

Shawn M. Powers & Michael Jablonski, **The Real Cyber War: The Political Economy of Internet Freedom**, Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015, 288 pp., \$25.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by

Anna Loup

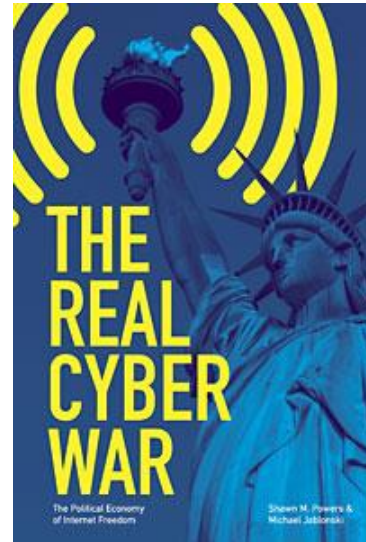
University of Southern California, USA

The world of Internet governance is still in its experimental phase, if not infancy, with actors in this field still striving to understand their respective roles. To take on this complex infrastructure and the new power-matrix implied by it is a daunting task. To explain its impact on the international political economy is surely just as difficult. In ***The Real Cyber War: The Political Economy of Internet Freedom***, authors Shawn M. Powers and Michael Jablonski succeed in blazing a deeper trail into the phenomenon of Internet governance.

As professors of international communications, Powers and Jablonski situate this book as their effort to shift the focus from “hackers, cybercriminals, and internet activists,” who they believe are actually secondary to cybersecurity and to the “state-centered battle for information resources” (p. 1). As such, they “examine the geopolitics of internet policies, identifying and analyzing why and how states compete to shape policies, technologies, and norms that structure the role of the internet in society” (p. 5). These authors also take a historical approach to understanding the “real cyber war,” which they define as the use and manipulation of digital networks by hegemonic state actors and Western cultural and economic institutions in ways that are mainly beneficial to these state actors. This book, in short, is a welcome step forward in the field of Internet governance research. The authors bring their analysis to life through the use of case studies that focus on specific topics related to Internet governance.

The conceptual approach of Powers and Jablonski combines theories of political economy (Vincent Mosco) with communications theory (Jürgen Habermas, Jonathan Aronson, and Peter F. Cowhey), which is a useful way to reach multiple spaces within academia. At the same time, the authors have inserted a rich strand of theory into the analysis of Internet governance, one that successfully delineates the “real cyber war.” For them, this concerns how international information flows have changed the very definition of sovereignty, including power plays by state actors who seek to maintain control of cyberspace in a time of constant and rapid change.

Having staked out their theoretical claims at the outset, Powers and Jablonski follow up with three thematic chapters, “Information Freedom and U.S. Foreign Policy: A History,” “The Information-Industrial Complex,” and “Google, Information, and Power.” In the first of these, the authors delve into the development of state policies, mainly those of the United States, and how these have interacted with the evolution of knowledge, massive data bases, and the proliferation of information technology. The



chapters also trace the historical development of those international institutions that have determined the shape and the trajectory of Internet policy development and implementation.

In the chapter "The Information-Industrial Complex," Powers and Jablonski forge a connection between the rise of 21st-century government in a knowledge economy and the rise of the information communications sector. The authors use the model of C. Wright Mills on the military-industrial complex as a way to link international policy making and political power to the rise of the information communications sector. The authors assert that digital information has been commodified, not only by the historical development of the Internet through public-private partnerships but also by the post-9/11 emphasis on the implications of the Internet for national and international security. It is this phenomenon that Manuel Castells has termed "communication power," meaning the ability of certain actors to shape the minds of others through their management of the communication process (Castells, 2011).

The next three chapters ("The Economics of Internet Connectivity," "The Myth of Multistakeholder Governance," and "Toward Information Sovereignty") investigate critical questions now emerging within the Internet governance (IG) community. This includes, for example, the role of IG in economic development, the impact of the multistakeholder experiment, and what sovereignty actually means in a post-Westphalian world. Again, these questions about Internet governance and development, multistakeholder approaches, and sovereignty are probed through the joint lens of communications and political economy theories.

