



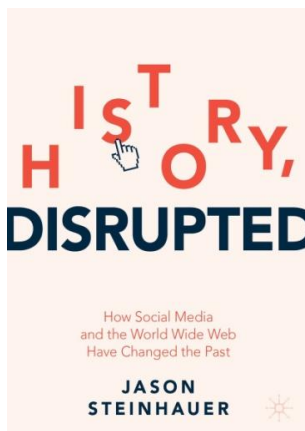
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(*) Corresponding author
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History, Disrupted: How Social Media and the World Wide Web Have Changed the Past

By Jason Steinhauer (Author) (Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan 2021)

Jeanette Ruiz^{1*} 

¹Virginia Commonwealth University: Richmond, Virginia, USA ✉ ruizjr@vcu.edu



In international relations (IR), the past is never a neutral backdrop. Historical narratives function as tools for legitimization, instruments of soft power, and vehicles of strategic communication. Jason Steinhauer's "History, Disrupted" intervenes in this debate by turning attention to the digital platforms that now shape how history is encountered and consumed. His central insight is that the architecture of the internet—search engines, algorithms, and especially social media—rewards a form of "e-history" that often runs counter to the standards of professional historiography. What results is a version of the past that is accessible and emotionally compelling, yet fragile in its evidentiary foundations and easily repurposed for political ends.

Steinhauer identifies seven mechanisms that define this emerging "e-history universe": crowd-sourcing, nostalgia on demand, virality, storytelling, newsworthiness, narrative coherence, and what he calls "History.AI" (an algorithmically generated synthesis of the past). These mechanisms collectively privilege speed and emotional resonance over scholarly verification, thereby transforming both the production and the circulation of history online.

Some of the book's most effective chapters demonstrate how these dynamics unfold on specific platforms. For example, Wikipedia operates on the principle of "verifiability, not truth," a standard that often sidelines historians whose archival findings contradict dominant interpretations. Steinhauer highlights the case of Timothy Messer-Kruse, whose careful research on the Haymarket Riot was repeatedly rejected by editors because it conflicted with prevailing secondary sources. Another striking example is the 2016 "Snowzilla" blizzard: within hours, contributors had compiled a 5,300-word Wikipedia article with nearly 200 citations, effectively canonizing a local snowstorm as historically significant before the event had even concluded. These cases show how participatory speed and volume can elevate minor events into the historical record.

The discussion of blockchain technology is equally provocative. While blockchain promises archival permanence, Steinhauer points out that its immutability sits uneasily with the

historiographical principle of reinterpretation and revision. Once fixed in the ledger, a narrative may carry authority not because of its scholarly rigor, but because of its technological durability.

Although compelling, the empirical scope of the book is primarily focused on the US. The argument would be enriched by sustained attention to non-Western contexts—such as China’s WeChat environment or the politics of digital censorship in Eastern Europe. Even so, the conceptual scaffolding is broad enough to apply to diverse information ecosystems.

For IR, Steinhauer’s contribution lies in three key areas. First, the book advances the study of narrative authority by demonstrating how digital platforms are increasingly determining which versions of history appear credible to global audiences. States now contest the legitimacy of history not only in diplomatic forums but also through edit wars on Wikipedia or viral videos on TikTok. Estonia and India, among others, have recognized that online narratives shape their international standing as much as formal statements do.

Second, Steinhauer offers a useful typology for analyzing information operations in an era where virality often outweighs factual accuracy. The seven mechanisms he outlines offer IR scholars a framework for understanding how revisionist actors can exploit emotional engagement to erode consensus or justify territorial claims. In this sense, “History, Disrupted” speaks directly to ongoing debates about disinformation, legitimacy, and the politics of memory.

Third, the book foregrounds epistemic inequality. Algorithmic design, language hierarchies, and platform logics privilege certain voices while marginalizing others. Steinhauer’s discussion of blockchain illustrates this: authority in these systems may accrue not to institutions with scholarly expertise, but to contributors who can post the most frequently. This dynamic parallels constructivist concerns in IR about norm entrepreneurs and knowledge hierarchies, where access and repetition often outweigh substantive authority.

The book succeeds in giving both a conceptual vocabulary and a set of illustrative cases that will resonate with IR scholars interested in media, legitimacy, and the politics of memory. The distinction that Steinhauer draws between “history,” “the past,” and “e-history” is particularly valuable, offering a set of terms that can be used across subfields. His chronological movement from Wikipedia through TikTok traces the digital evolution in a way that is clear, teachable, and analytically suggestive.

However, the book is not without its limitations. The empirical evidence relies heavily on illustrative anecdotes. While these examples are memorable, the absence of systematic content analysis—for instance, of widely circulated hashtags or viral YouTube searches—leaves open questions about scale and generalizability. A second limitation is the relatively brief treatment of historians who have successfully adapted to platform logics. Heather Cox Richardson’s success on Substack is noted only briefly, when a fuller exploration could have demonstrated just how professional historians navigate the digital ecosystem rather than merely resist it.

Despite these caveats, this book is a significant contribution to the literature on digital politics and historical knowledge. For IR, the book offers both a warning and a set of conceptual tools: a warning that logics of virality increasingly shape the authority of history, and a toolkit for analyzing how these logics intersect with legitimacy, memory, and power. As states and non-state actors continue to weaponize the past in digital arenas, Steinhauer’s analysis will remain relevant. For scholars, students, and practitioners alike, this book offers a timely starting point for understanding how history is contested in the digital age.