

WAR IN 140 CHARACTERS

**A Gray Zone Book
Summary**



**GRAY ZONE
ACTIVITY**

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This is a summary of *War in 140 Characters: How Social Media is Reshaping Conflict in the Twenty-first Century* by David Patrikarakos. We're providing a summary of this book because aspects of information warfare are central to understanding the coming "gray zone" conditions.

The United States is entering a period of political, social, and economic upheaval. Local intelligence, security, and emergency preparedness have never been more important. Knowledge is a key aspect of that preparedness.

Our mission at Gray Zone Activity is to help prepare Americans to navigate this "gray zone" future.

We don't support, condone, or entertain violence. We offer this book summary and others to help readers better understand conflict below the threshold of conventional war and better secure their families and communities for the tough times ahead. - M.S.

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Chapter 1

THE CITIZEN JOURNALIST: STORIES VERSUS GUNS

Conflict in the 21st century – Afghanistan, Gaza, the rise of ISIS, the conflict in Ukraine [2014], and many others around the world – display a few major trends:

1. Power has shifted from hierarchies and institutions to individual citizens and networks of citizens.
2. The narrative dimensions of war are arguably becoming more important than their physical dimensions.
3. Modern conflict occurs between a state and a non-state actor, or somewhere in the nebulous region between the boundaries of war and peace [the gray zone].

War is traditionally an extension of politics, where peace negotiations fail, and nations conduct war to force their opponent to the negotiating table. Now war has become the practice of politics itself. There is less interest in using war to militarily defeat an opponent but rather as a means of getting them to subscribe to a political or religious narrative. This has become increasingly common as more nations gain nuclear capability, a deterrent to near-peer total war.

“Coercive communication” is a crucial element in current conflicts. The concept of defeat always involves a political message. Communicate this political message to the loser: defeat equates to the perception of having lost and the consequent acceptance of the victor’s terms.

The 20th-century nation-state traditionally held primacy in two areas from which it derives its power:

1. Monopoly on the use of force

2. Dominant control of information flows

Modern communications and social media networks disrupt much of this control. Individual networks have as much reach and influence as state-controlled or state-sponsored media. The development potential for these networks is near limitless as there is virtually no barrier to entry for social media platforms and website hosts.

Two revolutionary shifts in individual communication practices are:

1. Ability to broadcast
2. Virtually no start-up costs

Smartphones and social media allow instant production and dissemination of information to national and international audiences. The shift in production, flow, and consumption of media has become a destabilizing force for existing hierarchies and their legacy media.

Controlling the narrative is a critical part of conducting a successful war. Using propaganda to rally support for the war effort helps win a military victory or sap the enemy of morale. As conflict shifts to State vs. Non-state groups, narrative control has become the end goal while tailoring military operations to support crafting messages. An individual with a large enough following has an impact on millions of people's perceptions relating to a conflict. International dissemination of emotional pictures and videos is done in minutes and seconds, before state-sponsored media outlets even know they exist. These images have a powerful impact on how the world perceives the conflict.

The power of the individual narrative on social media requires careful assessment. Susceptibility to emotional imagery can sway events if acted upon without further research. While it is a tool to shape an individual's reality, it rarely can provide situational context. For example, Farah Gazan, a 16-year-old Palestinian girl during the 2014 conflict in Gaza, would give minute-by-minute Twitter updates on what was happening in her area. Her location received heavy bombing by Israeli F16s and drones followed by ground attack. From the eyes of a teenage girl, she and her people were innocent and just wanted the attack to stop. The imagery was powerful and reached hundreds of thousands worldwide through her tweets. The tweets spark outrage and hate toward Israel even though Israel's actions may be justified. The opposite of this scenario is just as valid.

Chapter 2

THE SOLDIER: THE STATE FLOUNDERS, AND HOMO DIGITALIS EMERGES

Homo *Digitalis* is a hyper-empowered, networked, and globally connected individual who is helping to dismantle traditional information and media hierarchies.

War is a central component in the creation and development of the State as we have known it since the end of the 17th century. Raising money through centralized bureaucracies, taxation systems, and professional armies to conduct war allows governments to grow their control as the military is a standing servant of the State. This centralization of violence is a cornerstone of government preservation and warfare. Control of information is now equally as important as the monopoly on violence.

Information warfare is as old as physical warfare. State control of narratives is another cornerstone of war and control. Much like the shift of physical warfare from State to Non-state actors, the information war is now asymmetric. Control of narratives is decentralized due to the use of social media, and is another front in the war against non-state actors.

