Making Sense of Communication Power and the New Information Warfare
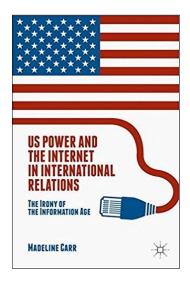
Madeline Carr, **US Power and the Internet in International Relations: The Irony of the Information Age**, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 221 pp., $79.99 (e-book), $92.80 (hardcover).
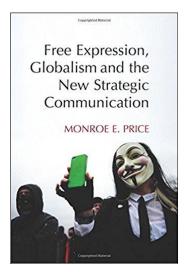
Monroe E. Price**, Free Expression, Globalism and the New Strategic Communication**, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 286 pp., $26.00 (e-book), $33.99 (paperback), $88.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Nathalie Maréchal
University of Southern California, USA

Since the 2016 U.S. election, many people around the world have been feeling like the world has been turned on its head. After decades of trying to export its version of liberal democracy and free market economics abroad, it seems the United States may have wound up on the receiving end of regime change. While it will be some time before all the facts are known, and longer still before society reaches a consensus about what happened in 2016, one explanatory scenario posits that Vladimir Putin's Russia, weary of perceived U.S. and E.U. expansion into its sphere of influence, endeavored to reshape the international system to better suit its interests—or rather, the interests of its ruling oligarch class (Maréchal, 2017). This is a most bewildering time, yet there are scholars whose work holds remarkable explanatory power, despite being written well before a "President Trump" seemed remotely likely.

In this essay, I review two recent books that grapple with transnational, Internet-mediated communication and power in the international system, and put them in conversation with one another in light of the 2016 election: Monroe E. Price's *Free Expression, Globalism and the New Strategic Communication* and *US Power and the Internet in International Relations: The Irony of the Information Age* by Madeline Carr. At first glance, it might seem odd to review them together, as they come from different disciplinary traditions—communication and international relations (IR), respectively—yet they complement each other in important ways. Carr's work integrates science and technology studies (STS) with traditional IR theory, while Price's book extends communication theory into the international arena. As such, they are best read in tandem.

Each book is the culmination of a project that predates the 2016 campaign. Price has been working on his book for years, and Carr's volume originated as her PhD dissertation. The books both reflect years of careful observation of the rapidly evolving relationship between communication and state power in the 21st century. I begin with a brief summary of each book before putting them in conversation with one another, highlighting their relevance to current events.

Price's *Free Expression, Globalism and the New Strategic Communication* considers the challenge posed by the Internet to the nation-state by focusing specifically on what Price calls "the market for loyalties," arguing that "the combination of new technologies, new tools for surveillance and new techniques for analysis of ever more available data raises the consequences and possibilities of strategic communication to new levels" (p. 1). Communicative efforts like propaganda, counterpropaganda, and public diplomacy all fall under the umbrella of "strategic communication."

Price describes this book as "a series of inquiries into global actors and the relationship between their information strategies and geopolitical impacts" (p. 8)—the "geopolitics of information," if you will. After an introductory chapter, Price offers definitions of key terms like *strategic communication* and *strategic communicators* before turning to "the organized advocacy of 'narratives of legitimacy' as a way to provide moral and consensual bases for modes of governance" in chapter 3. Chapter 4 conceptualizes the "diagnostic" as a "mode of analyzing information flows," arguing that communication environments comprising multiple strategic communicators (as opposed to haphazard communicators, one might suppose) necessitate scientifically rigorous understanding of competitors' goals, strategies, and techniques. Price's concept is rooted in his observations of public diplomacy and media assistance, "where fathoming the localized character of information flows is central to designing and implementing action" (p. 9). In chapter 5, Price analyzes asymmetric communication environments such as those pitting nation-states against various kinds of insurgents using a combination of innovation, "unorthodox techniques," and "unethical uses of communications" (p. 9). Circumvention technology also falls under this category, as "the process of designing, diffusing and encouraging the use of software that avoids state filtering and banning is an outcropping of potentially provocative intrusions on a state's own management of its narratives of legitimacy" (p. 9). Chapter 6 considers "strategic architectures," or "large-scale efforts to fix or stabilize the relationships of states and other major players to information flows" (p. 9). This chapter, notably, covers Internet governance.

The rest of the book comprises case studies of a variety of actors engaged in strategic communication: the Iranian government's perception that it is at the receiving end of a "Soft War" of ideas, the strategic communication of religious groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in "democracy promotion," the use of the Beijing Olympics as a "platform" from which competing narratives were projected, and the global broadcast of TV channels via satellite technology, which in many ways foreshadowed the central debates over Internet governance.

