

Magazine

# If Everything Can Be 'Weaponized,' What Should We Fear?

First Words

By JOHN HERRMAN MARCH 14, 2017

Politics is something like an art, if you ask those who practice it, and it's something like a science, if you ask those who study it. But to the journalists who cover it, it has always been something like something else: a sport. Writing in 1968, Milton Rokeach, the social psychologist, articulated what would become a perennial complaint. "The kinds of data obtained by public-opinion research and disseminated in the mass media seem designed more to entertain than to inform," he wrote. "The quality of the information conveyed seems not much different from that conveyed in the sports pages or, better yet, the daily racing form." The press, especially during election years, frequently failed to exercise "journalistic conscience"; it had internalized a "racehorse philosophy."

Nearly half a century later, Rokeach's assessment still echoes in our gripes about political news. His chosen metaphor, however, has been beaten to death. Coverage is now turning away from a language of sports and toward a language of war. The horse race has given way to an arms race, in which everything, and everyone, have the potential to be "weaponized."

According to the past year in headlines, Donald Trump has amassed a particularly enormous arsenal. Since the beginning of the election, he has been credited with improvising (or trying to improvise) weapons out of everything within

reach: Twitter, “the dollar,” conspiracy theories, “fake news,” harassment, Bill Clinton, emails, the media, “merry Christmas,” federal funding, unintelligibility and chaos — to name just a few. Trump’s opponents have taken up arms, too. Among the weaponry: “Hillary Clinton’s popular-vote victory,” history, social media, protest and “Trump’s incendiary anti-Muslim election rhetoric” (which was “weaponized” in court arguments against the travel restrictions he ordered). The left has been accused of weaponizing political correctness, weaponizing “safe spaces” and weaponizing racism — meaning accusations of racial hatred, not racial hatred itself.

“Weaponization” works as a throwing up of the hands, and as a suggestion — or an admission, or a strategic claim — that the discourse has failed us. Or, more accurately, it suggests that the discourse has become something dangerous: no mere fight but a terminal conflict without decorum or limits. The language of sports had a maddening tendency to flatten and trivialize the serious consequences of politics, creating constant suspense but obscuring life-or-death stakes. Militarized language moves in a different direction: It intensifies the news it’s describing while simultaneously obscuring actual threats. “Weaponization” is used to describe both rhetoric that might incite violence and criticism of violent rhetoric. It is lodged against the state, with its legal monopoly on violence, but also, incoherently, against those who challenge the state. It is a shortcut to false equivalence, and it manufactures excuses for those with a vested interest in drawing blood themselves.

As a metaphor, “weaponization” creates paranoia and the impression that nothing is immune from conscription. Suddenly tools for violence are hiding everywhere, waiting to be brandished by your enemies, taken up for self-defense or fatally mishandled by the blind or naïve. The fabric of civilian life is now wrapped in a linguistic fog of war.

**“Weaponize”** was born in the 1950s as military jargon. It was an instantly comprehensible neologism, useful and compact and inflected with the managerial style then in vogue. “To turn into a weapon” sounds clumsy and crude, bringing to mind early man gripping a fist-size rock or a prisoner sharpening a toothbrush. “Weaponize,” on the other hand, conjures thick-rimmed glasses and pomade, official reports and secret plans. It’s a contemporary of “collateral damage,” another term emblematic of what had not yet been termed the military-industrial complex.

Its first documented appearance in front of a wide audience came in 1957, in an Associated Press interview with Wernher von Braun, the former Nazi engineer who would become an integral figure in the American space program. Von Braun explained to the unnamed reporter that his work had been to “weaponize” the military’s ballistic-missile technology. Army rocketry was, of course, always destined for war, so von Braun’s use of the word suggested the fulfillment of a plan, more than a conversion. Over the decades that followed, “weaponization” proliferated alongside nuclear warheads, describing their constantly multiplying delivery systems, and lingered through the late stages of the Cold War. But it has periodically re-entered the lexicon to address fresh fears: anxiety about new infectious diseases being put to sinister ends; weapons of mass destruction, during the run-up to the first and second American wars in Iraq; and of course, 21st-century terror attacks, in which horrifying and surprising things — passenger planes, trucks — were converted into instruments of slaughter.

Recently, as the word has crept into civilian life to describe an anxiety about the future, it has brought uncanny echoes of history along with it. In that 1957 interview, von Braun used the word in response to a question about the Soviet Union’s technological advantages. Today it is Russia that is described — by American intelligence figures — as leading the way in a very different form of cutting-edge weaponization: of hackers, leaks, data dumps, social media and information in general, all aided by the machinery of the internet. This rhetorical conversion of the entire internet into a field of battle dovetails neatly with our deepening fears about technology and privacy. The notion that a state could weaponize social media for political ends is easy to understand in the familiar terms of online harassment, which turns seemingly inert platforms like Twitter or Facebook into tools for invading privacy and inflicting fear. Similarly, a nation using malware to interfere with a rival power’s missile launches resembles, more than superficially, a hacker’s plot to conscript your wireless baby monitor into a malicious botnet, and worries about pervasive state surveillance bring to mind our ambivalent relationships with the online services to which we hand over our most personal information. Both lines of thinking look at our technological, social and political acceleration with an extreme but appealingly simple pessimism: Whatever this is, it ends badly.

This feeling can breed either cynicism or paranoia, calling into question not just

different claims about the world but also the tools used to make them. “Weaponized Narrative Is the New Battlespace,” blared a January headline on Defense One, a website that covers national-security news. “Weaponized narrative seeks to undermine an opponent’s civilization, identity and will by generating complexity, confusion and political and social schisms,” the article says, repeating the claim that Russia “controlled” the United States presidential election with disinformation and hacked data. The global rise of blood-and-soil nationalism, it suggests, is a result of “attacks” meant to “tear down old identities that have bound us together.”

Russia Insider, a website broadly defensive of the country’s government, treated the subject with mockery. The Western media, it wrote in March of last year, was sounding paranoid: “Whatever You Can Think Of, Russia Is ‘Weaponizing’ It.” Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks — another entity frequently accused of weaponizing information — returned the favor in February: “When you read a newspaper article, you are reading weaponized text.”

In the months since the election, as our linguistic arms race has continued to escalate, less metaphorical weapons have inauspiciously rejoined the discourse: consumer drones in Mosul, the VX nerve agent in a Malaysian airport and, in North Korea, the original weaponized weapons, ballistic missiles. Seeing these headlines side by side with articles about the weaponization of data (to win elections) and of Hollywood (to criticize the president) doesn’t feel as strange as you might expect. Of course quadcopter drones have been weaponized. We’re at war. Haven’t you heard? They’re weaponizing *tweets* now.

But even as a metaphor, far away from missiles and drones and nerve agents, weaponization is disorienting. That social media can be described within a single year as having been “weaponized” by Barack Obama and by ISIS, by and against Hillary Clinton, by governments and by brands, by Donald Trump and by the protesters challenging him, by bots and marketers and malicious trolls targeting other users with explicitly violent threats — all of this is a testament to how “weaponization” scrambles power in ways that tend to favor the actually violent. It places weapons in the hands of everyone around them, annexing their targets into a war zone where anything is permissible.

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