The Fault Lines of Europe & Weaponizing Social Media
What Happens Next – 05.08.2022

Larry Bernstein:
Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein.

What Happens Next is a podcast where the speaker gets to present his argument in just Six Minutes and that is followed by a question-and-answer period for deeper engagement.

Today's discussion will be on the historic fault lines in Europe as well using social media in wartime.

Our first speaker will be Robert Kaplan who is the author of the best seller The Balkan Ghosts and the recently released Adriatic: A Concert of Civilizations at the End of the Modern Age. Robert will discuss why Italy, the former Yugoslavia, Albania, Greece and Turkey are the fault lines of Europe and why there are wars on Europe's periphery.

Our second speaker is Emerson Brooking who will discuss his book Likewar: The Weaponization of Social Media. We'll learn about how Ukraine and Russia are using social media to persuade their allies to support their war efforts.

Buckle up.

If you missed it, check out last week's program on Jewish Comedy and a History of the American Right.

The first speaker last week was Jeremy Dauber who is a Professor at Columbia and the author of Jewish Comedy: A Serious History. You will find out why there are so many Jewish comics and why they are so damn funny.
Our second speaker was Matthew Continetti from AEI who has a new book who entitled The Right: The Hundred-Year War for American Conservatism. Matt explains how the conservative movement is not monolithic and that they disagree over foreign policy, trade, and immigration.

Every month since the beginning of Covid, I have discussed the latest employment report because it is the most important global economic statistic. This month's Establishment report showed a 468,000 job increase which is very solid. Unemployment is low. Among college graduates it is now 2.0% and only 3.1% for those with some college. These numbers cannot go lower. We are approaching full employment.

The number of individuals who didn't look for work because they were scared of COVID fell in half this month and is coming to an end.   Yet, the demand for workers is at near record levels which explains why the job market is hot and why half of job switchers are getting raises in excess of ten percent.

The inflation in the economy is not transitory. And as a result, the Federal Reserve raised rates this week by 50 basis points to slow down the economy. But the Fed's actions have 18-month lags and the Fed Funds rate is still only 1%. So, watch out.

I use interns to help me prepare this podcast, and I am looking to hire a new batch of interns for the summer. Historically the interns have been seniors in high school, college students, or recent graduates.

Interns will read assigned books to decide if they are show worthy, we will review last week's show to learn how to make it better, and interns will be exposed to all aspects of podcasting. Please let me know if you are interested.

You can find transcripts for this program and all of our previous episodes on our website whathappensnextin6minutes.com, and you can listen on Podbean, Apple Podcast and Spotify.

Let's begin with our first speaker Robert Kaplan.

Robert Kaplan:
I'm Robert D. Kaplan. I'll be talking about my book, Adriatic: A Concert of Civilizations at the End of the Modern Age.

The Adriatic is important for these reasons: One, the Adriatic is a fault zone between the east and west. On the Italian side on the west, you have Roman Catholicism. On the Baltic side on the east, you have Eastern Orthodox Christianity and in Albania, Islam. You have the Venetian Empire on the West and the Ottoman Turkish Empire on the East.

This is significant today in light of the Ukraine crisis. What is the Ukraine crisis about? Europe has always been determined by wars, cataclysms, events on its periphery. Ukraine is a periphery of Europe. Peter the Great and the Ottoman Turks came in from the East and changed Europe. Russia has always been a challenge for Europe.

The Adriatic is another periphery of Europe. In the 21st century, we're going to see more interaction between Europe and the Near East, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa. and all this comes into play in my book about the Adriatic.

Larry Bernstein:
Robert your previous blockbuster book entitled The Balkan Ghosts was published over 30 years ago about the breakup of Yugoslavia. How much has the former Yugoslavia changed over the past 30 years.

Robert Kaplan:
Dramatically on one hand and not at all on the other. Take Croatia. Croatia is now a vacation destination. About 15 million tourists come to Croatia's Dalmatian Coast on the Adriatic Sea every summer. This is almost four times the population of Croatia. Croatia has changed from a hinterland Balkan country.

Since the war ended, there have been massive superhighways built, linking the interior of Croatia with points along the Adriatic Coast. Instead of suffering six hours on a train, you can go from the inland Croatia to the Mediterranean in 90 minutes. This changed its economy because of the explosion of tourism on the coast.

