On "Social Media Warriors: Leveraging a New Battlespace"

Stephen E. Stark

This commentary responds to Buddhika B. Jayamaha and Jahara Matisek's article "Social Media Warriors: Leveraging a New Battlespace" published in the Winter 2018–19 issue of Parameters *(vol. 48, no. 4).*

I was quite fascinated to read "Social Media Warriors: Leveraging a New Battlespace," by Buddhika B. Jayamaha and Jahara Matisek. The authors clearly know this very troubling topic. I was also deeply (and depressingly) surprised to learn of Chinese actions in New Zealand and elsewhere.

I was, however, disappointed the authors did not explore *why* social media makes such fertile ground for this poisonous seed. It is not just freedom of speech. It is not just bots and troll farms.

The inherent problem with social media is the manner in which developers have created the "stickiness" that keeps people glued to their services. A big part of the problem is "likes," and the all-too-human propensity for rating content against no standard whatsoever.

I have read more than one article about some outrageous action taken by an individual or a group just to score likes. Recently, a reporter on National Public Radio outlined how her simple act of watching inflammatory content on YouTube caused more and more inflammatory content to appear. Outrage seems to be the coin of the realm, and everything seems to get turned up to "11" on social media.

It is not the job of social media to provide news. The job of social media is to keep users jacked into that social media platform so that it can exploit their attention by collecting data, selling that data, or selling products, and, preferably, all three simultaneously.

Social media companies use artificial intelligence to promote this agenda. They use techniques of gamification. They use color psychology. Likes on a social media site is the metric users have to gauge their impact on the world, and likes have been shown to give users a little dopamine boost. That is exactly what games (and some drugs) do. That is why they are addictive. I do not suppose it matters if likes come from a bot or servers in an AI troll farm.

The weaponization of social media will continue so long as gamification persists. Relationships should not be a game. My personal and preferred solution would be to shut down social networks like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. None of them have shown themselves to be particularly good corporate citizens—but all of them make people rich. And we know they are not going to shut down. So, if we cherish our republic and its liberal democracy, we have to do something.

Mr. Stephen E. Stark, senior editor of *Army AL&T* magazine, writes about the military as well as science and technology.

Much needs to be done, and I have no idea how to fix the big issue. But removing the like button would be an obvious way to unarm bots. Other techniques might further reduce the gamification of social media. Perhaps we could also outlaw the tracking and trading of personal data.

Not long ago, I was walking down a very crowded street near midtown Manhattan. As a thought experiment, I tried to imagine how the crowd might respond on social media if a passerby dropped a subway card. "Hey, what are you, some kind of —— moron? I think you dropped your subway card. I can't believe what an ugly face you have."

Someone might say something nice. Someone else might smile. Others might take offense. Fights might break out. People gather to see what is going on. That breeding of offense and violence is going to travel a lot faster and remain a lot longer than a simple act of kindness. . . or even a massive act of kindness. In fact, the nastiness could erase the kindness as violence spreads.

Finally, I was disappointed the authors descended into the same kind of false equivalence between left and right (Charlottesville and Houston) that we often see too much of in the mainstream media. The kind of manipulation by social media that causes such social rupture (schismogenesis—what a great and scary word) has been shown in any number of experiments to be much more effective and "sticky" with people on the right of the political spectrum, regardless of where it happens.

I hope the authors will continue their research and find some creative solutions to a situation that is perilously close to out-of-control and in serious danger of wrecking society as we know it.

The Authors Reply

Buddhika B. Jayamaha and Jahara Matisek

We are grateful for Mr. Stark's thoughtful comments since our article was meant to generate a lively discussion on a new battlespace, one that has been leveraged by adversaries. Their actions pose an existential threat to American democracy, civil society, and foreign policy.

