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Book Review: *Digital Militarism*

Christopher Regan

Digital Militarism

Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca L. Stein
Stanford University Press (2015), 192 pages

Social media has become a ubiquitous part of life, particularly among younger generations. Since its relatively recent inception, it has provided people with a fun way to connect to one another. In their book *Digital Militarism: Israel's Occupation in the Social Media Age*, authors Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca L. Stein argue that social media in Israel is used to express the ingrained militarism of the Israeli populace against Palestinians. According to the book, Israel was dubbed one of “the world’s biggest users of social networks” in 2011, and the book argues that the rise of this social media age has led to a novel form of militarism: digital militarism (p. 9). According to Kuntsman’s website, her work lies at the “intersection of media and cultural studies, sociology, politics, and digital cultures.” Stein’s focus is Israeli cultural and political processes vis-a-vis the occupation of Palestinian land and dispossession of Palestinians. The authors combine their diverse areas of expertise to craft a compelling argument about the role of social media in Israeli violence.

The book’s preface clearly defines digital militarism as “the extension

of militarized culture into social media domains often deemed beyond the reach of state violence” (p. 6). This clarity exemplifies one of the book’s most important strengths: the use of straightforward language to convey a clear message. The quick dive into the idea of digital militarism, however, is one of its weaknesses as well. The authors write the book in a way that assumes the reader agrees with their stance on the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Kuntsman and Stein reference “mainstream militarized politics” (p. 7) and “denial of occupation” (p. 11) in Israel, but they do not make a case for why these things are true. Especially egregious is the statement that “many Jewish Israelis would support a politics of militant security in the name of ‘Israel’s right to self-defense,’ usually with little regard for mounting Palestinian civilian casualties” (p. 10), as they do not explain why “Israel’s right to self-defense” is an invalid excuse for Israel’s conduct. Instead of first proving the existence of militarism and then providing examples of digital militarism, the authors assume militarism and merely prove the centrality of digital components. Given the contentious nature of the debate over Israeli-Palestinian relations, this misstep alienates a large portion of the potential audience. This miscue is unfortunate; Kuntsman and Stein could have ameliorated this issue by briefly arguing that Israel has a culture of militarism.

The authors structure the book as a collection of many anecdotes about the growth of Israeli digital militarism. It starts with the failures of early attempts by the government to effectively use social media, such as in the aftermath of an Israeli military assault on a ship carrying activists and humanitarian aid to Gaza, known as the Freedom Flotilla incident. The Israel Defense Forces, however, improved its social media outreach with time, and private individuals began to employ digital militarism. Kuntsman and Stein use the example of Eden Abergil, a soldier who posted a controversial picture of herself with blindfolded Palestinian detainees, to demonstrate that the occupation is a “public secret” (p. 54), meaning it is an aspect of society that everyone knows to be true but that no one talks about. The Abergil incident

exemplifies this idea as Israelis acted surprised by this post, even though this behavior is common among soldiers. Similarly, Israelis were surprised when Mor Ostrovski posted a picture of a young boy in his sniper scope on Instagram, and the authors contend that recurring incidents of this nature further demonstrate public secrecy in Israel. The authors also propose that a culture of digital suspicion emerged in Israel since the rise of social media, in which people question the legitimacy of any photos depicting the oppression of Palestinians for fear of false editing. This paranoia reveals a significant transformation in militarism on account of social media, as pictures were not as widespread before the social media age. The book concludes with stories about “selfie militarism,” or the culture of soldiers taking pictures glorifying war. Specifically, the authors argue that the extensive social media protests that erupted when IDF soldier David Adamov was suspended from the military show the ubiquity of digital militarism in Israel.

While these stories and the pictures that accompany them certainly make for an engaging read, the lack of quantitative evidence is striking. What exactly does “going viral” mean? The book leaves the reader guessing, as the authors provide no statistics. Moreover, without the backing of statistical evidence for practically any of the claims, the reader is also left wondering whether the examples from the book are cherry-picked to fit the authors’ narrative.

Admittedly, it is likely difficult to gather statistics on intangible subjects like culture, but the heavy reliance on the anecdotes of a few specific Israelis causes the book to read more like a story than a serious work of research. Although the book introduces the reader to a possibly valid, interesting view on the role of social media in Israeli militarism, there are too many holes in the argument to consider it compelling.

Christopher Regan is a freshman from Franklin, Mass. double majoring in economics and physics. He would write a longer bio about his dreams and aspirations if he had any idea what he wanted to do after college.