Why hasn't changed at all. You get to Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, and it's all ethnic politics. Arguments about the number of Jews or Serbs killed during World War II. The same arguments I heard 30 years ago, when I researched Balkan Ghosts. In the former Yugoslavia, ethnic conflicts continued without the shooting. There's no violence. Now it's played out over the internet between people screaming at each other over Twitter and Facebook.

I don't think there will be any shooting because the countries are still exhausted. Remember the shooting happened because the Yugoslav national army collapsed and all the weaponry got divided up among the various militias in the 1990s. I don't think the Balkans are gonna come back into the headlines in a bad way again.

Croatia and Slovenia have done the best of the former Yugoslavia.

Even there, development should be even higher than it is if you didn't have this nasty ethnic politics. They could be on the scale of Austria. Croatia and Slovenia have both not changed at all and changed dramatically.

Larry Bernstein:
My grandfather George Karp was born in the Austria Hungarian Empire in the small city of Sibiu. When he grew up there before World War 1, the city was evenly split among Germans, Jews, Slavs, and Hungarians. Today it is purely Romanian. This area in the Adriatic and Eastern Europe has had massive population transfers. Do you think we will see more or less population diversity in the Balkans?

Robert Kaplan:
I think they've become less pure because of the population exchanges. The Ukraine war has exacerbated that. This is a century of migration of refugee movements.

In this century, people will be on the move not just because of wars, but because of the revolutions of rising expectations. People will want to move to a place where it's better.
This is a much more global Balkans than the one I saw when I researched Balkan Ghosts 30 years ago. Globalization is everywhere in Croatia and also seeping into Montenegro and Albania. Italy is less Italian. Globalization has diluted these fierce ethnic nationalisms.

Everyone's bubbling about populism. Even though Marine Le Pen lost the election, she got a better result than ever before, and Victor Orban has been reelected in Hungary, and look what Putin is doing in Ukraine.

In the long march of history, populism will be a phase passing through because this is not the 1930s. Globalization has diluted ethnic nationalisms and is continuing to do so on a daily basis, so gradual you don't even notice it. Even places like Hungary and France will pass out of this.

Larry Bernstein:
When I worked in Salomon Brothers emerging markets trading department, I partnered with Mark Franklin who taught me the shoe leather approach to market research. We would literally walk the emerging markets and meet with the most senior politicians, central bankers, local billionaires, and newspaper editors.

You use a shoe leather style to journalism. Describe your process.

Robert Kaplan:
The moment you cross into the former Yugoslavia, politics takes over and you have to talk to people to find out what's going on the ground, because it is different than you read in the newspapers.

And it's not different in the sense that the journalists get it wrong, it's that they're missing nuances, they're missing subtleties. For instance, the talk about Saudi Arabia is the killing of the Washington Post journalist, and that it's an autocracy. And you get to Saudi Arabia, and everybody is happy over the liberation of women. You see women sitting alone in cafes, working on their Apple computer, greeting a man, kissing him on the cheek. The society has changed dramatically over the last five years, and yet because it didn't happen all in one day, it's not a news story, it doesn't fit within the parameters of news.

I didn't expect the level of globalization in Croatia, nor did I expect the continuing arguments about ethnic politics, because you don't read about it, because it's nonviolent, it doesn't make a news story, so it doesn't travel outside local websites. I was surprised by the dramatic change in living standards.

I didn't expect the high level of urban development in Albania where Tirana has become a global city, despite the crime and the corruption. You don't read about this in the newspapers. To understand a country, you have to go to the place and talk to people. Because journalists miss nuances, because that's not what they do.

Larry Bernstein:
In your new book, you mention that travel offers the individual a chance for self-discovery. Why does leaving your local community encourage personal growth?

Robert Kaplan:
All travel is a work of self-discovery because you are alone encountering different landscapes, different art, different people. You're out of your daily groove, you're not among friends or relatives or even colleagues. You discover aspects of yourself that you didn't realize you had. And that's something I've dealt with my whole career as a travel writer.

