

BOOK REVIEWS

Information Wars: How We Lost the Global Battle Against Disinformation and What We Can Do About It

Richard Stengel

New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2019, 368 pp.

In *Information Wars*, Richard Stengel offers a compelling first-person account of his tenure as Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy during President Obama's second term. The book recounts his attempts to turn the State Department's sprawling public diplomacy apparatus toward countering Russian and ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) messaging. His experience illustrates that American government institutions cannot move rapidly enough to effectively respond to the digital messaging of more nimble adversaries. This lesson largely fails to influence his proposed policy solutions, however, which embrace media regulation rather than civil-service reform and the elimination of bureaucratic veto points.

From the start, Stengel takes a clear-eyed view of disinformation's effects. He highlights its ability to muddy the epistemic waters, rendering truths unbelievable, while rejecting the popular shibboleths of malleable minds and a disinformation-borne 2016 Trump victory. He writes:

I absolutely hate the phrase, so often used to describe PD [public diplomacy], "winning hearts and minds." Everything we've learned in the last 50 years from social science and psychology suggests that changing someone's mind is a nearly impossible task.

Cato Journal, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Spring/Summer 2021). Copyright © Cato Institute. All rights reserved.

Russian messaging had a lot of reach but hardly any depth . . . the ads themselves were not very successful . . . what had a more significant effect was the false and deceptive content . . . but in the end, disinformation tends to confirm already held beliefs; it's not really meant to change people's minds. Disinformation doesn't create divisions, it amplifies them.

After a year-long confirmation process, Stengel was dropped into the State Department, where he found himself almost totally at the mercy of foreign-service officers in scenes that feel drawn from the British political satire *Yes Minister*: “Nobody would openly oppose something, but then people would work behind the scenes to undermine it. Sometimes you discovered that actions you had signed off on were still not done months or years later.”

He describes the “infantilization of Principals,” a process by which political appointees are kept overscheduled and dependent on staff for information such that they lose any real agency, never making “any decision or choices other than the ones baked in for them by staff.” Time and time again, Stengel recounts how bureaucratic red tape, office politics, and a careerist mentality delayed or outright prevented the presentation of an official countervailing narrative to disinformation. Early in his tenure, the State Department’s Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) attempted to answer Boko Haram messaging on social media. Stengel found the proposed graphics bland but approved them immediately “because I didn’t want to delay our efforts.” Soon after, Michele Obama’s #BringBackOurGirls hashtag placed kidnappings by Boko Haram center stage in American politics. Ten days after this deluge of viral support, Stengel discovered that the CSCC graphics hadn’t been published, held up by concerns from the African and Intelligence and Research bureaus. As he adroitly notes, “This was insane. A ten-day-old tweet might as well not exist.”

As time passed, he was frustrated by internal leaks from rival branches of the State Department and longstanding misallocations of resources. “As hard as it was to start something new at State, it was almost impossible to end something old. When I arrived, the two countries that received the most public diplomacy money were Japan and Germany—a continuing legacy of WWII.”

At his first meeting with the Board of Broadcasting Governors (BBG), which oversees Voice of America and a host of other, less

well-known American-backed foreign outlets, Stengel discovered that, despite its budget of \$750 million, Board publications' support of U.S. foreign policy goals is limited to editorials from the U.S. State Department, isolated from organic content.

As he struggled to deploy effective counter messaging, Stengel recognized our enemies' strengths in digital information warfare. The Russian Internet Research Agency and other state disinformation organs were willing to fail quickly and cheaply and learn from the experience. ISIS messaging was decentralized—anyone could create ISIS propaganda, and a legion of online fans selected and promoted the most compelling content. As America hesitantly waited for tweet approval, our foes ran circles around us.

Stengel's most striking example of this mismatch is personal and came in the wake of Russian-backed separatists downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17. Using Twitter to demand a "credible and unimpeded investigation" of the "crash," Stengel accidentally appended the hashtag #UnitedforGaza rather than #UnitedforUkraine. Facing mockery and claims of anti-Israeli bias, he follows up on the mistake by tweeting, "Earlier tweet with wrong hashtag was a mistake. My Bad," which elicited further mockery and advice from his chief of staff to do nothing. Stengel recounts, "that was her usual advice in a crisis. Her attitude was, anything you do is likely to make it worse."

While further response has its risks, simply retreating from the mistake cedes control of the narrative entirely. This is not to mock Richard Stengel. He is not terribly familiar with the norms of social media or Twitter in particular, and he received poor advice. When drawing lessons from the incident, however, Stengel appreciates only its illustration of Russia's use of disinformation, ignoring the role his anemic response played in delivering a Russian win:

The point wasn't really to mock a mistake or an individual, it was to divert attention from the actual issue: Russian culpability in the shooting down of a civilian airliner. I don't think I saw one tweet, in the back-and-forth over my mistake, that had anything to say about how Russia had been responsible for the murder of 298 innocent people. That was their goal all along. Mission accomplished.

By treating this loss of narrative control as inevitable, Stengel abdicates responsibility for his own failure to respond appropriately to his

mistake and Russian attempts to seize upon it. Stengel himself could have easily provided the tweet he pines for. Indeed, while his weak apology was followed by prompt critical media coverage, a stronger response might have inspired favorable coverage. It needn't be rude, the insult-laced "wolf-warrior" diplomacy of Chinese officials does little to establish a trustworthy brand. Imagine if, instead of simply apologizing, Stengel had tweeted the following: "Picking the wrong hashtag is a mistake. Downing a civilian airliner is the predictable consequence of giving advanced SAMs to untrained proxies."

