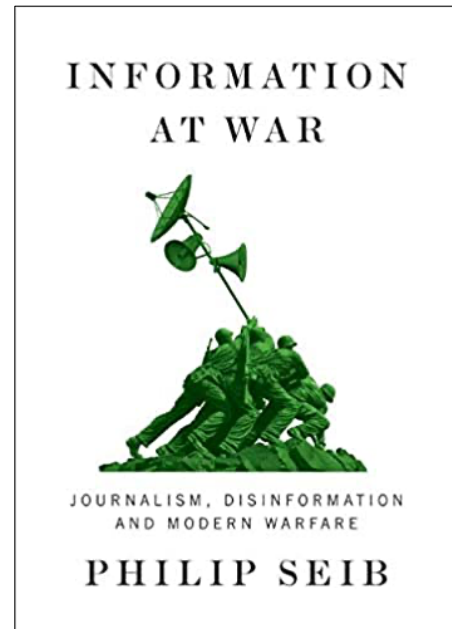


Philip Seib, **Information at War: Journalism, Disinformation, and Modern Warfare**, Medford, MA: Polity, 2021, 240 pp., \$69.95 (hardcover), \$24.95 (paperback).

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“Check it out” is a basic rule on which a wide array of practices counteracting disinformation attacks should be built, underlines Philip Seib, the author of **Information at War: Journalism, Disinformation, and Modern Warfare**. He continues: “The concept is not difficult to understand, but it cannot always survive when it is so easy to simply accept information passed on from someone you know or when you see something online that elicits a ‘Wow!’” (p. 161).

Philip Seib is a professor of journalism, public diplomacy, and international relations at the University of Southern California, and one of the top experts on media and modern foreign policy. His new book provides an array of insightful chapters describing and analyzing conflicts, when (dis)information becomes a weapon in itself. “At war” in his study means not just use of information and propaganda in a conventional war or an armed conflict, but also a major controversy or dispute, when a side aims to incite enmity and weaken its opponent, such as during recent U.S. presidential elections, “Arab Spring” revolutions, the “Qatar diplomatic crisis” of 2017, acts of terrorism, and, naturally, the current pandemic.



A basic premise of the book is that, if a government wants to wage war, it must control or influence the information ecosystem (p. 34). From a different perspective on this interplay, while powerful media corporations are indeed able to use their own initiative and means to disseminate jingoist propaganda, a war is unlikely to be launched without at least implicit support of a state (Kearney, 2007, p. 9). Indeed, propaganda for war is effective only in environments where governments control media and tacitly support “hate speech” (*Propaganda and Freedom of the Media*, 2015, p. 65).

The first five chapters present an extensive overview of the historical aspects of using information in various conflicts, most prominently World War II, Vietnam, Falklands, and the Gulf War. The picture is broad, and while it is unfair to criticize a book for what is not there, I cannot but register my surprise of the absence of Peter Arnett’s name in the book’s pages on CNN’s coverage of the invasion in Iraq in 2003, as well as of the important stories about the first image of American soldiers killed in WWII published by *Life* magazine (Cosgrove, 2014), and that of a dead American soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu in 1994 (Dauber, 2001)—in the chapter on the use of photography at war (pp. 99–103).

Photography can boost the morale of the nation at war, but it can also increase the public revulsion against the war (p. 99). A thorny topic for the editors, media scholars and the public has been whether and how images of the dead, especially dead soldiers, may appear in the press (whether they can be color or black and white, doctored or not, bodies covered or naked, pictured on the front page or inside the issue, at the top or foot of the page)—to protect the readers “from an unnecessary gory and distressing detail” (Mayes, 2007, p. 172).