With *US Power and the Internet: The Irony of the Information Age,* Madeline Carr updates IR theory for the 21st century. Throughout the book, she highlights a longstanding frustration of mine: the discipline's failure to account for the Internet in its theories of power. Through three judiciously chosen case studies—cybersecurity, Internet governance, and network neutrality—Carr melds the IR canon with

an STS approach to question "the assumption that technology has a universal effect on power regardless of social or political forces" (p. 13). The book rejects the very premise of questions like whether the Internet (or technology in general) is good or bad for international stability, whether it enhances or diminishes U.S. power, or whether social media is good or bad for democracy. The answer is, it depends—frustrating, perhaps, but nonetheless accurate.

After an introductory chapter, Carr offers a rich critical review of IR and STS, putting in them in dialogue to highlight IR theory's failure to "take into account the distinctive features of information and communication technology (ICT) which can render the nature and expression of power more complex" (p. 16). She focuses on the social construction of technology (SCoT) in particular, carefully explaining the ways that "conceptions of US power have influenced the development of the Internet and what implications this has for understanding power in the information age" (p. 16). The chapter takes a theory-building approach to integrate STS with IR, emphasizing that today, "neither the industrial age paradigm nor the information age paradigm is proving effective for understanding the relationship between power and technology" (p. 17). This chapter's review of the STS literature as it applies to the Internet and the international system should be required reading for every graduate-level IR theory course, and is accessible enough for many advanced undergraduates.

The third chapter offers a "select" political history of the Internet, arguing that many existing such histories imply that "technology evolves in a social and political vacuum without reference to the norms and values of the society in which it is embedded." On the contrary, for Carr, "political decisions have played an integral role in the development of Internet technology" (p. 45). This chapter stands well on its own, and makes an important contribution to the body of "Internet histories."

The three case study chapters—on cybersecurity, Internet governance, and network neutrality—follow a coherent structure: findings, a "technical brief" explaining the specific technology under discussion, and thematic analysis. Some of Carr's findings will be surprising even to subject matter experts, but it is hard to disagree with her evidence or analysis. For example, with respect to cybersecurity, she concludes that "politicians do pursue a security-maximizing approach to state survival in cyberspace but, perhaps surprisingly, they do so through the pursuit of social power rather than materials power" (p. 78). With respect to Internet governance, she notes that "the normative assumption that intellectual property rights (as a commercial concern) should be central to Internet governance has been deeply embedded in US debates around this issue from the very beginning and rarely challenged in academic or policy debates" (p. 123)—because commercial interests were defined as the "relevant social group," in SCoT terms. The global structure of the Internet might have looked very different if another group's interests had been prioritized.

Taken together, the empirical case studies point to "conceptions of power" being "influential in shaping technology only when associated with a social constructivist approach to technology" (p. 150). Indeed, unlike cybersecurity and Internet governance, network neutrality was not conceived as central to state power by U.S. policy makers, and "politicians on both sides of this debate defer to external sources of authority" (p. 153), such as the free hand of the market or the Internet's fundamental character and natural destiny. This suggests that advocacy efforts to preserve net neutrality under Ajit Pai's tenure as

Federal Communications Commission chair might do well to reframe net neutrality as fundamental to U.S. power, rather than as a guarantor of freedom. Carr demonstrates that the *freedom* frame is used by both sides of the issue, pitting freedom of information against economic freedom—two values with strikingly partisan connotations.

The conclusion is incisive, packing several key insights into a mere eight pages. Carr's clear prose reiterates the critique of IR theory that is the cornerstone of the book: "Understanding power in the information age *means* understanding the relationship between technology and power. And yet, as a discipline, IR has approached this problem largely without engaging deeply with technology in an applied or theoretical sense" (p. 182). As a result, assumptions grounded in technological determinism and a belief in universal effects have mistakenly sought to determine whether the Internet was good or bad for U.S. power, for democracy, and for human rights. These ultimately sterile discussions were notably embodied by the so-called Shirky/Morozov debate earlier in this decade (Morozov, 2011; Shirky, 2011). The Internet's impact is always context dependent and is linked to political actors' conceptions of authority and legitimacy. In other words, *how* actors think of power is determinant of both technology and policy: "Conceptions of power as they relate to Internet technology are even more complex and multifaceted than anticipated and this in itself is an important finding which should prompt a re-evaluation of the relationship between power and new technology" (p. 183). The empirical research found that American politicians see the Internet as having a "complex array of implications" for U.S. power, resulting in conflicting policy choices at times. Diverse ideas about power strongly suggest that a "political construction of technology" (p. 184) is at play.

Carr concludes that "state power in the information age is linked to a belief in the agency of political actors rather than the agency of technology or the market" (p. 188). Politicians believed that they had the authority and legitimacy to mold the Internet—whether by pushing the Internet Freedom Agenda or establishing U.S. hegemony over Internet governance processes. Norms and values were also found to be significant, most visibly embodied by the "21st Century Statecraft" of Hillary Clinton's State Department. One can only guess what her presidency might have looked like. Carr's hypothesis (at the time of writing) was that "the projection of US power . . . looks set to focus much more on how norms and values which promote US power can be embedded in global expectations of Internet technology" (p. 189). Time will tell how well this prediction holds up in the Trump era.

