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***Digital Influence Warfare in the Age of Social Media.*  
By James J. F. Forest. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, An  
Imprint of ABC-CLIO, 2021. ISBN: 978-1-4408-7009-5.  
Preface. Acknowledgements. Notes. Index. Pp. vii, 302.**

Review by James J. Torrence

James J. Forest's 2009 book *Influence Warfare: How Terrorists and Governments Fight to Shape Perceptions in a War of Ideas* is a classic in the newly emerging field of information operations in a world increasingly dependent on networked devices in the Internet of Things (IoT). Twelve years later, Forest wrote *Digital Influence Warfare in the Age of Social Media* which should be on the desk of every leader and researcher looking to understand the way in which state and non-state actors implement digital influence warfare to achieve strategic objectives. Forest defines digital influence warfare as "the landscape of online psychological operations, information operations, and political warfare through which a malicious actor (state or non-state) achieves its goals by manipulating the beliefs and behaviors of others" (p. 2). *Digital Influence Warfare in the Age of Social Media* is both an in-depth literature review on recent publications focused on understanding the tactics, methodology, and psychology behind digital influence warfare operations, and a brilliant depiction of the challenges faced by democracies and average citizens in the age of disinformation.

The first five chapters of Forest's book are devoted to a thorough review of recent information literature. He uses myriad sources to reinforce the existing landscape in which disinformation and digital influence warfare occurs. He also introduces the term influence silo which refers to "a place where both the goals of the influencer and the goals of the target can be met – in other words, influencers and targets have a mutual desire for the influence silo to exist" (p. 153). Though the first five 5 chapters are interesting (and necessary for researchers or newcomers to the field) and set the foundation for his future arguments, the book doesn't become required reading outside of academia until chapters 6 and 7. In chapters 6 and 7, Forest introduces the concepts of information dominance and information attention, highlights the disinformation fatigue and gaslighting created by the Trump administration and pro-conservative

media, and provides recommendations for a future in which people can be less susceptible to being easily manipulated by disinformation.

Forest argues that governments in authoritarian countries seek “a form of information dominance, in which all of the information available to the country’s citizens is highly controlled” (p. 189). He further argues that democratic countries cannot ever achieve influence dominance because of protections on freedom of speech and access to “a broad range of information sources” (p. 189). Forest contends that democratic countries must seek attention dominance to achieve a similar “predominance of influence” as information dominance which “is made increasingly possible through algorithms of social media platforms, search engines, and website trackers” (p. 189). Forest provides ample examples of information dominance from China and Russia which helps to build his argument that democracies, the U.S. in particular, have environments in which little to no regulation on the news and social media coupled with influence silos created from hyper-partisanship result in populations susceptible to digital influencers seeking to “muddle reality and get their citizens to question everything” (p. 207). Forest then provides examples of how the Trump administration and pro-conservative media used attention dominance in the U.S. to gaslight the population as well as to create doubt about the objective truth.

Forest mentions former President Trump and his administration throughout the book when providing examples of digital influence warfare and disinformation. He argues that Trump created disinformation fatigue and unleashed a “firehose of falsehoods” (p. 213) as part of a strategy “for establishing the information dominance enjoyed by authoritarian regimes in Iran, Russia, China, Turkey, and so forth” (p. 213). Forest argues that the mix of Trump administration disinformation and pro-Trump trolls focused on gaslighting created an environment of information overload where people gave up “trying to actively interpret or discern fact from fiction” (p. 213). After an individual gives up trying to discern fact from fiction, they leave themselves susceptible (either by being more certain about their core beliefs or questioning what to believe) to being influenced.

Forest made it clear that the Trump administration and pro-conservative media cultivated influence silos “where the only information permitted is that which is already filtered for them and where they [could] find ample

sources of comforting reassurance in their prejudices, relying on group identity and conformity to provide answers and reinforce their certainty” (p. 214). Forest showed how Trump disoriented and fragmented the opposition by leveraging digital influence operations coupled with social media (p. 219).<sup>1</sup> Trump served as the epitome of attention dominance and will be a benchmark for actors in democratic countries looking to replicate his success. Forest’s writing is even more relevant with the ongoing January 6<sup>th</sup> committee deliberations which Trump and pro-conservative media continue to discredit by using the exact type of digital influence Forest described throughout this book. The actions of the Trump administration along with other state and non-state actors will leave the reader wondering if there is hope for a better future with less disinformation.

Forest posits that “the future will bring darker influence silos that no light of truth can penetrate, resulting in heightened uncertainty and distrust, deeper animosity, more extremism and violence, and widespread belief in things that simply are not true” (p. 228). He then discusses how the trust in Artificial Intelligence (AI) to make decisions creates a vulnerability that digital influencers can use to manipulate AI-based decisions (p. 229). Though the future seems bleak for breaking through influence silos, Forest does provide some hope. He argues that politicians (and social media companies) cannot allow the creation and dissemination of demonstrably false information, that we should educate citizens on their vulnerability to be the victim of disinformation, and that educated citizens are our best hope for combating disinformation (pp. 236-237, 242-243).

Forest’s book is excellent and it offers much for those in academia and organizational leaders. It starts with research focused on the current media landscape through which digital influence warfare occurs. Though it starts research-heavy, that background information is necessary to understand his later arguments in which he introduces the terms information dominance and attention dominance, and provides his thoughts on how future citizens can avoid being manipulated by digital influence warfare. Researchers will appreciate the breadth and depth of

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<sup>1</sup> Forest notes that the conservative-oriented influence silos he often references are not because he is picking on conservatives. Instead, he cites research that identifies that liberals “trust a wide (and sometimes eclectic) variety of information sources, while conservatives trust comparatively few” (p. 181).

what amounts to a literature review on digital influence warfare. The research is current, relevant, holistic, and fills in the gaps of many concepts currently discussed in the information operations field. His continuation of the research into recommendations for the future makes this book important for military and civilian leaders looking to understand how they can help their organizations and their people be less susceptible to being the victim of an influence operation. Like his first book on influence warfare, *Digital Influence Warfare in the Age of Social* is destined to become a classic in the field of information operations in an IoT-centric world.