Larry Bernstein:
In your other books, you are a detached observer. But in your new book Adriatic you become a character in the plot. Why did you decide to make this book so personal?

Robert Kaplan:
Half of the book deals with the former Yugoslavia. And I became famous or infamous because of Balkan Ghosts. And I couldn't just write about the former Yugoslavia and not talk about Balkan Ghosts, and my regrets about it. I couldn't avoid it because my book was an issue in the Balkans. I had no choice but to put myself as a protagonist.

Larry Bernstein:
In your book, you beat yourself up over your naivete in Balkan Ghosts. You had read other historical travel writing but skipped academic research in your field. Why do you think that getting the academic perspective is necessary to understand what is happening now?

Robert Kaplan:
Before I went to the Balkans 30 years ago, I read a lot of its history, but I was ignorant of the academic history and research about the place. Now one can criticize that we have too much credentialism, too much specialties, and we're missing generalists like myself. But the intellectual honesty of it is that you can't just go to a place and be oblivious to the specialists. The best specialists are worth reading. And I've incorporated the best of the best into my discussions of the former Yugoslavia and Albania.

Larry Bernstein:
In your work, you highlight the importance of geography. National borders matter, mountains and water separate communities. Why is geography important in the Adriatic?

Robert Kaplan:
When we think of geography, nothing seems more logical than Italy. It's a long boot extending from Europe, and everyone speaks Italian. It geographically makes sense. But as I point out, that was not always the case. Northern and Southern Italy were almost different countries. Turin in the north to a village in Sicily in the south is to go from the most developed part of the world to the least. What changed geography in Italy was modern transportation.

Larry Bernstein:
As an example of the importance of water to geography, can you compare Albania with its close neighbor Corfu?

Robert Kaplan:
I went to a town in Albania that I knew from 30 years ago, Sarandë, which was then a beautiful little sleepy village, and now it's this overgrown morass of the worst architecture you ever saw. By bad architecture, I don't just mean an urban design that you disagree with, I mean buildings that look like the interior of lavatories. No zoning, no aesthetics. There's a chaotic violence in it. And Albania, despite all the progress it's made is still way, way behind. High levels of corruption, weak institutions, organized crime, etc.

Yet, you take a hydrofoil from Sarandë, and it was a calm day, and it glided over where the Adriatic meets the Ionian Sea, and literally 30 minutes later, you're entering the breakwater of Corfu to the Greek customs station where you go through passport control. And the moment you went to Corfu, it's like the Wizard of Oz, it goes technicolor from black and white. Everything changes. Aesthetics take over, every trellis has potted flowers. Every building is old, but well kept up. It's a perfect paradise without being touristy. 30 minutes of sea travel takes you from one realm to another. Comparison is the beginning of all serious scholarship.

"What is Albania like?" I'll say, "It's a lot worse off than Croatia." "What is Greece like?" "Well, it's a lot less institutionally developed and organized than France, Austria, or Germany. But compared to Albania, it's paradise, literally."

And this is only 30 minutes on a boat. You could swim it, if you're a good swimmer.

Larry Bernstein:
Why do so many Balkan states dream of joining the EU and NATO like Ukraine.

Robert Kaplan:
The Balkans are quite similar to Ukraine; They're Eastern Orthodox, quasi-European in various ways. Underdeveloped, on the periphery of Europe, with real historical legal issues vis a vis their neighbors.

Some of the Balkan countries are part of NATO, others are not. Only Croatia and Slovenia are part of the EU, the others want to join.

This Ukrainian crisis could unfold uniting the EU and NATO and giving it a new purpose. And with that new purpose, both the EU and NATO may in the future have the energy to incorporate the Balkans, that's the good news. The other way of looking at it is six months from now, Europe may be exhausted from dealing with Ukraine with less of an appetite to absorb these Balkan countries.

Larry Bernstein:
Will the Ukraine War lead to a radical restructuring of the periphery of Europe?a
Robert Kaplan:
Vladimir Lenin said that, "Decades could go along, and nothing happens, and then days and weeks everything happens." Decades transpire in a matter of three or four weeks. And the next seven weeks in Ukraine could determine the next 15 years in Russia.

Larry Bernstein:
You wrote two books on the American military and its role in nation building. The US army operates differently from the Russians who are blowing up a nation.

