technologies including social media, these eye-catching, pessimistic claims are not backed by convincing evidence.

The strongest parts of “War in 140 Characters” are the individual portraits of various figures using social media for political gain. There’s Farah Baker, for example, a Palestinian teen turned citizen-journalist chronicling Israeli incursions into Gaza on her Twitter account. There’s the college-age Israeli soldiers pushing out slick press releases and social media content via the IDF Spokesperson Unit’s various social media accounts. Then there’s the battlefield between pro-Maidan activists in Ukraine, and Russian separatists in the East that plays out on Facebook. And finally, there’s the portrait of former State Department diplomat Alberto Fernandez and his attempts to counter Salafi jihadist propaganda. The scope and detail of these portraits makes for compelling reading and, despite my reservations as to the book’s central claims, it ought to be of considerable interest to academics, policymakers and, as well, general readers with a more casual interest.

The book’s basic problem is that anecdotes such as these are not enough to support its five high-level claims. Other, more systematic evidence, from a variety of other sources and scholarship, suggests a nuanced interpretation of social media and its effects. And some important pieces of evidence flatly contradict Patrikarakos’s overall argument. To see where and how, I critically evaluate “War in 140 Characters” five claims one by one.

1. Social media has dismantled traditional media hierarchies
This claim is misleading at best. Yes, citizens are able to use social media to produce and launch content. Yet, as others have pointed out, media companies have not disappeared, but rather shifted to integrating user content. And as Zeynep Tufekci has argued, the algorithmic nature of many sites or platforms (Facebook and Twitter)—whereby popular content gets promoted more often—empower a smaller number of actors and actually reinforce hierarchies. The current position held by Facebook and the other media companies suggests that while some hierarchies have been dismantled (traditional local newspapers), even more monopolistic ones have emerged in their place.

2. Social media has greatly weakened the nation-state.

Evidence suggests otherwise. Rather than weakening governments and state institutions, leaders and governments have embraced social media itself. More than 75 percent of leaders are on social media, and many leaders—Duterte in the Philippines, Modi in India, and Trump in the U.S.—actively use social media to cultivate their own personal brand, advocate policies, and denigrate political opponents. Most importantly, leaders and governments have gotten more sophisticated in their ability to manage and sway public opinion. Perhaps no nation more than China has shown how social media can be deployed to strengthen the state. The government of China employs a large cadre of censors and paid blog commentators known as the “50 cent army.” The commentators push pro-government talking points and drown out criticism using a combination of censorship and distraction. 

3. Social media increases misinformation, disinformation, and worsens social and political polarization

It’s conventional wisdom that social media increases the spread of “fake news,” and increases polarization by allowing people to seek out information that confirms their pre-existing biases. While there is evidence of this kind of polarization in networks (homophily), the idea that social media worsens polarization and increases the spread of misinformation is not borne out by the evidence. Research shows that partisan polarization preceded the advent of social media; cable news has been a much more critical factor in polarization in American politics; and that many of conspiracy theories and misinformation shared over the Internet were not as widespread, or as central to the U.S. elections in 2016 as Patrikarinos (and many others) argue. Guess, Nyhan and Reifler argue, to the contrary, that misinformation in the 2016 elections in particular tended to be concentrated among a smaller subset of mainly Trump supporters. Finally, there’s some, at least intriguing, research suggesting that, rather than polarize the population, social media may actually moderate opinions by exposing individuals to opinions they would not normally.

4. Social media has changed how wars are fought.

This—the central claim of the book’s title—is perhaps the most difficult to assess. Yes, new information technologies change the way communication happens during conflict. I have conducted research on the impact of social media on the various wars fought between Hamas and Israel. Others have examined how social media allowed the rebels in Libya to gain international support, or how extremist social media
content fomented pro-ISIS radicalization in Europe. The key question in much of this research is, however, what is the relevant counterfactual? In other words, if not for social media, how would conflict X be fought? Would the outcome have been different, or would the conflict have been fought at all? This is the central claim of this book, but is it true? In perhaps the best research to date on this general question, Kostyuk and Zhukov, studying the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, find that “cyber activities failed to compel discernible changes in battlefield behavior. Indeed, hackers on both sides have had difficulty responding to battlefield events, much less shaping them.”

5. The world today is more unstable and at greater of risk of conflict than at any time since 1945.

This is the weakest of all Patrikarakos’s claims. Most research suggests that even with the Syrian conflict, the world is a much safer place than it ever has been. People are less likely to die violently, poverty is at all an all-time low, and both absolute and relative levels of war deaths are also at all-time lows.

To be sure, there are serious and justified concerns that the world is headed for increased possibility of conflict, due to such factors as nuclear tensions on the Korean Peninsula, democratic erosion in the West, the rise of China, Russian geopolitical interventions, and social and economic fallout from increasing automation and other factors driving economic inequality. Even if we somehow considered these threats to conflict to have raised risks to the highest since World War II—a very big claim—social media is not a primary cause either by itself or within any of these factors. Communication technology changes do not happen in isolation. They occur concurrently with advances in military technology, and changes to the economy. Thus, the effects of social media on conflict are likely to be heavily correlated with technological changes of many kinds; Second, social media will not simply privilege challengers or incumbents, or weaker or stronger states, but rather will lead to strategic competition and adaption. Finally, the effect of new communication technology on conflict will defy simplistic explanations.

And herein the real problem with “War in 140 Characters.” Social media and its effects on communication and conflict are going to be critical issues in the future. After all, social media, its use and misuse, is already a matter of intensely polarized political debate within the United States and other Western democracies, as we seek to understand the depth and breadth of Russian disinformation campaigns. Yet the book goes well beyond this important and timely point to make dramatic and factually dubious claims, in an attempt to engage readers’ attention and passions. It pushes poor conclusions not supported by (and in some cases directly contradicted by) existing social science research.

The emotions stirred up by the book’s overwrought claims—anxiety, outrage, and others—are ironically not so different from the ones elicited and intensified by social media itself. Scholars, policymakers, journalists, and, importantly, the book’s general audience would do well to take account of other, more rigorous research. Social media, rather than upending our models of war and conflict, instead operates within them.

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