# SOCIAL MEDIA IN VIOLENT CONFLICTS

## - RECENT EXAMPLES

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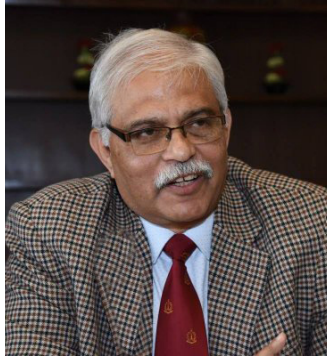
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# Social Media in Violent Conflicts – Recent Examples

## Introduction

Alan Rusbridger, the then editor-in-chief of the Guardian in his 2010 Andrew Olle Media Lecture, stated, "News organisations still break lots of news. But, increasingly, news happens first on Twitter. If you're a regular Twitter user, even if you're in the news business and have access to wires, the chances are that you'll check out many rumours of breaking news on Twitter first. There are millions of human monitors out there who will pick up on the smallest things and who have the same instincts as the agencies—to be the first with the news. As more people join, the better it will get."[1]

The most important and unique feature of social media and its role in future conflicts is the speed at which it can disseminate information to audiences and the audiences to provide feedback.

Social media changes traditional media news on conflicts. Online posts by citizen journalists and first-hand witnesses of conflict events shift the tone, extent and content of traditional media reporting of conflicts.

The social-media-driven conflict news shifts the focus from information provided by war gatekeepers to information from ordinary people. People on the ground tweeting photos and descriptions of events during wartime have become invaluable, as they tweet or post from areas too dangerous for journalists to go. It permits the victims of war to gain a voice and the world to view with greater detail what exactly is happening inside zones of conflict.

Today, journalists from well-known traditional media outlets extensively use social media, especially Twitter, to access news in real-time, get feedback on their own work, measure the demand for news on different topics by trending and widen their audience.[2] People on the ground tweeting photos and descriptions of events during wartime have become vital since they often tweet or post from areas too dangerous for journalists to reach. It allows the world to see in greater detail what exactly is happening inside zones of conflict. New media has become increasingly popular and is affecting how journalists do their jobs.[3]

In a remarkable book on social media, P. W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking brought out the essence of the weaponisation of social media.[4] The following quotes from the book will be apt: "Social media had changed not just the message, but the dynamics of conflict. How information was being accessed, manipulated, and spread had taken on new power. Who was involved in the fight, where they were located, and even how they achieved victory had been twisted and transformed. Indeed, if what was online could swing the course of a battle — or eliminate the need for battle entirely — what, exactly, could be considered 'war' at all? Attacking an adversary's most important center of gravity — the spirit of its people — no longer requires massive bombing runs or reams of propaganda. All it takes is a smartphone and a few idle seconds. And anyone can do it. Whether the cause is dangerous (support for a terrorist group), mundane

(support for a political party), or inane (belief that the earth is flat), social media guarantees that you can find others who share your views and even be steered to them by the platforms' own algorithms… As groups of like-minded people clump together, they grow to resemble fanatical tribes, trapped in echo chambers of their own design.



**Figure A2:** CNN uses content from the Twitter account of the Israeli Defense Forces and YouTube footage of the conflict zone

**Source:** US Television News Archive.
See https://archive.org/details/CNNW_20140808_030000_Anderson_Cooper_360/start/2520/end/2580 and https://archive.org/details/CNNW_20140801_030000_Anderson_Cooper_360/start/1930/end/1990, both accessed May 13, 2021.

The photo above shows how social media has changed reporting of conflicts by traditional media.

## What is Social Media?

The Oxford Dictionary defines social media as "websites and applications that enable users to create and share content, or to participate in social networking."[5] Social media refers to new media platforms where people can utilise electronic media outlets to send or broadcast audio, textual or visual messages and receive feedback from others. Even though social media is seen as a new tool for augmenting a civil society and democracy by providing a voice to citizens, it can be defined as a medium for conversation and coordination or interaction and sharing. A study examining the spread of information on Twitter found that false information framed as news spread more widely and rapidly than actual information. The motivation of companies for providing such content is profit-driven. The private sector now owns Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and the

other popular platforms, shaping and influencing what we think.