Robert Kaplan:
The American military is a great institution provided it gets good direction. The American military had no solution to the problems of complex Muslim societies in Iraq and Afghanistan. But the American military knows how to fight. It's not corrupted and honest. Morale is very good. The quality of the individual troop is much higher than in Russia. And this devolves from a free and democratic versus an autocratic society. Remember militaries are metaphorical extensions of the strengths and weaknesses of the society at large.

Larry Bernstein:
50 years ago, you enlisted in the Israeli military. How did that experience impact your world view?

Robert Kaplan:
The Israeli military is the product of a very small tight knit uniethnic society that has real enemies on its borders. It's not just paranoia, it's real enemies. It's a tight society with near universal conscription, morale and quality is very high. With these Russian troops, morale is terrible.

The US military has a very highly developed noncommissioned officer corps that is corporals, sergeants, sergeants first class, master sergeants, et cetera. They're the real heart and soul of the US military. They're what makes the American military function so well. The Russians have almost no non commission officer corps, and that's why so many have been killed. They're near the front lines because they have no buffer of noncommissioned officers to essentially direct the troops.

Larry Bernstein:
Robert, I end each episode on a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about?

Robert Kaplan:
While democracy may not succeed everywhere in the world, the general spirit of more liberal societies will gain ground because even autocracies around the world are liberalizing their populations.

Larry Bernstein:
Thank you, Robert. Let's go to our second speaker, Emerson Brooking. Emerson runs the Digital Forensic Research Lab and he's written a book, *Like War: On the Weaponization of Social Media.* Emerson, please go ahead.

Emerson T. Brooking:
I study the intersection of internet technology and war.

The first internet war was a small socialist uprising in the state of Chiapas, Mexico in 1995, and the most recent internet war is between Russia and Ukraine.

I see three ways that the internet has changed war and conflict.

The first is the revolution in open-source intelligence or OSINT. Widespread internet penetration and near-universal smartphone use lets video and photographic evidence spread through the internet after the fact.

As one CIA officer told me, secrets now come with a half-life. In the May 2011 mission to kill Osama bin Laden, SEAL Team Six stormed bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. They'd flown two Black Hawk helicopters low to the ground avoiding radar detection in the dead of night.

It was a secret military operation. They killed Osama bin Laden and exfiltrated and no one was the wiser. This operation was discovered by a Pakistani IT consultant who was up late at night, crashing on a project. He heard the whole thing, and he created his own digital trail of events.
After President Obama announced that bin Laden had been killed, reporters were able to find this evidence and ask questions, about evidence not disclosed in the initial U.S. announcement of the operation. This OSINT revolution enables crowdsourcing, a real-time collaboration between multiple analysts using off-the-shelf tools like Google Maps, or working with other people who are looking at the social media trails of fighters in war zones.

In Ukraine, the OSINT community watching TikTok videos of Belarusian teenagers had a pretty accurate understanding of Russian forces and military equipment that was in place prior to the invasion.

The second way that the internet's changed war is in the spread of propaganda. The internet optimizes content that produces anger and outrage.

This human compunction to consume content that makes you angry, to share it, has been harnessed by actors to gain political and battlefield advantages. The Islamic State Terrorist Organization in 2014 used viral propaganda and outrage-inducing barbaric violent content to grow from a small faction in the Syrian Civil War to a military organization that was capable of invading Northern Iraq that required an international response to defeat.

This content that spreads anger and outrage doesn't have to be true, and the messenger of this content does not have to accurately represent themselves. So, this opens the door to clandestine information manipulation or disinformation.

My team at the Digital Forensic Research Lab see disinformation campaigns proliferating in this war between Russia and Ukraine. The Russian invasion of Ukraine was premised on an extended

disinformation campaign that it denied historical Ukrainian claims to sovereignty and associated all Ukrainians with neo-Nazis.

The final thing is the way the internet has changed the power of social media companies. They wield the power of content moderation. As we think about war migrating online, we need to think a bit about the battle space. Now, this isn't a physical battle space. This isn't land, sea, or air. This is a digital battle space, and that means that it plays by a different set of rules.