In a fast moving and ephemeral information environment, taking your ball and going home is not an option. As any teenage influencer could no doubt explain to Stengel, "tweeting through it" was essentially his only option. As Stengel himself experienced, while one mistake may be seized upon, it is far harder to respond to a deluge of content. There is no reason the United States cannot attempt to "flood the zone" with transparently sourced, officially endorsed truth.

Indeed, investigative institutions such as Bellingcat have proven effective at countering disinformation with granular, reader-verifiable truths, explicitly conducting their analysis using publicly verifiable information. A better organized, more mission-focused BBG might support this work. Past proposals to agglomerate it into a cable "Freedom News Network" would, as Stengel notes, provide an inferior version of market offerings. Merely appointing a viceroy, as per the organization's late-2016 restructuring as the U.S. Agency for Global Media, produced an agency at war with itself under the disastrous tenure of Michael Pack. The organization must be more explicitly, perhaps legislatively, directed to develop and deliver credible, well-sourced examinations of internationally contested topics. An expanded Global Engagement Center, an all-purpose counter-disinformation center conjured by executive order from the CSCC, might also be a home for these efforts.

We must also be willing to recognize when America's allies are better positioned to realize our narrative goals. ISIS spoke to a Suni audience in Suni terms. The Sawab Center, a partnership effectively outsourced to the UAE, was therefore better able to offer culturally fluent responses to ISIS messaging than anything America brought to the table.

Workplace culture and career trajectories within the State Department should also be a focus of reform. Any healthy institution, but particularly one that aims to shape rapidly evolving internet

narratives, should be able to enthusiastically launch new projects without creating bureaucratic “turf.” If participation in new ventures is viewed as a career risk, rather than an opportunity, ambitious talent will be channeled away from the most pressing problems.

It is disappointing then, that the section of the book titled “What to do About Disinformation” offers only blunt legislative solutions aimed at limiting the spread of disinformation. Rather than attempting to apply the lessons learned throughout the prior sections to improve the American government’s ability to respond to false narratives spread by rival nations and nonstate actors, Stengel embraces illiberal and outmoded media regulation, rejecting the inevitability of easily accessible false speech.

Stengel states that he “tried to show throughout the book,” that “democracies aren’t very good at fighting disinformation.” But what he has shown is that the sclerotic State Department bureaucracy is incapable of turning our society’s natural advantages in narrative production and deployment toward foreign policy goals. To the extent that authoritarian societies are more resistant to foreign influence, it is because they abandon the pursuit of truth, embracing ambivalence and uncertainty to nourish demand for a strong state. Cultivating stultifying cynicism at home comes with myriad costs and puts a low ceiling on government legitimacy.

Proposing sweeping internet regulations destined to upend social media platforms is a poor response to disinformation when foreign platforms are waiting in the wings. The fact that the information war is conducted via American platforms should be seen as an advantage. They demonstrate our commitment to free expression while forcing others to play on our cultural terrain.

In late November 2020, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Lijian Zhao tweeted a photoshopped image of an Australian soldier slitting a Muslim girl’s throat. The Australian government asked Twitter to remove the tweet but had no power to force a removal. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison responded to the image on WeChat, where his comments were removed for involving “content that incites, misleads, has non-objective facts” or “fabricates societal/historical issues.”

While some question why autocratic governments are even allowed on Twitter, there are clear advantages to meeting them on friendly terrain. Chinese Communist Party (CCP) diplomats mostly use twitter to incite and offend, pleasing domestic audiences while stoking

resentment abroad, making it far from clear that their public presence actually benefits China. Furthermore, every one of Zhao's tweets is flagged as coming from a "China government account," explicitly binding his vulgar speech to the government that employs him.

Indeed, modifying Section 230 as Stengel suggests, or repealing it wholesale, as former President Trump demanded as part of the National Defense Authorization Act, would undermine our ability to respond to foreign disinformation. Section 230 gives the platform internet an American flavor—its most dominant actors are American firms, playing by American rules that prioritize speech and property rights. These firms are usually friendly to American values, at least in respect to foreign adversaries. In late February, Twitter removed a network of Russian accounts for "undermining faith in the NATO alliance and its stability." Silicon Valley firms are subject to American cultural and regulatory levers and tend to take a dim view of Islamist propaganda and CCP subterfuge. The same cannot be said of WeChat, Viber, VKontakte, or any of the other foreign platforms to which conversation might flow if American firms faced a newly hostile regulatory environment.

More broadly, an American approach to combatting disinformation must not treat the First Amendment as an outdated "design flaw" to be circumvented by AI-assisted moderation or the regulation of tech firms. Instead, it will require government to move more quickly, dispense with internal veto points, and embrace an agenda-setting role for American civil society.

Although his suggestions miss the mark, *Information Wars* offers a lively report of Stengel's two-front battle against Foggy Bottom bureaucracy and foreign propaganda. Unable to set his background as a journalist aside, Stengel's account of his own tenure offers a more institution-centric perspective than most Washington tell-all's.

Will Duffield
Cato Institute

A Question of Power: Electricity and the Wealth of Nations

Robert Bryce

New York: Hachette Book Group, 2020, 322 pp.

"Electricity has transformed humanity like no other form of energy," says Robert Bryce. A bold statement? Perhaps, yet he