

## A NEW KIND OF WAR

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The more Airmen recognize that influence operations have affected them, the faster we can recover and rebuild our defense against these attacks. Information warfare is not new; what has changed are the tactics our adversaries are using to conduct these operations at scale. We must empower our Airmen to recognize and actively combat this threat.

It was a pretty typical Friday when the story broke that I was going to be the 19th Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force. As the news hit the streets, I began to hear from people across the globe, including friends, family, and even coworkers I have served with throughout my career. My sister quickly let me know I was now an entry in Wikipedia and even sent me a news article, which is when I made one of the classic internet blunders. I read the comments.

It was quite surprising to me to see and read what total strangers were saying about me and just how quickly the narrative was being hijacked. I had heard terms like “information war” before, but it never resonated just how much this kind of conflict could impact the macro and micro levels of the internet simultaneously. It did not resonate just how easily our adversaries are able to leverage social media, digital media, and the information environment to directly impact the people, readiness, and culture of our Air Force.

If you were to get your hands on a pre-1950 copy of the *KGB Manual of Dezinformatsiya* (disinformation) you would see, on the first page in all capital letters, the proclamation:

IF YOU ARE GOOD AT DISINFORMATION, YOU CAN GET AWAY WITH ANYTHING.<sup>1</sup>

The harsh truth is that we have unwittingly been the target of nonkinetic, gray-zone warfare for about a century. Our modern age of disinformation, stretching all the way back to the early 1920s, has evolved into four waves, each roughly a generation apart. Today, we find ourselves in an age of disinformation that has been reborn,

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1. Ion Mihai Pacepa and Ronald Rychlak, *Disinformation: Former Spy Chief Reveals Secret Strategies for Undermining Freedom, Attacking Religion, and Promoting Terrorism* (Washington, DC: WND Books, 2013), 157.

reshaped, and refined with new technologies and a culture more and more dependent on the internet.<sup>2</sup>

This means a generation of America's sons and daughters enter our Air Force after spending a daily average of 58 minutes on Facebook, 53 minutes on Instagram, 50 minutes on Snapchat, and roughly 40 minutes on YouTube.<sup>3</sup> Putting that into context, Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *Outliers: The Story of Success*, proposed that if someone spent 10,000 hours in practice or preparation within a given field, they could reach an "expert" level.<sup>4</sup> Taking into account that most people use multiple platforms, it would take someone about nine years to be a social media master.

Here is the problem: In a world shaped more and more by algorithms and artificial intelligence, are those nine years making us masters of social media, or is social media becoming a master of us? Every time we open Facebook, Instagram, or even Google, we are feeding an algorithm that is designed to learn and predict our patterns. From there, the algorithm delivers custom-tailored information to our timelines that it thinks we want to see. It does not matter what that information is, who authored it, or even if it is factual. All that algorithm is concerned with is delivering content designed to keep us on those platforms longer.

Our adversaries know this. They fundamentally understand the dopamine rush that comes from engagement on social media.<sup>5</sup> They know social media takes advantage of a desire for validation, and they will intentionally put content on those platforms that causes people to react without thinking. They will look for opportunities to leverage internal conflict within our country for their own gain. China calls this "looting a burning house," and it is one of the 36 stratagems that make up a foundational principle of the "Hundred-Year Marathon."<sup>6</sup>

China is coming for us. Not just militarily, but economically, socially, and yes, even digitally. They are tired of living in what they call a "century of humiliation" and have announced that by 2049 they will take their stand as the world dominant power. This is not an assumption or speculation by the US military. It is a fact.

"In the future, direct confrontation between China and the United States will be unavoidable," said Li Lanqing, former vice premier of the People's Republic of China.<sup>7</sup> That direct confrontation could come in many forms, especially considering how reliant we have become on the digital environment. If China, Russia, or any of our

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2. Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 6.

3. Catherine Hiley, "How Much of Your Time is Screen Time?" USwitch, June 15, 2021, <https://www.uswitch.com/>.

4. Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2008), ch. 2.

5. Trevor Haynes, "Dopamine, Smartphones & You: A Battle for Your Time," SITNBoston (blog), May 1, 2018, <https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/>.