The way the platforms and algorithms are built, these decisions are concentrated in the hands of a small number of individuals, the founders of Facebook, Twitter, Google, YouTube, and the Chinese owners of TikTok who are disconnected from politics at large.

Historically, these social media companies have been reluctant to accept their new responsibility. A lot of the engineers who run these systems set out to create interesting consumer products. They didn't set out to be judges and arbiters of armed conflict or political campaigns. So, they've sometimes denied the power that their products have.

We've seen the power that these companies have wielded over the war between Russia and Ukraine. Technology companies repeatedly stumble as they've tried to write policy which permits Ukrainians to call for violence against Russian invaders, while still prohibiting violent content and extremism in other cases.

The Russian government seeing the power that these companies wield have banned, Facebook Twitter, and Instagram. Russia talks increasingly about disconnecting itself from the global internet entirely.

I study revolution in communications, in politics, and in warfighting, and it's a fundamental challenge for our age.

Larry Bernstein:
In your opening remarks, you mention the 1995 Mexican Chiapas uprising that employed social media. What happened?

Emerson T. Brooking:
In 1995, a revolution among poor farmers in the Mexican state of Chiapas rebelled against the Mexican government. They declared an independent state, and most governments typically send in the armed forces to reestablish control, and that's the end of it.

But this time, they launched an aggressive media war against the Mexican government. They could reach out to western journalists and web forums populated by- by global leftists and Marxist sympathizers. As soon as they declared independence, international reporters flew to Mexico to cover it. And the Mexican military couldn't release this brutal campaign of suppression without seriously damaging Mexico's international reputation.

The Mexican Foreign Minister at the time said with regret that Mexico had been a victim of "a war of the internet."

Larry Bernstein:

How important was social media for the Arab Spring? Remember that Google employee who worked in Egypt who said take to the streets and then millions did.

Emerson T. Brooking:
The 2010 Arab Spring is a moment where most people became aware of the political power of the internet as a democratizing tool for good.

The Arab Spring did lead to the overthrow of Mubarak and other dictators. But after Mubarak came Morsi and then Sisi an Egyptian Colonel and a new strong man.

Sisi's regime, which was deeply anti-democratic and has become more oppressive than Mubarak's regime ever was. So the social media mobilization did enable a democratic movement that overthrew a dictator, but it didn't last. And the same internet forces used for a good thing, we're soon used to strengthen an authoritarian regime.

Larry Bernstein:
Tell me about social media use of false propaganda to set off riots and bad behavior.

Emerson T. Brooking:
Your words remind me of a quote from a Sri Lankan government official describing a series of lynching's of Muslims by the Buddhist majority. These lynching's have been propagated by false rumors on WhatsApp. He said, "The seeds are our own, the seeds arise from our society, but Facebook is the wind." Social media intensifies and accelerates the way that information can spread.

Long broiling tensions in a society can come to the fore very quickly, but reactionary forces are much better at organizing on social media in the long run. In India, you see organized troll armies engaging in harassment against the Muslim minority. In Brazil, troll armies working on behalf of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro attack, demean and intimidate the minority.

Larry Bernstein:
Can you explain how ISIS radicalized Muslims to join them in the fight?

Emerson T. Brooking:
ISIS launched the most cost-effective war in history. When ISIS was at the peak of its power in 2014, it executed a kidnapped American journalist, James Foley. The video of that execution went immediately viral. In August 2014 more Americans reported being scared of an imminent terrorist attack than had been in October 2001 in the aftermath of 9/11.

By killing two individuals, neither on American soil, ISIS had managed to completely capture American attention. The Islamic state was destroyed in the end but the goals of this terrorist organization were to force a confrontation with the United States and to force American re-engagement.

The Islamic state ultimately did not achieve its goals of a long-lasting caliphate but did achieve their strategic objectives of martyrdom.

Larry Bernstein:
How would you contrast the use of social media by non-state vs. state actors?

Emerson T. Brooking:
Non-state actors are more willing to try new technologies and tactics because they're looking for any advantage they can get. That's why the first internet war I described was that of a small socialist uprising in Mexico against the Mexican government. In subsequent years, social media was largely a tool of left-leaning activist causes through the late '90s and early 2000's.

