OPEN ACCESS

KING'S College LONDON

King's Research Portal

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication record in King's Research Portal

Citation for published version (APA):
Fridman, O. (2023). Digital Influence Mercenaries: Profits and Power through Information Warfare by James J. F. Forest: Reviewed by Dr. Ofer Fridman. *Parameters*, *53*(3), 145-146.

Citing this paper
Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

•Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
•You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
•You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

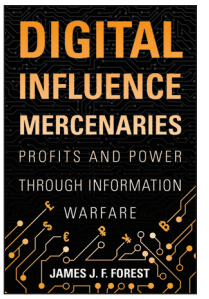
Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 05. Jan. 2025

Digital Influence Mercenaries: Profits and Power through Information Warfare

by James J. F. Forest

Reviewed by Dr. Ofer Fridman, senior lecturer in War Studies, King's College London



Unlike most books in this field, brimming with fancy, yet confusing illustrations and technical slang—the understanding of which requires a doctoral degree in computer science—James J. F. Forest's *Digital Influence Mercenaries* reads like a thriller. In his previous books, Forest proved himself as a writer capable of turning the most complicated topics into meticulously researched, detailed, accessible stories. In *Digital Influence Mercenaries,* Forest's skills manifest again. Both novices and information warfare experts should read his work.

Digital influence researchers can learn one important lesson from Forest's monograph: how to present a complicated problem shaped by sophisticated technology to those with no technical background. For the last two decades, the professional language of cyber experts has alienated political decisionmakers responsible for guarding citizens from malicious actors generating influence for profit or for power. From that perspective, Digital Influence Mercenaries is a helpful oasis in the desert of the political, professional, and legal discourse on the nature and character of digital influence, as everyone involved in this discourse can understand Forest's authoritative and knowledgeable presentation of the problem.

Forest's academic objectivity makes this book particularly useful to the policy-making community. He focuses on the phenomenon of digital mercenaries—who they are, and how and why they operate. He pays much less attention to their benefactors, making his argument accessible to everyone regardless of their political beliefs. In the same spirit of political objectivity, he refrains from offering political, legal, or other recommendations. While the last chapter attempts to offer a glimpse into future challenges and how to confront them, Forest stops short of offering direct recommendations. Instead, he concludes that "the future looks promising for digital influence mercenaries," unless some "unimaginably huge changes in America and worldwide" prevent it (169). The book leaves the decision on the nature and

character of the "unimaginably huge changes" required to transform this future to the readers.

The timing of *Digital Influence Mercenaries* could not be better. On February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin started a war, which very quickly escalated into a geopolitical earthquake. Since the beginning of the war, many writers have spilled much ink discussing the detrimental effects of the shock waves from war in Ukraine on the economic, political, security, immigration, and other foundations of the global order, which the COVID-19 pandemic had already weakened. Unsurprisingly, when the rumble of Russian artillery began echoing just across Poland's eastern border, the media sidelined the issue of malign digital influence. But that does not mean the problem has disappeared—rather the opposite. Regardless of when, where, and how the guns fall silent in Ukraine, the shock waves of this geopolitical earthquake have already created economic, political, and societal grievances (within NATO member states and worldwide) that different political actors would use to pursue their goals through digital influence.

On the one hand, the war in Ukraine has made the future of digital influence mercenaries even more promising than Forest suggests in this book, sent to press months before Russian tanks crossed the Ukrainian border. On the other, no one can control, predict, or foresee the direction, consequences, and implications of geopolitical earthquakes. The French Revolution, World War I, or the end of the Cold War shook the existing global order and led to geopolitical transformations that helped revive societies by transforming outdated institutions and overcoming systemic obstacles. While we still do not know the magnitude of the current earthquake in Ukraine, it offers many opportunities for previously unimaginable transformations, including in the field of digital influence.

Digital Influence Mercenaries, therefore, has arrived at the right time. It brings much-needed depth, clarity, and nuance to a field in which a generational gap and a lack in technical background create a plague of misunderstandings. Forest's accessible presentation of the problem offers the desperately needed common language between professionals, policymakers, and legislators. *Digital Influence Mercenaries* deprives its readers of an "I don't understand the problem" excuse, and this—for better or for worse—is its biggest achievement.

Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2022 • 264 pages • $39.95

Keywords: digital influence, technology, Ukraine, NATO, Cold War