## Social Media and Conflict

Use of propaganda, disinformation, deception and information warfare is not new. What is new is the ease, efficiency, low cost of such efforts, global reach, propagation speed, and our political sensitivity to national and international opinion. We cannot control who accesses this capability. The advent of Social Media about 20 years ago has changed how we wage war. Both nation-states and non-state actors leverage social media to manipulate like-minded populations' cognitive biases to influence conflict dynamics. The social media battlefield has developed into an inevitable appendage to every international conflict. The agile player who can shape perceptions will more likely achieve their objectives. Social media has changed reporting of conflicts by traditional media.

Some researchers feel that social media is toppling the traditional political uses of media by:-

- Democratising access to media sources.

- Speeding the dissemination of information.

- Facilitating and spreading collective action.

Use of social media is not limited to civilians. Social media has the potential to help the Armed Forces better understand the environment in which it operates. Social media allows more agile use of information in support of operations. The effective utilisation of social media in the conflict may result in achieving the goal of the war or preventing the enemy from achieving his goal. There is a possibility that social media will divulge sensitive real-time information on military operations. In

'Operation Pillar of Defense', the US Home Front Command asked Israelis not to report the locations of missile strikes.

Social media offers a strategic medium for radical organisations or non-state actors to win the battle by inviting sympathy, support and discouraging the spirit of their enemies. This medium gives power to them to have their voices heard. It allows them to voice their views without passing through a gatekeeper, which existed in the traditional media outlets.[6] Israel Defense Forces (IDF)'s chief of New Media, Lt. Sacha Dratwa described his work as, "Facebook and Twitter are the battle fields. It is there that we fight, each and every day."[7]

How social media is being manipulated today is explained in the following diagram:



Source: Overview of Hostile Social Manipulation, RAND Corporation

Rapid growth of Social Media platforms have given non state actors an asymmetric advantage because of the low cost of entry and the relative

operational agilty wth which they can access and utilise new technologies. Social Media will make a significant impact in any future conflict. During the air campaign by Israel against Hamas militants in 2012, ten million Twitter messages were exchanged in eight days by online proxies of both sides to shape public opinion. It was the first twitter war.

For information operations, old methods of incorporing messages into newspapers and radio broadcasts have to be complimented by online methods to reach the widest targeted audience. To effectively shape the information environment during modrn military operations this paradigm shift has to be recognised. Headquarters at each echelon must understand how to establish credibility and gain popularity through social media.[8]

## Recent Examples of the use of Social Media in Conflicts

## The Islamic State (IS) in Iraq

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi became the 'Bin Laden of the Internet'. It is an example of the weaponisation of social media by non-state actors. Zarqawi's jihadist network, al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), weaponised YouTube by creating content depicting their successes in killing U.S. soldiers and civilians to a musical soundtrack. By 2006, AQI morphed into the Islamic State in Iraq with its own information warfare (IW)/media arm tasked with professionalising the development of the content with a message of fear, action and blood to recruit and shape public opinion.

IS used the internet successfully to convince numerically superior Iraqi forces to abandon posts and weapons out of fear. This resulted in rapid fall of Mosul and large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria. In addition, IS carried out its offensive like a virtual marketing tour that recruited over 30,000 people from nearly a hundred countries to join its cause. A column

of approximately 1,500 IS fighters rolled into northern Iraq. They were equipped with dirty pickup trucks and second-hand AK-47s. They also broadcast their offensive. If you're launching an invasion in conventional military operations, you don't want the enemy to know about it. But IS wanted everyone to know about it. So they had countless fans and botnets on Twitter that conjoined around a hashtag, #AllEyesOnISIS.

The effect on Iraqi soldiers was devastating. The Iraqi army was much larger, far better equipped with tanks and helicopters, and was better trained, backed by the U.S.' most powerful military. They were looking down at their smartphones and see what seemed like an IS victory playing out. It made as many as 30,000 defenders run away, leaving much of their equipment for the IS to claim and later broadcast using American equipment. What was playing out on social media changed the dynamics of the battlefield.

By 2016, Iraqi forces understood the weaponisation of social media posts (SMP)and situation was reversed. They used the IS tactics, techniques, procedures (TTPs) in their SMP-enabled IW efforts against the IS using portable cellphone towers and its own tag #FreeMosul. The U.S. State and Defence Departments joined Iraqi forces in the offensive in cyber and social media. The result was there for all to see.