Competition for narrative control in the build-up and active portions of conflict is unceasing. Every operation, action, and event is an immediate race to control the narrative through social and legacy media spins. Speed and breadth of dissemination are critical when countering an opponent's narrative pushed through the media. Non-state actors

excel in the rapid dissemination of information because of *Homo Digitalis*, who is unbound by institutional rules and policies in the distribution of messaging. The State's counter is censorship and persecution through legacy media.

Chapter 3

THE OFFICER: MILITIA DIGITALIS TAKES TO THE BATTLEFIELD

Militia Digitalis is the semi-formalization of *Homo Digitalis*. An organization or an institution (like a nation's military) takes the individuals that form *homo digitalis* and builds a support network around them.

Legitimacy is a pillar of successful campaigns, both conventionally and unconventionally. Competition for legitimacy occurs through narrative war, most of which happens in cyberspace. Controlling the narrative shapes how each host-nation or group views its side of the conflict and the international community's view of it. Narrative control determines how much support – militarily, morally, economically – is provided.

Conventional militaries are adapting to narrative competition within cyberspace by crafting narratives from footage from ground troops, personal accounts from affected populations, and reliable, independent reports in conjunction with some legacy media. The Israeli Defense Force, as an example, had its structure laid out in five steps:

1. Evaluate the newsworthiness of an event.
2. Liaise with the creative team for the IDF's messaging.
3. Speak to the spokesperson's unit representative embedded within army divisions in the field.
4. Create the content, taking the chosen message or news event and turning it into attractive graphics, audio, or video product.

5. Send the content for approval to fit into an editorial plan for the next 24 hours.

Crafting successful individual posts that spread wide and fast has two key characteristics:

1. It is highly visual
2. It has relevant and compelling audio (speaking segments, music, sound effects)

The faster these posts can gain traction, the faster you can get ahead of counter-narratives. Creating the content to push your messaging and forcing the enemy to respond is the offensive equivalent of narrative war. The IDF uses effective comparisons that are easily digestible on the world stage. One example is the comparison of the fastest man in the world, Usain Bolt, to an average Israeli citizen. They crafted a narrative stating Usain Bolt can run 200 meters in 20 seconds while the average time an Israeli citizen has to respond to a rocket attack and get to a bunker is 15 seconds. Most citizens do not live within that distance of a bunker. The message presents a well-known figure compared to ordinary people in a way that's compelling in delivery.

Another example is building counter-narratives. Palestine accuses the IDF of targeting homes in missile strikes and raids. The targeting is factually accurate, but the opposition's narrative wants people to believe it is for nefarious purposes. The IDF counters this through social media campaigns by creating easily digestible images with straightforward titles like "When Is a House a Home?". Coupled with the title is a picture of a traditional home, but its diagram shows secret areas built within it that house soldiers and armaments making it a legitimate target.

Third-party verification in the dissemination of messaging is a powerful tool. Getting outside sources to corroborate what you are reporting on, especially when it aligns with your narrative, lends legitimacy to your information flow. Establishing networks of journalists within legacy media to re-report what you are putting on social media is one effective technique.

Wars get fought in multiple dimensions:

1. Physical

2. Information/Narrative
3. Discursive (digressing from subject to subject)

The narrative war's design affects the discursive dimension above all else. It frames the raw data emanating from war zones and gets the data out of the battlefield and into the information sphere. From here, the watching world can process the data, make up its mind about a conflict, and decide where its support lies.

Chapter 4

THE FACEBOOK WARRIOR 1: THE VIRTUAL STATE AND CHAPTER 5 - THE FACEBOOK WARRIOR 2: HOMO DIGITALIS ON THE BATTLEFIELD

Social media contains two preeminent abilities in wartime:

1. Amplify messages
2. Mobilize people

The Arab Spring in 2011 is a prime example. Millions of people mobilized via social media to protest against governments. The response was so great that in one case, a government responded by cutting the internet to quell the mobilization.

In 2014, during Russia's first incursion into Ukraine, Anna Sandalova (known as the Facebook Warrior) focused on organization and crowd-funding via social media (primarily Facebook). She created a network dedicated to raising funds and supplies for Ukrainian soldiers fighting pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. Through this network, she provided:

- Logistical support (food, water, body armor, helmets, communications devices, blankets, medical aid)

- Transportation (infiltrating support and exfiltrating civilians/casualties)
- Repairs (civilians fixing outdated and poorly maintained military equipment for use on the front line)
- Information dissemination (troop movements spotted by civilians, morale-boosting networks)
- Other networks developed off of their example to provide similar structures

This network development allows them to circumvent the Government and streamline the support processes. Social media use by civilians to support conflict continues to blur the line between soldiers and civilians.