Scholarly inquiries into the relationship between communication and power are nothing new, of course. Nor is the idea that nation-states and other actors use communication tools to exert power over actors. What is new, though, is the possibility that the world's hegemonic superpower may have suffered a coup at the hands of an autocratic power with an aging nuclear stockpile. If borne out by careful empirical investigation, the Kremlin's apparent campaign to steer Western democracies toward far-right ethnonationalist parties, candidates and platforms may well prove to be a "black swan" event to rival 9/11. What the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon did for international Islamic terrorism, the 2016 U.S. election may do for "information warfare." Like terrorism, this kind of information warfare exploits open societies' freedoms—of speech, access to information, movement, and more—to turn societies against themselves, creating chaos and breeding suspicion. "There are terrorists in our midst, therefore we must surveil and control everyone" becomes "There are propagandists on the

Internet, therefore we must censor and control all online content." Without knowing friend from foe, or credible analysis from "fake news," societies become paralyzed, unable to coordinate against a shape-shifting enemy that many doubt is even there. Curiously, this strategy is nearly identical to the one described by Julian Assange in his 2006 manifesto, in which he explained that the point of mass leaks was to prevent the target organization's internal communication and coordination (see Maréchal, 2013).

If Max Weber famously described states as having a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, Price argues that the definition is currently being amended, with states claiming a monopoly (or at least a privileged position) with respect to the "legitimate use of information" (p. 4). As is true of violence, this monopoly can be "bargained away by treaty or argument" (p. 4). For Price,

> What is implicit in [Weber's] argument is that a state will seek to recover elements of its monopoly over violence that it has delegated, bargained away or lost through other means. Perhaps the same is true with respect to speech and the state's recuperative impulse. (p. 4)

Price is very clear that he is not arguing that "a state ought in principle to have management capabilities over information flows," but that "major elements of such management are inevitable" (p. 4). The central argument of the book is that

> In the constitutionally circumscribed areas where a government justifiably (and consistent with carefully restrictive international norms) has a proper role to play, it should have the implied capability of doing so, including through managing technical challenges . . . [embracing] responses to powerful states that abuse control of information and weaker states where the capacity to function needs buttressing. (pp. 4–5)

A closely related theme is the duplicitous behavior of institutions whose outward-facing rhetoric embraces privacy despite the same institutions' growing use of surveillance to control citizens and their behavior. The U.S. federal government and Internet giants like Google and Facebook come to mind as prime examples of this dynamic, but they are far from alone in this category.

Price and Carr both hint at a coming reshuffling of the international system. The last such major reorganization—at least from a Western perspective—spanned the 1989–1991 period, when the fall of the Berlin Wall and collapse of the Soviet Union effectively ended the Cold War, along with Russia's superpower status. Russian elites see the United States's success in exporting its cultural products as a threat to national sovereignty and resent the European Union's eastward expansion and growing U.S. influence in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Over time, Putin and his allies have become convinced that Western countries (mainly the United States) use the Internet to foment "color revolutions"—an existential threat to their hold on power. The 2011 Arab Spring and mass protests of the Russian legislative elections later that year only reinforced that worldview. Russian elites, of course, have long viewed information as a threat, dating to the pre-Bolshevik era. From 1998 onward, Russia has put forth United Nations resolutions to regulate cross-border information flows by forbidding "information aggression," to no avail (Nocetti, 2015). *Information aggression* is conceptually equivalent to Price's strategic communication, but

colored by the language of war. The very act of communicating across borders—which is greatly aided by the Internet—is securitized, spurring a logic of retaliatory aggression: armies of Internet trolls and Twitter bots, weaponized leaking, strategic use of *kompromat*, and more. In February 2017, the Russian defense ministry acknowledged the existence of a specialized information warfare unit, about which few details are yet publicly known. But any way you slice it, it is an escalation (Isachenkov, 2017).

Real-time analysis is a hazardous exercise, and many a scholar has been burned by predictions that fail to materialize. Price and Carr, wisely, do not hazard a guess about the future, and nor will I, except for this: Whatever strange adventures lie ahead, these two books will only grow in relevance and explanatory power. As such, they are essential reading for IR and communication scholars as well as graduate students. As mentioned, Carr's review of the STS literature as it relates to the Internet and power in the international system should be required reading for all IR doctoral students. The three case studies would work well as stand-alone readings on their respective topics for students of any level. Price's book is much denser reading and would likely be challenging for undergraduate and some master-level audiences, but would bring much to doctoral seminars and to students preparing comprehensive exams.

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