And then social media was used by terrorist organizations, by Al-Qaeda after the invasion of Iraq, then by ISIS and other groups. Different governments adopted the technology at different rates. For a weak state like Russia, which is looking for new ways to compete with the United States, social media and a new generation of information operations was an attractive area of investment.

Iran and China looked for new ways to contest American hegemony.

Larry Bernstein:
Eliot Higgins spoke on What Happens Next about his organization Bellingcat that uses crowdsourcing to debunk disinformation by governments. Bellingcat used video and photos by Russian soldiers to prove that Russia was responsible for shooting down a Malaysian Jetliner. Afterwards, Russia tried to prevent Russian soldiers from bringing their smart phones to battle. Loose lips sink ships.

Emerson T. Brooking:
Loose tweets sink fleets. The Russians learned it the hard way. Russian military operational security was nonexistent in the early 2010s when they were operating first in Eastern Ukraine and then in Syria. Open-source intelligence groups like Bellingcat were able to identify individual Russian soldiers as they conducted their malign activities.

The spread of social media is a wakeup call for militaries trying to reassess their operational security. It's not as easy as just banning smartphones because smartphones are an intrinsic part of the lives of active-duty service members just as they are for everyone else. You can tell a 19-year-old not to use a smartphone, but then they can't communicate with their family and their morale absolutely hits the toilet.

Larry Bernstein:
You mentioned the raid on Bin Laden in Pakistan and that the Obama made misleading statements in his press conference that were later refuted by the Pakistani IT guy's video. What happened?

Emerson T. Brooking:
In the operation to kill Osama bin Laden, a helicopter crashed while we were conducting that operation. There were no casualties. The SEALs were prepared for that contingency, so they were able to relocate to the other Black Hawk and exfiltrate successfully before they were confronted by Pakistani military.

But the loss of a Black Hawk helicopter is not something that President Obama was sharing in the first triumphant address to the American people. That was something that journalists knew about immediately and could press American national security officials on. I think for governments for which there's an expectation of transparency, this real-time reporting does put new pressures on them. But for authoritarian regimes that are comfortable lying, social media often enables them to provide disinformation efficiently and faster to more people.

Larry Bernstein:

Putin used little green men in its Crimean invasion. Is this how authoritarian regimes will respond to social media and openness in war that they use fake proxies to give plausible deniability?

Emerson T. Brooking:
In the 2014 invasion of Crimea and then Eastern Ukraine, Russia thought about how you mask military movements in the age of social media. When they invaded Crimea, the strategy was to take off any identifying emblems. These Russian invaders or "little green men" had taken the Crimean parliament building, they'd locked down major Crimean infrastructure and strategic centers before the Ukrainian military really had a handle on what was happening. At first, they thought they were dealing with a protest. They weren't sure who the protestors were. They thought it was a civil action, only too late did they realize that they'd been invaded.

Larry Bernstein:
How would you compare Russia's use of social media for its Crimean invasion with the recent Ukrainian one?

Emerson T. Brooking:
It's a marked contrast between Russian operations in 2014, which are quite good at disguising their providence versus the Russian invasion in February 2022, which opened with cruise missiles landing on Kyiv and other cities and 190,000 Russian soldiers marching across the border.

This current operation appears to have been a decision taken by Vladimir Putin right before the shooting began. Certainly, there was no disguising all the Russian military assets that were in place, but when it came to the invasion itself, very few Russian government officials knew about it in advance and there was a lot of confusion among senior Russian officials.

For the first week, it was Russian policy to deny that there were troops outside of Eastern Ukraine, and deny that there was a Russian tank column heading toward Kyiv. It was very hard for Russians to message consistently to the international community and their own people.
That's begun to straighten itself out. Today there are patriotic brigades of Russians who are helping to police online discussions in Russia. There is a very powerful censorship law passed by the Russian parliament in which demeaning the Russian military can land you a 15-year jail sentence.

There's a crackdown on many social media platforms in the country, and that has overnight transformed Russian digital culture, because it is much harder to speak frankly. Those small acts have stopped because the cost is just so high. And it's also noteworthy that as Russia's focuses more attention on its domestic population, it hasn't done that much internationally.
Russian policy makers understand that they have truly isolated themselves from the global community, but what matters most is stopping a fifth column from forming.

