

Emerson T. Brooking
What Happens Next – 05.08.2022

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 compulsion 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.