It is necessary to demonstrate where crowdsourced monetary and material support is going so supporters don't believe they are getting cheated. Ukrainian units sent photos of themselves on the frontlines with the food, clothing, equipment, and other material they received from the network. It is a solidifier of legitimacy, a good practice for the network, and a morale booster for all involved.

Anna also travels to the frontlines with a dedicated cameraman. Everything gets documented and sent through social media networks. Once the networks get a hold of the documentation, it spreads exponentially, and the narrative source gets controlled. The images she takes are a far more powerful motivator than text alone. Everyone with a quality cell phone has a production studio in their pocket, dramatically enhancing *Homo Digitalis*.

Documentation of active participants needs careful consideration when the nature of the conflict is internal. The 2014 Ukrainian conflict saw many soldiers' families threatened by pro-Russian separatists that resided in Ukraine when recognizing their faces on social media.

Chapter 6

THE TROLL: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

The rise of social media has both coincided with and exacerbated a crisis of faith in western institutions by sowing distrust between a nation's citizens and its government. A crisis of faith is a way of destabilizing an enemy nation with external influence. Moscow's most prominent international propaganda arm's slogan is "Question More." Their goal is to sow as much distrust within a rival nation against its government as possible. "Question More" is another way of saying "trust less." They accelerate pre-existing problems and conspiracies to accomplish this goal.

The Russian "troll farms," as they call them, are organizations dedicated to rewriting pre-existing articles in circulation and fabricating online personalities, organizations, and news. The rewriting of existing articles is a vital part of their propaganda efforts. The facts and central themes of the pieces remain unchanged, but the language used in key chunks of the text gets altered to present itself as more pro-Russian in the Ukraine conflict. Small fundamental changes like shifting from "terrorist" or "separatist" to "militia" or instead of "Ukrainian Army," use "national guard" or "volunteer battalions," which have reputations for containing thuggish far-right elements. Changing the language in how they refer to Ukraine also has an impact. They say "na Ukraine" (on the border) rather than "v Ukraine" (in Ukraine), which suggests that Ukraine is not its own country, but a satellite region on the edge of Russia.

Other sections of the propaganda organization are dedicated to writing outright fake news articles and blog posts, as well as the creation of memes, fake websites, cartoons, and other popular social media posts. It is a massive undertaking, with teams dedicated to spreading the content on every social media platform, page, and website possible. Its efforts don't concentrate on targeting a specific demographic but seek to saturate the online medium with as much false information as possible to make discerning the truth difficult.

Chapter 7

THE POSTMODERN DICTATOR: ADVENTURES IN UNREALITY

The Russians use a method called *maskirovka*, a military deception targeting foreign nations to manipulate the understanding of Russian intentions and capabilities. One example includes the line that Russian President Vladimir Putin never officially invaded Crimea, declared war, or crossed the border with Russian soldiers. Instead, several hundred troops marched into Simferopol and seized its regional parliament and Council of Ministers. They were masked and wore green uniforms without identifying insignia, although everyone knew they were Russian. These “little green men,” as they came to be known, took control of the region and introduced a Russian-sponsored referendum in which more than 96 percent of Crimeans purportedly voted to join the Russian Federation. Putin had annexed a chunk of another sovereign state without officially invading or firing a shot.

Another crucial part of *maskirovka* is controlling the narrative in the online sphere so thoroughly that the messaging becomes a reality. Online content reinvents peoples’ reality on the ground with key tropes, ideas, and motifs used as weapons. Perpetual narratives of Ukraine being “Nazi jerks” and outside money getting funneled into the hands of corrupt politicians help remove legitimacy to the nation and destabilize internal and external support.

Putin uses orchestrated narrative control and limited military intervention to achieve his goals. Avoiding outright conflict but still influencing the outcome of war lands these activities within the gray zone. Gray Zone warfare includes actions that fall below the threshold of

conventional warfare, but are still intended to accomplish geopolitical, security, or military objectives.

Social media recreates reality for the unaware. People must understand when and how they are being exposed to manufactured narratives because it drives movements on a large scale.

Chapter 8

THE INTERPRETER 1: FROM THE BEDROOM TO THE BATTLEFIELD

The following examples are from Eliot Higgins's use of Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) for his blogs that uncover the truth in current conflicts.

