Bombs and Bandwidth: The Emerging Relationship Between Information Technology and Security

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At first glance, it is easy to mistake this work for yet another in the Cyberterror genre: “The Internet: Be Afraid!” More specifically, it is easily mistaken for an example of the subgenre Security Fears: “You have no security. Terrorists with computers are everywhere! Get over it—or give us more power…” Both the title and the subtitle suggest that the work will largely be about the Internet and state conflict, or the cybernetic “military revolution.” Happily, this is not the case. In fact, the calm and rational voices of experts such as those who have contributed to Bombs and Bandwidth is the best remedy we have for such anxieties.

The work is a project coordinated by the Social Science Research Council. This might lead readers of a certain inclination in turn to think of the authors of the thirteen chapters as predominantly egg-headed liberals. Readers with such presuppositions should begin reading Professor Carolyn Nordstrom’s chapter, in which she treks along African smuggling routes despite hardships and dangers appropriate to Soldier of Fortune magazine. Such readers, however, might be somewhat disappointed, because the villains she meets are often highly educated and quite capable of fixing their computers, satellite telephones and assorted ICT (Information-Communications Technology) appliances as skillfully as they wield them in bringing their illicit goods onto the world market.

The book is divided into four sections:

1. Cyber-war and National Security
2. Surveillance and Security
3. Digital War-Making
4. Civil Violence and Information Technologies

Once again these titles raise the specters of the post-9/11 age. However, in each section, at
least one chapter is carefully crafted to peel back the facade of common analysis in these subject areas to reveal the underlying sub-structure of the usual self-interested groups.

For example, Ralf Bendrath’s chapter, “The American Cyber-Angst and the Real World–Any Link?” in the first section reveals that there is precious little connection between our common fears of digital terrorism and political realities. He shows us that cyber-terror is in part a cold-war substitute in search of a budget as various administrations grope for some attractive—i.e. terrifying—analysis that will keep the cornucopia of public funding flowing. The chapter, like most in the work, is carefully documented and thoughtfully organized.

In section three, “Digital War Making,” Chris Hables Gray’s chapter, “Perpetual Revolution in Military Affairs, International Security and Information” ties the “elements of post-modern war” to globalization. He believes the search for new forms of warfare to be an effort to avoid facing the underlying reality: war is no longer a useful tool of policy. But a new form of warfare might hopefully, in the views of those whose interests largely depend upon military spending, once again make it so.

The chapters are not all contrarian. We also have those who believe that terrorism merits not only our full attention but also a sacrifice of civil rights and freedoms in a measure appropriate to the sacrifice of the lives lost. This is particularly true of several chapters on security, led off by Dorothy Denning’s “Cyber Security As An Emergent Infrastructure.” Denning is practically the mother of the field and her very precise prose gives us an excellent overview of its development.

This consistent descriptive precision is one of the most useful aspects of Bombs and Bandwidth, and is probably a result of Robert Latham’s editorial hand. There is an effective effort to carefully define terminology and concepts in such a way that the chapters, while they rarely touch upon each other, do build a common descriptive structure.

For those wanting a broad survey, which at the same time consists of carefully written and organized studies of relatively narrow topics, this is the book. The work would also be a very useful text in a college or university classroom in any topic area touching upon digitalization or political conflict. With careful reading, it could serve as both an introduction, and as an in depth-analysis of important aspects of a wide variety of related fields.

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