## Syria

Social media has played a conspicuous role in the Syrian Civil War. Many competing factions in Syria have their own YouTube and Twitter accounts to publicise their battlefield successes and tout their territorial control. Syrian rebel groups have utilised their Facebook pages to brand themselves and to facilitate fundraising. Social media provides conflict participants with an avenue to both attract political and material support

and improve their chances of success.

In 2015, after the Iranian-backed offensive by the beleaguered Syrian regime failed to regain control of the city of Aleppo, members of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-trained brigades started posting photos of the experience on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. These photos divulged the aircrafts they boarded, the geolocation of fighters, the identity of their comrades and commanders, the weapons they carried and the airports the Iranian regime used for its logistical efforts. When fighters died, militias took to social media to create remembrance pages and posted photos of funerals and martyrdom videos. Their friends responded with likes and comments, in the process revealing their identities. This wealth of open-source information helped real-time intelligence gathering. For example, selfies taken onboard Iran air aircraft proved that the Iranian commercial carrier was being employed to support the fighting. As a result, it helped the U.S. to sanction Iran Air.[9]

## Conflicts in Gaza

British journalist David Patrikarakos in his book, 'War In 140 Characters: How Social Media is Reshaping Conflict in the Twenty-first Century', provides statements of representatives of both the IDF and Hamas concerning their strategy of social media. Lt. Col. Peter Lerner, former IDF international spokesman, stated in his interview to Patrikarakos, "If you're silent on social media, you are not putting anything in your enemy's way that prevents their message from gaining steam... And if you are silent on social media, you're not getting your own message across; and... not giving your supporters ammunition to use. My job is to prevent that from happening." Ihab al-Ghussain, Hamas spokesperson, told Patrikarakos during the 2014 Gaza War, "it is not just about taking pictures of dead people... We're now telling the story of this family, and how they were

eating breakfast when they were killed."

Some of the escalated conflict and military operations between the Palestinian–Israeli conflict were Israel's military operation in Gaza in January 2009 named 'Operation Cast Lead', the conflict between Israel and Hamas in November 2012 called 'Operation Pillar of Defence' and the latest  Hamas Israel Conflict in Gaza in May 2021 named as 'Operation Guardian of the Walls'. During these conflicts, Israel and Hamas have considerably increased and expanded their use of social media as a strategic warfare tool.

This paper will review the use of social media by both Israel and the Palestinian militant organisations during the recent conflicts in Gaza.

## Operation Cast Lead

On December 27, 2008, Israel launched Operation Cast Lead. It was a massive, 22-day military assault on the Gaza Strip. Cast Lead progressed in two phases: a week of intense aerial bombing followed by two weeks of a joint air and land assault and invasion. On January 18, 2009, Israel declared a unilateral ceasefire and withdrew its forces from Gaza. Palestinian armed groups followed with a separate unilateral ceasefire. In the Second Lebanon War in 2006, Hezbollah had used the advantage of real-time Internet press and social media as a tactical tool to bypass mainstream media coverage and reduce Israeli public morale. Israel relied on traditional informational tools like targeting Lebanese combatants and civilians with push text messages and airborne leaflets.

Israel learnt the lessons from the Second Lebanon War. It established the National Information Directorate to control and unify Israeli information operations and public relations across different media outlets. Israel's launch of Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in December 2008 was

supplemented by a massive and intensive informational campaign that combined traditional media, new media and diplomacy. Israel gained complete control of information coming out from the Gaza Strip by enforcing a media blackout that banned foreign journalists from entering Gaza. The IDF Spokesperson's Unit launched a *YouTube* channel, which was the only source that journalists and mainstream media could report on. The IDF YouTube channel was viewed by millions, either on social media platforms or through mainstream media. The Israeli foreign ministry recruited immigrants to blog in favour of Israel in native languages. The Interdisciplinary Center in Hertzlia recruited students to spread positive messages justifying Israel's military operation on social networking platforms and to post comments in Israel's favour on influential blogs.