OSINT Tradecraft Example 1:

OSINT is applied to social media to gather critical information for wartime and other activities. An excellent example in the book is the use of a video uploaded to YouTube by rebels in Brega, Libya, in 2011, claiming they had taken the city. The footage contradicts another video uploaded by Libyan government forces claiming they had taken the same city. The analyst needs to determine the truth for the journalists he works with. The video uploaded by the rebels is approximately five minutes of the soldier walking down streets and filming himself. No distinct landmarks or road signs are visible, but the analyst knows the city he is in, Brega. He watches the video again, drawing a path on paper that matches the soldier's walking path, and he adds side roads to it as he can see them in the video. He takes the shape of the roads he drew and scans over Google Maps until he finds an area that matches the road shapes to determine the rebels' location. He discovered they were on the far eastern outskirts of the city in an area called New Brega. He then applied a similar technique to videos from government forces and discovered they were on the outskirts of the city's far west. Both sides are uploading videos claiming they have taken the city to boost morale when neither side has taken the city yet.

OSINT Tradecraft Example 2:

An analyst watches Syrian state TV and notices something odd: the presence of M79 Osa rocket launchers, a Yugoslavian anti-tank weapon with unique and easily identifiable designs. He then sees the same weapons on the YouTube channel of the jihadist organization Ansar al-Islam which is very odd and unlikely that they should possess them. By recognizing the details of the weapons and their origins, and the unlikelihood of them being in Syria, he uncovers an illicit weapon smuggling trail originating in Croatia. Weapons sent to the rebels are ending in the hands of the jihadists.

OSINT Tradecraft Example 3:

In July of 2014, a civilian airliner is shot down over Ukraine, and no one can say for certain where the missile came from or who fired it. Higgins begins running OSINT investigations utilizing photos and videos posted online. He and a couple of other followers on Twitter gain information by:

- Geolocating the truck based on the surroundings in the photo. Identifying a two-lane street with trees running down the middle and a business with its sign partially visible in the background.
- Verifying the location by searching dashcam footage (very popular in Russia and Ukraine) to identify the same landmarks and streets.
- Using a program called SunCalc, that can determine the time of day the photo is taken based on the shadows in the image.
- Identifying that the phone number on the truck carrying the Buk missile launcher is a Donetsk phone number for a truck rental company. After calling the number, analysts determine the truck is stolen, giving an origin of departure.
- They put a route into Google Maps from the rental company to the estimated firing location. The time from vehicle theft to arrival where the photo is taken lines up with the approximation from SunCalc.
- The Ukrainian Ministry of the Interior publishes a video of the truck later in the day after the airliner gets shot down, leaving Luhansk minus one missile. The actual launch site is just east of the

village of Chervonyi Zhovten, south of Snizhne, where it had appeared in the photo three hours after downing the airliner.

He can prove where the truck came from but hasn't determined the origin of the Buk missile launcher attached to it yet.

Chapter 9

THE INTERPRETER 2: MAN VERSUS SUPERPOWER

I ggy Ostanin, a native Russian living in the Netherlands, performs similar tradecraft. He doesn't have formal training as an investigator or analyst but utilizes OSINT and cooperation with others in online mediums to help solve who shot down MH17. Part of the way through his investigation, Ostanin leverages social media by setting up a Slack channel to organize everyone who is helping with the investigation. Roles are assigned, specific pages get created to place information and track progress, and they can bounce ideas off each other even though they are all over the world.

OSINT Tradecraft Example 4:

- Ostanin scours social media websites, using hashtags relevant to the reports and related to military technology find markings on Buks that match the ones in the released photos.
- Ostanin gets sent an image from a military convoy of about 100 vehicles that has a few Buks among it. The date the photo gets taken is June 23rd, 2014.
- Users identify license plate numbers on the military vehicles with the number 50 indicating they are from the Moscow Military District.
- Analysts determine from social media military enthusiasts that only two Moscow units have Buks. These units are in Shuya (5th Brigade) and Kursk (53rd Brigade).

- Ostanin finds a video of the military convoy with the Buks, and identifies one with the matching markings to the one they believe shot down MH17.
- They believed the Buk that shot down MH17 had come from the 53rd Brigade based on the earliest video discovery being taken just outside of Kursk but still need to confirm it entered Ukraine.
- He searches for a VKontakte group (on Russian social media site VK, similar to Facebook) for the 53rd Brigade. He searches through all public profiles until he finds one with a soldier taking a selfie, and it has a matching license plate in the background to the photo taken on June 23rd.
- A mother in the group saves all the photos her son (a soldier in 53rd Brigade) takes, sends her, and posts them to the group. Many photos show evidence of the convoy heading to the Ukraine border between 23 and 25 June.
- There are also photos of the same convoy in eastern Ukraine on July 17th and photos of the same convoy leaving Luhansk after the July 17th downing of MH17.

