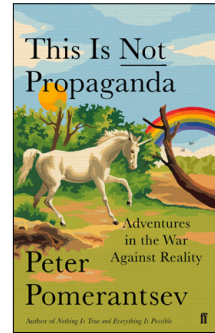


Book Review

This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality



By Peter Pomerantsev

Publisher: Faber & Faber, London, 2019

(ISBN: 978-0571338634), 288 pages

Reviewed by Honorary Group Captain Dr Keith Dear

Biography: Dr Keith Dear was an 18-year RAF Intelligence Officer, then expert advisor on the No10 Integrated Review Taskforce. A CAS Fellow, he holds an MA in Counter-Terrorism and a PhD in Experimental Psychology. Now a 601 Squadron Group Captain, Keith is Director AI Innovation at Fujitsu Defence and National Security, and a Director's Fellow at Cambridge Judge Business School.

Introduction

Pomerantsev has been essential reading for understanding the contemporary operating environment since authoring *Nothing is True & Everything is Possible*, a reflection on his time as a television producer in Russia and more broadly on the sophistication and occasional absurdity of the Kremlin's manipulation of Russian public opinion. In *This Is Not Propaganda*, Pomerantsev documents Russia's development and export of its misinformation model through elegiac reflection on his parents' experience as dissidents in the USSR and later as emigrés in London, alongside examples of contemporaneous manipulation – sometimes sophisticated, sometimes crude, frequently startling.

Why should you read it? As Pomerantsev writes, 'When information is a weapon, everyone is at war'. If you're in any doubt as to how serious this might be, consider the glee with which the Kremlin state broadcaster RT reported a recent US poll suggesting 46% of US troops now consider Russia an ally – discussion as to whether the poll is representative, or if it is, whether Russia's information campaigns caused the perception shift, continues. But if you are member

of a NATO military organisation, you ought to understand how there is even a realistic possibility that one country could deliberately and effectively subvert the views of the soldiery of another. Pomerantsev is the best guide out there to help understand how we got here.

He disarms the reader by beginning not with the familiar examples of Russia's 'troll farm', or self-styled 'Internet Research Agency' and its manipulation of the 2016 US Presidential election, but with the Philippines. In doing so, he implicitly makes the point that while Russia is central to the challenge of disinformation, it is now merely one manifestation of a much deeper and more pervasive problem. He shows how self-starting individuals – such as 'P' in Manila – have married psychological research to scalable manipulation campaigns on social media, to acts of performative violence, protests or policies, with web-based news and set-piece conferences – to change the way elections are fought in ways that will leave most readers uncomfortable, with the emphasis on division, scapegoating and misinformation. He shows how these networks often receive support from Russia's Internet Research Agency, blurring national boundaries as national citizens in the digital realm find themselves surrounded by voices claiming to be local but which, in reality, are a mixture of workers at funded troll farms and global volunteers.

There are examples from across Eastern Europe, Spain, France, and the UK, to the US, Brazil, Venezuela, the Philippines, Syria and more. Exploring online manipulation in Mexico Pomerantsev introduces us to the complex mathematical and network modelling that underlies much 'behavioural manipulation' in typically engaging fashion. Talking us through his encounters with 'Alberto', a man who claims to study search engine patterns to predict – and then through online manipulation to 'summon up' – protests, Pomerantsev introduces us to sock-puppets, bots, trolls and cyborgs, to web-enabled networks fighting back against mafia groups, live-tweeted executions – propaganda of the deed, cyber-attacks and meme factories and the way all of this and more can be used to 'manufacture consensus'. Pomerantsev's greatest talent is as a story-teller – he takes the reader with him on his journey through evidence, analysis, anecdote and interview. The characters we meet along the way give insights into a viscerality that often draws on Pomerantsev's research, but never gets so waylaid by it as to distract the reader from the compelling narrative. There are useful discussions of the Cambridge Analytica scandal and related campaigns and approaches, as well as a look at 'surveillance capitalism' and the role of Facebook, Google and others in enabling misinformation campaigns and algorithmic manipulation. Plenty to learn and rehearse for general and Defence readers alike.

Air Force and other military readers might be struck by the repurposing of terms and organisations we are familiar with as part of the lexicon and organizational structure of online influencers and trolls. Networks built in closed sites such as gaming forums and crowd-sourcing sites define and refine tactics in what are, in effect, virtual doctrine and concepts development centres. They are producing manuals, guides and words of command for armies of volunteers. For example, using the hashtag '#AirSupport' lets your virtual colleagues

know you've successfully engaged a target on social media, and they will then bombard opponents, voting down their videos on YouTube, drowning them in vitriol on Twitter, or sending others off conducting 'sniper missions' to bait 'mainstream' journalists.

Perhaps the most important point for military readers is linguistic and conceptual. Pomerantsev rejects the framing of all that he describes as an 'information war'. He makes the argument that the militarization of language enables violence – the war on drugs as a precursor to President Duterte's enabling of vigilante killings across the Philippines, for example. He points out the danger of adopting the framework offered by Russia when it discusses 'information wars'. The term 'information war' suggests we are fighting not for truth, but for the influence over people. As such, there is no irrefutable truth, only contestable opinion. If everything is an information war, what can and should people believe? What can they trust? If we accept that we are all actors in an information war, Pomerantsev ponders, is the long-term solution a series of information peace agreements, giving individual states sovereignty over the truth within their territory – a licence to censor to a lie?

With both Russia and China advocating for the concept of information sovereignty, this is a line of thought that those in Defence, security and, indeed, across Government must ponder. Should it be accepted that opinion is simply just that, and that, as one senior British civil servant speaking under the Chatham House rule recently pronounced, the question of whether truth exists is 'a matter for [Archbishop of Canterbury] Justin Welby'? Is the concept of information warfare helpful? How should the UK respond to the challenges of the information age? What is Defence's role, if any, in any response? Pomerantsev's *This Is Not Propaganda* won't answer questions, but it's the best guide out there to understanding the questions, and their pressing importance.

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