More specifically, in the fourth chapter, titled "The Economics of Internet Connectivity," Powers and Jablonski highlight the prevalence of Western (predominantly American) companies that sit at the heart of the digital inclusion movement and the ongoing effort to ensure U.S. hegemony within the network. I believe that the authors' analysis could have moved beyond surface-level discussion of the debates surrounding the World Conference on International Telecommunications and its pro-government outcomes. While the claims made in this chapter are critical, the issue of inequality and the historical exclusion of non-Western and diverse individuals is essential for a truly progressive and historical analysis of the "real cyber war." I am puzzled by the lack of engagement with diversity and inclusion in this book overall, as well as the implications of these two critical issues for Internet governance.

For instance, Spike V. Peterson argues that globalization is "distinguished by its dependence on historically contingent and socially embedded information and communication technologies (ICT) specific to the late twentieth century" (2005, p. 507). Gender is part of this equation, including how it has been systematically excluded from discourse on and studies of the global political economy. Even though there is an emerging base of scholarship that demonstrates that gendered inequalities have existed throughout the development of technological infrastructures, *The Real Cyber War* simply ignores this topic. Gendered analysis is especially important today as women continue to face discrimination and harassment within the IG policy development and implementation space. A recognition of these fundamental inequalities is every bit as important as our understanding of the role of IG in the post-Westphalian world and how structures of power tend to reinforce hegemony. Beneath the inequalities that Powers and Jablonski address, such as economic barriers to entry and existing markets, there are also *systemic* inequalities that remain unacknowledged and underanalyzed. It is partly because of this lack of analysis and attention that gender

itself remains a barrier to entry for those who have been relegated to the periphery of government, economy, and society.

The fifth chapter, titled "The Myth of Multistakeholder Governance," adds much to the discussion about the problems associated with the use of the term *multistakeholderism* to understand the method of governance within IG. Powers and Jablonski are in agreement with the assertions of IG theorists such as Milton Mueller, Laura DeNardis, and Mark Raymond who believe that the use of multistakeholderism does not allow for the development of governance methods and theories that are effective and contextually based, but instead perpetuates a culture in which "participation thus creates legitimacy, even in the absence of actionable methods of accountability" (p. 142). The chapter undertakes a critical discussion about multistakeholderism that is important in the current context of the transition of the stewardship of the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA) functions from the U.S. National Telecommunications and Information Agency, both of which have engaged the IG space in a discussion about accountability mechanisms that go beyond simply implementing a multistakeholder model of governance. For instance, for many critics of the March 10 proposal delivered to the U.S. government by the Internet Corporation of Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), there is a lack of mechanisms by which to hold *all* members of the IG community accountable, especially those who hold high-level positions, such as the ICANN board members.

The final chapter, "Internet Freedom in a Surveillance Society," discusses the interaction between cybersecurity policy and the Internet freedom agenda of the United States. This chapter circles back to initial discussions about Internet freedom as it highlights the surveillance work being done by the National Security Agency and the counter-surveillance work of individuals like Edward Snowden and the Tor browser. Unfortunately, while this chapter purports to elucidate on the gap between the call for Internet freedom and the constant work being carried out to defeat anonymity in the name of national security, its focus on legal action taken on this matter throughout history does little to clarify the situation.

The Real Cyber War is an important work in the budding field of Internet governance research. This book confirms the need for interdisciplinary research that creatively combines discussions of policy and theory. In a world where technology is rapidly changing the way information is transmitted, created, and valued, an eclectic work like this enhances our ability to "create new forms of knowledge that engage adherents of different traditions in meaningful conversations" (Katzenstein & Sil, 2008, p. 111). Already *The Real Cyber War* has become an essential read within the fields of international relations, communication, political economy, and cyber security.

References

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