In spite of the media and electricity blackout, citizens from Gaza managed to send videos and images with mobile phones. Gradually, information started to leak from Gaza. Hamas posted footage on *http://PalTube.com*, a video-sharing platform affiliated with the organisation. Palestinian journalists based in Gaza gave interviews by phone and Skype to international mainstream media outlets. They used social media such as blogs and Flickr accounts to report on the unfolding events. Mainstream media reporting had to accustom itself to the media blackout and incorporate social media as a primary source for covering the war. This included footage from the IDF channel, live video feeds streamed from Gaza news agencies, and *Google Maps* to display the places of Israel's airstrikes and infantry incursion in Gaza or the Israeli cities hit by Hamas rockets. Mainstream media also made use of a collection of tapes released online by Al Jazeera under a Creative Commons license.

## Social Media and the Palestinian Guerrillas

The Palestinian militant organisations also learnt lessons about the importance of media from the war between The Islamic Resistance of Hezbollah and the Israeli army in 2006. During 2008-2009 war on Gaza Strip, Hamas had utilised social media platforms, mainly Twitter by launching a hash-tag *QassamCount* to report "where Hamas rockets landed, when they landed, and what type of rocket was used". According to *Jerusalem Post* newspaper, it was estimated that 10,000 users signed up to display the QassamCount in the conflict's first three days. Outside Gaza, thousands of supporters of Palestinians used the Qassam Count bot, which automatically updated their status to report the real-time events on the ground.

## Operation Pillar of Defence

The IDF, on November 14, 2012, launched a series of airstrikes against Hamas in response to increased rocket fire from the Gaza Strip. The Israeli airstrike killed Ahmed al-Jabari, the second-in-command of Hamas's military wing. The fighting continued for seven and a half days. Israel called up reservists and threatened a full-scale ground invasion of the Gaza Strip. Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups continued to fire rockets into Israel, reaching Tel Aviv and Jerusalem for the first time. A mediated ceasefire, brokered by Egypt and the U.S. with United Nations oversight, took effect on November 21, 2012.[10]

With the development of social networks, the conflict in Gaza Strip between the Palestinian militant organisations, led by The Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) and Israel had moved into cyberspace. It appeared that the social media platforms had turned into another war-front alongside the military operations. One of the most interesting

aspects of the 2012 Gaza Conflict was the extensive use of social media, especially Twitter, by Hamas and Israel. It was unprecedented. When the IDF first announced it had killed top Hamas military commander Ahmed al-Jabari, Twitter was its medium of choice. Shortly after Israel attacked al-Jabari, Israel formally announced the launch of the Gaza operation on Twitter by using its *@IDFSpokesperson* Twitter account rather than a press conference at military headquarters. This was the first time a military campaign was formally declared on Twitter.

During the conflict via English-language Twitter feeds, Hamas' and Israel's interactions made some experts name it the first "Twitter War". For the first time commencement of the campaign was announced on Twitter by the IDF using its @IDFSpokesperson Twitter account. Each side used social media to put their own actions in a better context and belittle the opposition.

The Twitter feed provided material for the established media. Comments from the Twitter feed were included in reports by CNN, al-Jazeera English and other mass-media outlets. In one example, an article on the CNN website quoted the IDF's Twitter announcement, "Terrorists put an underground launch site next to a mosque. We targeted the site. The mosque was unharmed."[11]

**Use of Social Media by Israel.** During the 2012 Gaza Conflict, Israel's goal was to conduct airstrikes to weaken Hamas and other militant groups' capabilities and exact a price for continued rocket attacks. As a militarily stronger state, Israel could invade and physically control Gaza by a ground offensive. This ground offensive, though militarily feasible, was internationally unpopular because of the large number of casualties suffered in the 2008-2009 Gaza Conflict. Israel refrained from doing so.

In Operation Pillar of Defense, the IDF and the Israeli government made an exceptional investment in the media front. The following initiatives were taken:-

- IDF Spokesperson's Unit expanded its efforts on social media platforms and its internet blog.

- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs drafted around 200 Israeli students and 1,300 students abroad to deploy throughout social networks and broadcast the Israeli message. This was more than a battalion strength to fight the media war in numbers.

- Israel adjusted its approaches towards the established press. The IDF deployed a new cadre of friendly, foreign-born spokespersons. Unlike in Operation Cast Lead, the IDF placed no restrictions on the entry of the international media into Gaza.

Israel understood the media lessons from the previous war on Lebanon and utilised the online media platforms alongside the military attack. The critics of earlier Israeli actions believed that the IDF disproportionately targeted Palestinian civilians, with the lopsided casualty numbers cited as evidence of the IDF disregard for civilians. To counter this perception, the IDF Spokesperson Unit, the military unit responsible for media relations during peace and war, was highly active on its Twitter feed @ *IDFSpokesPerson*. It attempted to put Hamas's actions negatively and place a positive spin on the IDF's actions.

