



War in 140 Characters: How Social Media is Reshaping Conflict in the Twenty-First Century

**By David Patrikarakos
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Reviewed by CPT Kevin M. Bernhardt

Leaders make decisions within an instantaneous global media cycle, influenced by anyone who maintains a social media account with the ability to engage an audience's emotions and biases. In almost every moment in modern warfare, individuals consistently update events that occur around them on social media, in which the immediacy of reporting can lead to information supremacy. David Patrikarakos, the author and a British investigative journalist who reports on war and international affairs, shows how social media has changed the landscape of warfare in the 21st century by shifting the power of institutional media outlets to the individual, who he labels "homo-digitalis" or the hyper-empowered individual. Patrikarakos argues that anyone with access to the internet can serve as an actor in war.

Patrikarakos developed his thesis through a collection of primary source interviews from people who shaped the conflict around them by way of social media. The author also taps into his own personal experiences reporting on war, adding to the credibility of his thesis. He describes the effects of photographs posted on social media sites by Farah Baker, a Palestinian teenager, which included graphic images of casualties following air raids in the Israel and Palestinian conflict, immediately influencing the global narrative. The author emphasized that Farah, "the Citizen Journalist," did not have any formal media training; however, she did have a phone and an internet connection, which allowed her to immediately post graphic images that contradicted institutional media reports that claimed the bombing had ended.

Patrikarakos also asserts the importance of data emitted by social media through the story of Eliot Higgins, "the Interpreter" of imagery and data. Higgins, a former world-class video gamer, analyzed publicly available geo-located images and articles to investigate Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, an airline that unaccountably crashed in the Ukraine in 2014. Higgins' ability to analyze the information from these open source sites ultimately revealed evidence proving the Russian military shot down the airliner, contrary to official Russian denials. Higgins' example displays the power of analytics, and the vulnerability and exploitation value of data produced by open source media.

Patrikarakos also tells the story of Sophie Kasiki, a French woman victimized by the Islamic State's recruiting campaign through social media. Several of Kasiki's male friends who accepted the call to the Caliphate radicalized Sophie through iterative interactions on the internet and convinced her to travel to Raqqa, Syria. Once she arrived in Raqqa, the narrative that her friends described did not come close to the disheartening reality of the Caliphate. After a month, she escaped and returned to tell her story. Sophie's story shows the potential impact of social media in a real-life story and outlines how the Islamic State used social media as an effective but deceptive recruiting tool.

The author transitions well from story to story and allows the reader to understand the impact of social media in war. For balance, he interviewed competing actors, to include Israeli Defense Force officers about their effort

to counter narratives by Farah Baker and other Palestinian media reports. However, he shows a subtle prejudice and emotional tone in the quantity and quality of content he presents for Farah Baker, which culminates in overt bias in his conclusion. His closing paragraphs compare effects of current populist movements powered by social media with pre-World War I conditions in 1914, and he suggests that the 2016 U.S. election and the Brexit serve as indicators of future large-scale conflict. Although his lack of objectivity in his out of place conclusion affects his argument, this small misjudgment does not take away from the greater lessons in the rest of his book.

Operational leaders and staffs should understand the impact of social media and the speed in which the effects, whether positive or negative, of operations can proliferate throughout the operational environment. *War in 140 Characters: How Social Media is Re-shaping Conflict in the Twenty-First Century* provides awareness for the potential effects of social media in war for leaders in an operational environment. Patrikarakos' insights will be valuable to commanders, operations officers, and targeting officers, who are either currently deployed or preparing to deploy to any operational theater.

(At the time this review was submitted, CPT Kevin Bernhardt was a student in the Defense Analysis Program at the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA.)