



(Foreign Policy, 2016)

Social Media and Conflict: Weighing the Pros and Cons

Theme: Social Media & Conflict

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The New Weapon of War

The prevalence of social media in spreading disinformation has recently taken precedent in the discussion of the effects of social media. However, there is an aspect of social media disinformation that is often overlooked: its effect on conflict. The use of 'fake news' as a weapon of political warfare in conflict is a topic that cannot be ignored. Social media users are no longer ordinary people trying

to connect with old hometown classmates, and mutual friends. Social media has become a platform used by nonstate actors and political parties to spread disinformation about other group as a means to bolster tensions and conflicts. Actors that use disinformation or 'fake news' as a political weapon are aware of those they are trying to influence, as they try to manipulate the audience into believing something they would not normally believe.¹

When we discuss the topic of fake news, the majority of the conversation revolves around its role in political campaigns and influencing civilians views' on political parties.² But what about the use of fake news in regards to conflict? How does social media change the way we view conflict? How can social media be used to spread false information on topics regarding conflict on both sides of warfare? Today, fundamentalist violent extremist organizations such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda have utilized social media as a way to gather support for their groups by posting videos and articles of their actions online for the public to see. While these organizations are using social media as a platform for their cause, governments and political parties are also using these same posts to denounce groups, gather international support against them and simultaneously score points with voters within their countries³

During conflict, key actors, including civilians, fight to shape the public opinion of a conflict, while also trying to gain or diminish political, moral and material support for the continuation of war and the utilization of a country's resources.⁴ This concept can be seen in many different types of conflicts, in regions around the world. Specifically within the Middle East, there are issues regarding the spread of fake news in reporting on conflict events and casualties. In 2013, there was controversy regarding the reporting on chemical weapons used in Syria by the United States, and while information was given with evidence, there is still controversy between the two warring parties.⁵ Regardless of which side is true, both sides are denouncing the other and their actions to further support from their populations.

¹ https://www.behorizon.org/disinformation-as-a-political-weapon-by-ziga-turk/?mc_cid=a37ffb66ba&mc_eid=aa814ae688

² <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13669877.2018.1443491>

³ <https://www.cfr.org/interview/free-speech-and-muslim-unrest>

⁴ <https://www.sciencespo.fr/evenements/?event=covering-conflict-beware-fake-news-but-fear-faux-frames-false-narratives>

⁵ https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/5958p5/assad-despite-overwhelming-evidence-says-chemical-weapons-attacks-in-syria-were-fabricated; <https://www.rt.com/news/436933-us-fake-attack-syria/>

The Weaponization of Social Media in Conflict

Sharing information with others has never been easier and we see millions of images shared every day through Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. How can sharing photos online affect conflict? Sharing posts on events has proven to shed light on serious issues within conflict, such as human rights abuses, outbreaks of conflict and attacks on civilians. The ability to share this information must be examined critically as it is both a positive and a negative aspect to social media's role in conflict. Social media is being weaponized by extremists and inadvertently utilized as a megaphone for amplifying hate speech and misinformation by civilians, many of whom struggle to understand the effects of online social platforms.⁶ It should be noted that spreading fake news can occur at all levels of society, and this is part of the danger in social media's relationship with conflict. There are fewer things that can be verified through social media, which means that spreading false information becomes much more pertinent.⁷

Pros of Social Media: A Call to Action

As stated before, the role of social media in conflict can be seen as both a positive and a negative. Social media has enabled civilians to become more engaged in conflicts that they would otherwise not have known about if it weren't for social media. Similarly, the role of states in regards to conflict has also transformed because of social media. States have become more accountable for their actions as civilians are better able to advocate for humanitarian assistance or an end to conflict.

Governments feel like they must react on behalf of this social outcry. Yemen is a clear example of this. Social media has been used to spread information about the ongoing humanitarian aid crisis, leading to billions of dollars (euros) in aid, in an attempt to alleviate the crisis. Within the context of the Middle East, social media is used consistently to spread news about conflicts on the ground, particularly in places where rebel groups are active. This is not to diminish the challenge of countering disinformation; techniques become more and more sophisticated, and so must the efforts to combat fake news.

Cons of Social Media in Conflict: Fake News

⁶ <https://www.openglobalrights.org/tech-companies-inability-to-control-fake-news-exacerbates-violent-acts/>

⁷ <https://www.cits.ucsb.edu/fake-news/danger-social>

While the public has become more aware of conflicts throughout the world because of social media, this does not mean that they have become more educated on the topics. Yes, social media is used to spread information, but has also been used to manipulate people through fake news, as actors use these platforms to gain support of civilians. The accountability of states can also be seen as a failure of social media's role in conflict. False information has transformed the way that states must gather their information in regards to conflict, and social media can be unreliable in giving out information to civilians. Similarly, governments may spread false information, as is often seen in authoritarian regimes.⁸ Actors on all sides may manipulate information to garner support for their cause, pitting opposing players in the conflict against each other by framing the other side incorrectly.

There are endless friction points, unsettled actual or perceived grievances or inequalities, suspicions, distrusts, perceptions, among others. These friction points are all fertile ground for fake news to take root and drastically influence politics of conflict, internally or even regionally. Therefore, the potential for conflict is perhaps greatest in regions where disinformation predominates. For instance, deep seated grievances can easily be exploited through the use of social media and enabled by widespread high-speed connectivity.

Overall, the spread of disinformation could incite political violence, sabotage elections, and unsettle diplomatic relations, leading to deterioration of conflicts. Because most of people are more inclined to believe what they see and read, fake news are an especially dangerous tool to the spread of unverified information—an issue made worse by how quickly and easily social media platforms can be used facilitate this spread.

What can be done?

Social media's role in conflict will continue to play a more significant role as time goes on, as the diffusion of information has become easier and instantaneous. In addition, individuals and actors will continue to frame the opposition in a conflict against their cause, and this is unlikely to change.

Ultimately, all actors using social media must be held responsible. Governments should explore options to develop specific media regulations that would facilitate social media platforms, such as

⁸ <http://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/reports/LSE-IDEAS-Hybrid-Warfare-in-the-Middle-East.pdf>

Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, to share information about fake news. These methods could then be expanded, and information regarding disinformation could then be shared with news agencies and nongovernmental watchdogs, amongst other actors. Implementing regulations such as these would help social media companies police their platforms for harmful content that could affect conflict.

It is up to individuals to critically analyze all sides in a conflict, particularly when misinformation incorrectly exposes a conflict. The need to improve public awareness and individual's critical thinking skills must be addressed as an additional aspect of the broader strategy to combat disinformation. Specific delegations have already made strides to education civilians on how to disengage with fake news.⁹

⁹ <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/communication-tackling-online-disinformation-european-approach>

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Elisa Cherry
Middle-East Department



Avenue Louise, 89 - 1050 Brussels - Belgium

Tel: +32 02 725 84 66

www.bic-rhr.com

info@bic-rhr.com