Larry Bernstein:
In the days before the invasion of Ukraine, Biden made public pronouncements that the invasion was imminent. I suspect he did so to prevent the use of bogus reasons for an invasion. What happened?

Emerson T. Brooking:
I don't see how the US could have played it better. Here's a contrast. In 2016 when the US had definitive proof that Russia had engaged in interference operations against the United States presidential election, it took months of internal deliberation for the White House to put out one small press release.

You contrast that with President Biden saying, "There will be invasion, we have the proof of it." Because the US had been so clear in calling out what was going to happen, when the invasion came, the international response came together much faster. The US had prepared this environment and then the Ukrainians themselves were so powerfully showing their bravery.

These two things together compelled the international community to expel Russia much faster than most observers anticipated before the war began.

Larry Bernstein:
The outrage in Ukraine dissipates with each passing day. Anger exponentially decays. How does that fit in with the social media problem?

Emerson T. Brooking:
That is a wonderful question. Anger and all online content come with a half-life. When something goes viral, most people see it in just a few hours. And then it rapidly diminishes after that.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has followed the same course that all online events do. I'm studying this with a team right now. And the average daily shares of Ukraine related articles is down to about 5% of what it was at its peak the day after the invasion. Most global observers are sympathetic to the Ukrainian cause, but it's becoming a background noise for most people. It was inevitable.

Larry Bernstein:
Elon Musk is buying Twitter and he believes in Free Speech on the platform. How will this change censorship of violence on Twitter.

Emerson T. Brooking:
I worry that Elon Musk has never thought about this issue. Elon Musk's conception of free speech comes from a largely American-centric debate between White men, who are rich and feel censored when they can't express political positions.

The content moderation policies that Twitter has developed didn't emerge in a vacuum. They emerged after more than a decade of Twitter dealing with terrorists, foreign intelligence agents, and white supremacists using the platform. And so the decisions that they've made are very much tied to that context. Elon Musk is set to restart these debates. And unless he proceeds carefully, he'll be re-empowering many hateful forces, which could spell terrible consequences for Twitter and for broader internet discourse.

Larry Bernstein:
When I worked at Salomon Brothers in the late 1980s, I was part of the corporate finance team that covered the Soviet Union. And each week, I would send a market update using a fax. I was told that this one of the few faxes in the entire country. The Soviet Union was incredibly backward in its technology and many analysts at the time thought that it was the new communication technology that led to the Soviet downfall. Now with the Chinese, they have cutting-edge technology, but instead it empowers the authoritarian regime.

Emerson T. Brooking:

China shows definitively that technology and the internet is not a liberalizing force. The Chinese Communist Party wanted to maintain a technological edge with a philosophy of state control. The Chinese Great Firewall was built by American companies Cisco and Sun Systems who took what they learned in corporate intranets to make an intranet for the entire country.

Communication between Chinese internet and websites overseas would flow through Chinese sensors. The Chinese have been pioneers in data collection. Sometimes they make great commercial products. TikTok's success in the West is because of how advanced Chinese engineering has gotten in collecting micro data for every user. But all those tools are used for control of the Chinese population and the suppression of anti-political activity.

China is the textbook example of government dominance of the internet. It is very difficult to see that changing. And as time has passed, more and more countries around the world are looking to the Chinese model.

Larry Bernstein:
I end each episode on a note of optimism, Emerson what are you optimistic about with regard to social media?

Emerson T. Brooking:
Authoritarian forces have gotten much better at using the internet. But as I look back over the Russian invasion of Ukraine, I'm encouraged by how bad the authoritarian messaging continues to be in practice. How unconvincing it is. We talked about how Russia is now exercising so much control over their domestic population. But if you look at the content and videos, they are unconvincing.

A few years ago, we worried about Russians running these highly sophisticated sock puppet networks overseas pretending to be citizens and masking their identities. We know now that they can try that stuff, but they're bad at it. Whether it's open-source intelligence outlets, like Bellingcat or labs that study social media manipulation, like my own, the Digital Forensic Research Lab, we can find, track, and disrupt a lot of this malign behavior.