Israel's wide-ranging use of its @IDFSpokesperson Twitter feed served three purposes:-

- It was in English, the communication was likely directed at an elite, international audience. It emphasised the Hamas rocket

attacks and Israeli victimisation, and used to justify to a global audience Israel's military campaign.

- To combat what it perceived as Hamas misinformation.

- To mobilise Israeli sympathisers in other foreign constituencies to pressurise external actors of the 'justness' of Israeli military actions.

The increasing role of the IDF's new Interactive Media Unit, dedicated to using social media to sway foreign audiences, highlights the importance Israel gives to social media and its role in future military strategy.[12] Operation Pillar of Defense involved IDF efforts to reach internal and external audiences through Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and several other social media platforms. In addition to Facebook and Twitter accounts, the IDF used Tumblr and Pinterest, posting photos of the military operation and day-to-day army life. The Israeli military was also streaming images from drone cameras to Twitter posts. The IDF spokesman tweeted updates detailing Israeli Air Force attacks well before their release to the traditional media. There were also some slipups on the part of the IDF. An independent assessment that compared the IDF's social media performance with that of Hamas was particularly critical.

The IDF turned to social media to bypass the filter of the international media, control the message and reach audiences directly. Twitter enabled Israel to deliver information in real-time on incidents as they occurred. Twitter feed helped to reach out to not only social media users but also the established media itself. The rigid 140-character structure of Twitter disciplines the writer into packaging thoughts into crisp sound bites. Due to its resulting quality, the IDF's Twitter product found its way into the mainstream media, influencing coverage of the campaign there. The IDF's tweets complemented representatives' verbal comments.[13] The IDF's use

of Twitter received more attention than any other element of the Pillar of Defense media campaign. The @IDFSpokesperson Twitter account dramatically increased its number of followers, rising above 200,000 by the end of the campaign.[14]

This time, journalists were allowed to enter Gaza. A 24-hour government press office was made to issue press cards to reporters. The government streamlined its information gathering from the battlefield to regular news conferences. The Government Press Office organised media tours to the sites of rocket attacks from Gaza. The operation's coverage inside Israel differed from its coverage abroad. The operation's name, 'Pillar of Cloud' in Hebrew, was translated by the Israeli army as 'Pillar of Defense' for the English-language media. Pillar of Cloud is a biblical reference to God taking the form of a cloud to protect the Israelites against the Egyptians.[15]

Israel could monitor feedback on how Hamas supporters viewed the conflict via the frequency of the two hashtags, *#GazaUnderAttack* and *#IsraelUnderFire*. The IDF monitored the volume of support via the changes in these hashtags and passed this information up the chain of command. The Israeli army developed a proactive information strategy, combining social media tools and soliciting the support of the Israeli online communities, to set the agenda in the media and control perceptions of the fighting. The Israelis used information successfully to preserve strategic options enabling them to attain their objectives.

London's Jewish Chronicle said that "the Israelis seem to have turned a corner in their dealings with the media. In Cast Lead, they did their best to keep out and frustrate reporters. This time around, they devoted resources to keeping the media informed and took PR seriously."[16] A report by *Der Spiegel* also emphasised the increased effectiveness of the IDF Spokesperson's Unit representatives.[17] The decision to grant free

access for international media to enter Gaza was universally applauded and described as Israel's interest.

Other operators joined the fray. The hackers group *Anonymous* announced that in response to threats by the government to cut Gaza's telecommunications links it hacked into 87 Israeli websites. The group said in a post on its website, "We are ANONYMOUS and NO ONE shuts down the Internet on our watch,". It threatened Israeli government with "full and unbridled wrath of Anonymous" if it shuts down Internet access in Gaza.[18]

**Action by Hamas**. The Palestinian militant organisations, mainly the *Hamas*, have utilised social media to disprove the Israeli army stories about the targets in Gaza Strip and waged a psychological warfare against Israel. Hamas' goals in the 2012 Gaza Conflict were two-fold:-

- Knowing they could not defeat Israel conventionally, Hamas sought to make the costs, both militarily and in terms of international standing, of further military confrontation too high for Israel. The settlement would improve its struggling economy.