The internet is revolutionary precisely because it created a new domain of social interaction that fundamentally altered the way individuals and communities relate to one another locally and across the globe. Alas, it is also a domain with no stop signs and no regulatory mechanism to shape the nature of social interactions. In this context, Mr. Stark correctly points out the underlying economic logic of private entities—from smartphone makers and social media sites to gaming platforms—seeking to monetize aspects of this broad domain, which is an elemental aspect of the broader problem. The irony, of course, is that so much of this technology brings us "closer together" in a centripetal way that should increase societal cohesion. But if it is misappropriated by hostile actors, it can lead to centrifugal tendencies that fragment and polarize society.

The danger, though, is that the monetizing logic of the internet makes weaponizing social media and the subsequent social schismogenesis easier. But only partially, because as we point out, schismogenesis is easier when there are already deep-rooted social cleavages. We used the left-right dichotomy and the subsequent empirical information as an example to point out how schismogenesis is very much about creating new social divisions as well as deepening existing ones. As Mr. Stark correctly noted about the "false equivalence between left and right (Charlottesville and Houston)," we admittedly did this to prevent most readers from viewing our analysis as being politically biased. But we agree with his findings on schismogenesis being "much more effective and 'sticky' with people on the right of the political spectrum."

The left-right dichotomy in the United States today is symptomatic of an empirical, verifiable polarization of society. Unlike years past, American politicians have adjusted to new societal realities by trying to win an election through procedure and technicalities, as opposed to winning over the median voter that has long characterized American national elections in a two party system. That structural condition—gerrymandering—creates a domestic political logic where hyperpartisanship pays political dividends while centrist pragmatism creates costs. This shift has given malicious actors a new entry point into the discourse of civil society that can be used to deepen existing divisions or to create new "false" points of contention.

Our article attempted to remain neutral and apolitical, so as to raise awareness while defining the broad contours of the dangers lurking in this domain. The underlying economic logic of the internet requires keeping users in a constant interactive mode and profiling them to generate a better user experience and to monetize private data. As economic agents trying to maximize revenue, they rely on psychology, color theory from art and design, behavioral economics, and deep pathologies inherent to human beings; each of us relate very differently to negativity. Even in print news, bad news trumps good news: a metro that runs efficiently is not news, but a crashed metro is a profit-generating narrative keeping users constantly engaged. In this milieu, "banning" sites that add to misconceptions would be counterproductive to American values and society.

This is not to say we should not identify outlets that decidedly convey opinions in the guise of empirical truths. There are many mainstream news outlets that increasingly focus on generating revenue, rather than disseminating facts, because such narratives appeal to certain demographics. This practice leads to the generation of parallel realities in the United States where the average citizen can live in a "bubble." Because of the internet, citizens who are unable to relate to others living in equally isolated bubbles can remain on opposing spectrums.

We have to be mindful that internet-based interactive forums are technologically empowered, socially interactive domains where individuals are the protagonists. As long as there is utility, we will use them. And as long as we use them, there will be underlying monetizing opportunities, which means banned sites will reincarnate in innovative forms. What would be advisable is to generate guidelines to shape interactions on the one hand and generate an external and internal distinction on the other.

Shaping guidelines could begin with verification mechanisms. Asking social media companies to verify the identities of users would minimize automated activity and empower local law enforcement agencies to prevent abuse of citizens online, as they do in normal social contexts. To date, independent of Congressional action, outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, have taken steps to mitigate the propagation of extremist information while limiting the ability of certain outlets to promote narratives that are destructive to democracy and civil society. Moreover, developing external-internal distinction capabilities would better enable security institutions to identify and to isolate malicious actors with foreign origins. With this approach, offensive and defensive cyberactions can be employed as needed.

Lastly, Mr. Stark's rumination about his "thought experiment" in New York gets to the heart of the broader schismogenesis puzzle. As Frank Sinatra clairvoyantly pointed out, "I want to be a part of it, New York, New York . . . . If I can make it there, I'm gonna make it anywhere." New York is an urban domain of intense social interaction. It is as a global city with a unique sense of decorum and civility. Could we possibly attain Sinatra's vision in web-based interactive domains?

Mr. Stark's emphasis on the "why" contributes to important puzzles. We are happy to confirm we are currently grappling with the issues he raised in our ongoing research project on the issue. We intend to publish the findings in *Parameters* and other scholarly journals.