In the author’s analysis of the media performance at war, I find paramount the discussion on “patriotic” vs. “non-patriotic” journalism (pp. 54–57), which relates to that on “journalism of attachment” vs. “bystander journalism” (pp. 79–82). While Seib rather raises questions than provides answers on who is right or wrong in the debates, his warnings against attempts at society polarization and “us vs. them” rhetoric in the media (p. 67) and its use of jingoism (p. 158) are quite clear-cut. He also warns against racism in the White-dominated media covering conflicts in the Global South (p. 71).

The author judges U.S. administration as being effective (Roosevelt, Kennedy), or ineffective (Johnson) in applying informational tools in the context of its time. The book abounds in contextual information, so perhaps its target audience are students of international relations. Otherwise, it is hard to put up with the numerous instances of statistics on such related—and also unrelated—issues as Internet and cell phone penetration in particular countries, number of refugees or casualties (including those killed by friendly fire; pp. 108–109), length of the Soviet-Finnish border (in miles and in kilometers; p. 120), per capita GDP in the Baltic states (p. 139), size of Gaza (p. 108) and ISIS-held territories (p. 103), number of Instagram users (p. 102), etc. Another trivial element better found in the footnotes are numerous and often detailed definitions of well-known phenomena: genocide, refugees, terror, media literacy, public diplomacy, disinformation, or propaganda.

These chapters make an important point of relevance of trust in the media to the effect of propaganda (and disinformation as its main instrument), as it is the press that narrows the distance between war and public and makes shifts in public opinion (pp. 18, 22, 25). “Information has value only if it is credible,” the author says (p. 8). He rightly points to the success of broadcasts by Ed Murrow from London and by Walter Cronkite from Vietnam as “trusted providers of information” in the past (p. 33).

The current dependence of the public on news from the social media only aggravates the situation, leading to a “widening breach of trust between citizens and their governments” (p. 175). “In a war, buildings and the infrastructure of the society are destroyed. In information warfare, trust is destroyed,” Seib says, quoting a Finnish blogger (p. 147). He speaks of the public’s “cynical reaction” to news today, citing an overabundance of information and difficulty in deciding which pieces deserve priority attention among its reasons (p. 156). Indeed, a leitmotif of modern propagandists is that there should be no trust to information, as there is no truth and everyone lies, including the media and journalists. In the famous case of the alleged “crucifixion” of a three-year-old boy in Donbas that Seib refers to (p. 136), the Russian TV newscast presented it as an “unbelievable” story.

The largest chapter of this book is devoted to current Russian disinformation campaigns, and its influence on targeted countries: Ukraine, the Baltic States, Sweden, Finland, Turkey, and Libya. Bringing

the history of psychological “special operations,” the author missed the media role in the Chechen War of 1994–1995. Its coverage by Russian television and press in different ways underlined the senselessness of both the decision to apply force in Chechnya and of its implementation, while military actions were portrayed as a banal fratricide, the president and government at large were stripped of their charisma, preservation of territorial integrity was put into doubt, and the image of the military equaled a punitive weapon (Vinokurov, 1995). That brought the authorities to the idea of the need to solidify its control of information, which eventually led to the demise of independent media in Russia.

The Russian chapter is interlinked with the following two chapters (6 and 7), which I find the most interesting in the book. The author provides testimonies of attempts to counteract harmful disinformation through debunking lies, media literacy, protecting communication infrastructure with the help of the NATO military, use of artificial intelligence, and diplomacy. The author points to a perhaps synchronized manipulation of information by Russia, Iran, and China (p. 169). At the very end of the book, where Seib illuminates his vision of future developments, China is singled out as the power that will fashion the use of information at war in the near future.

In his crisp and insightful analysis, Seib underlines the importance of media literacy to prevent abuse of information. In particular, he points to Finland, where the government linked media education, from kindergarten up, to everyone’s task of protecting democracy (p. 165). Perhaps, when the threats of disinformation become part of everyone’s agenda—and not just that of the authorities, media literacy efforts may claim a victory over disinformation. Seib has published a book that can and definitely will contribute to media literacy of its readers. Check it out!

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