6. Peter Taylor, *The Thirty-Six Stratagems: A Modern Interpretation of a Strategy Classic* (Oxford: Infinite Ideas, 2013), ch. 5.

7. Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2016), 95.

adversaries hacks one of our satellites, then our way of life—things like putting gas in our cars, accessing our bank accounts, or even calling home—could be disrupted. Combine this kind of attack with a constant flow of influence operations and you have a recipe for destabilization.

That destabilization gets played out at scale and speed across a digital environment where fact loses to fiction on a daily basis. It happens all the time. Social media is designed to hold us in a reactionary state where critical thinking cannot gain a foothold. That is when the trolls come out from under the bridge. Even though adversaries like Russia employ paid internet trolls to sow discord and division, the vast majority of trolling comes from average people giving in to anger online.

“In a report titled ‘Anyone Can Become a Troll,’ a team of researchers found that mounting anger turns users toward trolling behavior,” said Dr. Peter Singer. “And just like conspiracy theories, the more the anger spreads, the more internet users are made susceptible to it.”<sup>8</sup> The problem with trolling is that it does not always stay online. The outrage born in the digital domain exists in a sea of potential energy that holds our thoughts, ideas, beliefs, knowledge, and emotions. The Chinese call this *shi*, and the Chinese government actively looks for ways to turn that potential energy into kinetic energy for its own strategic advantage.<sup>9</sup> They are also quite happy to “kill with a borrowed knife,” letting Russia continue their influence operations, which distracts us from the true motives of both countries.<sup>10</sup>

Understandably, this paints a pretty bleak picture of the digital domain, which always brings about the argument of whether or not we should continue to engage on social media. Unfortunately, the information environment is a battlespace that can no longer be ignored. The Airmen we are recruiting today will inherit this new kind of war—one that requires them to extend their capabilities across multiple domains. We cannot avoid information warfare, but we can properly educate and train our Airmen on how to fight in it.

“Social media is extraordinarily powerful, but also easily accessible and pliable,” said Singer. “Across it play out battles for not just every issue you care about, but for the future itself.”<sup>11</sup> He is right, and he is also right in the fact that we all have a choice in defining the role we play and the influence we have on others within our network. The speed and scale at which information comes at us online is overwhelming and pushes us to abandon critical thinking. We need to teach all Airmen, at all levels, to truly understand this environment and how it impacts them both online and offline.

We need our Airmen to understand that the expectations of their conduct do not end when they go online. Quite the opposite, in fact. As highly contested as the information environment is, we need our Airmen to be true ambassadors of our core values.

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8. P. W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2018), 165.

9. Pillsbury, *Hundred-Year Marathon*, 238.

10. Taylor, *Thirty-Six Stratagems*, ch. 3.

11. Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar*, 273.

Just as we would not expect an Airman to walk by a problem in the real world, we need them to champion professionalism and critical thinking across the digital domain.

It may seem like a small thing, but by cultivating this positive behavior, we guard ourselves against the influence operations of those who seek to do our nation harm. We also build a culture that embraces the diversity of all Airmen and values the contributions they bring to our Air Force.

The more Airmen recognize that influence operations can, and likely have, affected them, the faster we can recover and rebuild our defense against these attacks. The concept of information warfare is not new, and neither are the core strategies behind it. What is new are the tactics our adversaries are using to conduct these operations at scale. We must empower our Airmen not only to recognize this threat, but also to actively combat it.

This cannot be done in a vacuum.

We need collaborative solutions, developed and implemented at all levels, that truly seek to understand conflict across the gray zone. We need our Airmen to understand what Russia understood in the 1950s when Aleksandr Sakharovsky, former head of the First Chief Directorate of the KGB, said, “World War III was conceived to be a war without weapons—a war the Soviet bloc would win without firing a single bullet. It was a war of ideas.”<sup>12</sup>

I believe in the idea that our Airmen can overcome any obstacle they face. The information environment challenges us, every second of every day. It challenges our people. It impacts our readiness. It erodes our culture. We need to meet this challenge head-on, with multicable, multidomain Airmen who are ready to take our Air Force into 2030 and beyond. Æ

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12. Pacea and Rychlak, *Disinformation*, 186.

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