The evidence they uncover gets put to work in the narrative war against Russia. Russia responds with its counter-narrative by claiming these “citizen journalists” are western intelligence services running misinformation campaigns. They also go on to personally slander Higgins on mainstream news networks, calling him a conspiracy theorist and calling into question his credentials and expertise on the subjects he’s reporting on.

Chapter 10

THE RECRUIT: FRIENDS ARE CLOSER BUT ENEMIES ARE CLOSER

Post formation of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), recruitment efforts are driven by social media. From 2013-2016 they recruit over 30,000 new fighters from over 100 different countries. Social media furthers the recruitment process by:

- Accessibility – Until censorship efforts hit the social media sphere in earnest, anybody with a computer and internet connection can watch ISIS messaging, executions, and declared victories.
- Language – Messaging and video through social media get automatically translated.
- Speed – Media can spread around the world within minutes.
- Networking – Connecting like-minded individuals and groups is significantly easier.

Much of the ISIS-generated media for the general public focuses on attention-grabbing propaganda like beheadings, assassinations, rocket attacks, and declared victories. The direct recruiting of a member, however, takes a more personal approach. ISIS members target known vulnerabilities (usually emotional and spiritual) identified through personal social media and make direct contact with potential recruits via Skype, Whatsapp, or other platforms. They also build narratives that get pitched to individuals. These narratives show the prosperity the “cause” of ISIS brings. Images of community, thriving towns and cit-

ies, and religious ceremonies are distributed. Frequently bombarding people with these images over social media and targeting their vulnerabilities convinces them to join ISIS.

Chapter 11

THE COUNTERTERRORIST: GOLIATH VERSUS A THOUSAND SLINGSHOTS

ISIS is so prominent on Twitter that its information campaigns through social media matched and, in many cases, outpaced its physical campaigns. The nature of ISIS's campaign makes the physical and virtual campaigns symbiotic.

A significant trend dominates 21st warfare in the battles fought between State and Non-state actors:

- The inability of rigid state institutions to match the effectiveness of *Homo Digitalis* and the pervasive lack of faith in western institutions prevents them from promulgating effective narratives to compete in the information sphere. The battle for the information sphere is the culmination of 21st century conflict.

Oppositional social media messaging and trends get countered in the information space with:

- Volume – The more extensive the audience it reaches, the more likely it is to be shared.
- Authenticity – The messaging origin is genuine and identifies a problem people understand to be authentic.
- Idiomatic Messaging – It uses, contains, or denotes natural expressions to a native speaker.
- Simplicity – This is often symbiotic with authenticity because truth does not require thorough explanations and message manufactur-

ing. A simple slogan or hashtag can contain volumes of meaning when rooted in truth.

- Alternate Narrative – The messaging can't only be in opposition to something. Its narrative must back something for people to get behind.

The crafting of counter-narratives also takes on creative mediums, like the use of humor and sarcasm, so long as it is rooted in truth. A Department of State agent tasked with countering ISIS's online presence runs a successful campaign by taking videos that ISIS has uploaded themselves and reframing the context. He mashes up videos of ISIS handling dead bodies and crucifying people into satirical promotional videos with captions like "come to ISIS Land, where you can learn useful things for the Ummah (global Muslim Community) like blowing up mosques and crucifying and executing Muslims!" Another caption states, "Travel is inexpensive because you won't need a return ticket," followed by videos of dead foreign fighters that came to join ISIS. It is visceral imagery coupled with powerful messaging and sarcasm rooted in truth.

The efforts from the Department of State's information campaigns still fall short because of the overbearing bureaucracy. It does not allow for the free flow and development of messaging like the naturally occurring, networked *Homo Digitalis* does. It also has the problem of credibility. The content the State Department produces gets labeled with its logo, which immediately makes it dismissable by many of the intended audience: young Muslim men.

Those most successful in new warfare can both avoid battle and control territory through political control of the population. Gray zone conflicts and armed politics have, however, blurred the distinction between war and peace, which is dangerous. When you don't desire to defeat your enemy and force him to the negotiating table, then when does war end and peace start?