- The military confrontation also improved Hamas's domestic political support relative to Fatah.

Hamas's extensive use of the *@AlQassamBrigade* Twitter feed during the conflict served two purposes:-

- It used social media to both threaten Israel and demonstrate its resolve in the conflict. This would help mediators to negotiate a fast and favourable settlement to avoid a long protracted conflict.

- Hamas's Twitter feed emphasised Palestinians' victimisation by the Israeli military. This would move international public opinion

in favour of Hamas.

Hamas promoted its own hashtag so that users could show their support by tweeting *#GazaUnderAttack*. Based on hashtag mentions of *#IsraelUnderAttack* (Israel) versus #GazaUnderAttack (Hamas), Hamas had more supporters on Twitter than Israel. On the other hand, The Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine chose to send SMS messages in Hebrew during the war on Gaza in 2012 to the mobile phones of nearly 5000 Israeli soldiers and officers. The *#FreePalestine* hashtag launched by supporters of the Palestinian cause enticed many people around the world, including celebrities who tweeted this hashtag to show their sympathy with the Palestinian civilians who suffer from Israeli airstrikes. Supporters of the Palestinian cause on social media succeeded by putting pressure on Israel by showing to the world the destruction in Gaza Strip and the footages of the victims, particularly children. These actions urged the international community to call for an immediate ceasefire, express their sympathy with the victims, and condemn civilians' killing.

Hamas used to communicate with the Israeli soldiers as part of psychological warfare, penetrating the broadcasting of several Israeli media outlets to send messages to the Israeli public. Hamas' military arm, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, operated many accounts on Twitter, such as *#GazaUnderAttack, #Gaza, #StopIsrael* and *#PrayForGaza*, to provide up-to-date news about the Palestinian casualties and news about launching rockets towards Israel. The strategy of using social media by this militant organisation was to refute Israel story that Hamas' fighters were using civilians as human shields and civil infrastructure, such as schools, to launch rockets towards Israel. This strategy aimed to change the international perception about the Israel's war on Gaza Strip by broadcasting images of the injured and killed children by Israeli airstrikes.

To demoralise Israeli spirit, The Military Media Unit of Hamas' military arm provided the combatants with new brand cameras fixed on their shoulders and heads to film their military actions in order to document them and extract suitable videos for online broadcasting-editing. Also, the unit broadcast on its website video songs in Hebrew, such as 'The End of Hope', which is an opposite version of Israel anthem, and short films to document the continuous manufacturing of rockets in Hamas' factories and transporting them to the battlefield.

An Israeli researcher analysed the Twitter accounts of Hamas and the IDF during the conflict and concluded that "the IDF refrained almost entirely from engaging in Twitter discussions, and in doing so failed to dominate the online discourse and the messages being transmitted." [19] Maath Musleh, lecturer in media and human rights at AlQuds-Bard College in Jerusalem said, "The Israeli army cannot manipulate information and the imparting of information as easily as they used to. In terms of getting information out, the Palestinian network, especially on Twitter, is doing a great job. We are covering the events through people on the ground and trusted media sources." He said media positioning plays as important a role in modern conflicts as positioning the troops. He stated, "The IDF's communications people probably thought they could get some strategic advantage by being the first to tweet about activities. The pictures and stories coming out of Gaza over social media will probably have a more global impact because they may be seen to be the victims. So the IDF probably thought they could dominate the international news story, set the tone and frame events by tweeting first."[20]

A member of the IDF Spokesperson Unit highlighted, "we intercepted 90 percent of their long-range rockets into Israel via the 'Iron Dome', but if they (Hamas) can manage to say (via Twitter) that they fired rockets until the very last day of the conflict, that's a victory for them. Perceptions

matter." As one pro-Palestinian analysis piece already noted approvingly, in Pillar of Defense, "While Hamas's social media efforts have been clumsy, independent activists have driven the narrative on the Palestinian side, as young Gaza residents rush to hospitals to take and upload photos and video of the carnage."[21]

In the summer of 2014, a 16-year-old Palestinian girl, Farah Baker, became an international celebrity. International media and news agencies worldwide ran stories based on the content of her english-language Twitter account, where she recounted what she saw and felt during the Israeli bombing raids on her town during the Gaza War. Patrikarakos writes, "The majority of articles by traditional-media outlets were based on her tweets and the narrative around them. In effect, they treated her Twitter feed like a newswire service; a tweet became comparable to an associate press bulletin."[22] Many of her tweets were simple descriptions or videos of what she saw and heard. "This is the car which was bombed at my house door #Gaza #GazaUnderAttack," she tweeted on July 26 with accompanying photo of the destroyed vehicle." But it was the detailing of her emotions—her fear for her safety and for that of her family, especially her little sister, Lamar—that was by far the most powerful and popular element of her output."[23]

Many of Farah's tweets were retweeted thousands of times, including by journalists and opinion makers, with many followers amplifying her message. "Tweets begat retweets, which begat greater audiences, which begat news coverage, which begat demonstrations, which begat yet more news coverage, most of it pro-Gaza." In an interview Farah told Patrikarakos, "[with Twitter] more people ... can see what you write, and crucially, journalists use it as a source." Examples of her tweets as quoted by CNN in Online is given below.

**Figure A1:** CNN quotes from Twitter account of a 16-year-old Farah Baker, who describes life in Gaza during the 2014 Gaza war



**Source:** Screenshots from CNN broadcast, available at: https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2014/07/31/nr-bts-life-of-gaza-resident-farah-baker.cnn, accessed March 12, 2021.

## How the Twitter War Unfolded

The use of social media to announce and comment on military operations, almost in real-time, is a significant departure for the social networking platform.[24]

Israelis released black-and-white video footage showing the airstrike that killed the leader of Hamas' military wing, Ahmed al-Jabari. Using the Twitter handle *@IDFspokesperson*, the IDF communications tweeted a photo of Jabari with the word "Eliminated" stamped across his face, along with a list of his alleged offences. The IDF also uploaded a video of the attack that killed him to YouTube.
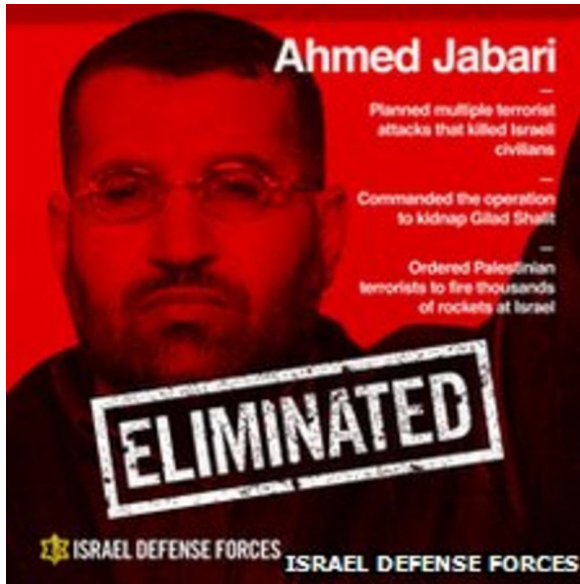


On November 8, 2012, the IDF Spokesperson Unit tweeted, "We recommend that no Hamas operatives, whether low level or senior leaders show their faces above ground in the days ahead." The @IDFSpokesPerson feed was criticised for directly threatening Hamas with its tweets. Avital Leibovich, the head of the IDF's Interactive New Media Branch, explained the role of such threats, "When rockets are falling on our (Israelis') heads, and I'm referring to 500 rockets in the last 72 hours, if you can even imagine the extent (of it), then when you have certain time (sic) that you want to convey a message of deterrence to an audience, then that's a good tool (Twitter/social media) to do it."

In response, Hamas' military wing — Twitter handle *@AlqassamBrigade* — tweeted: "Our blessed hands will reach your leaders and soldiers wherever they are (You Opened Hell Gates on Yourselves).»



The @IDFSpokesperson tweeted messages justifying Israel's military offensive such as, "What would you do if rockets were striking your country? RT14 if you agree that #Israel has the right to self-defence -12:40 November 16, 2012." The @IDFSpokesPerson feed also described the process of targeting Hamas militants while also belittling Hamas for hiding among civilians like, "Hamas' (sic) strategy is simple: Use civilians as human shields. Fire rockets from residential areas. Store weapons in mosques. Hide in hospitals -10:09 November 18, 2012." Lt. Col. (Ret) Avital Leibovich, creator of the Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) social media unit stated during an interview with CNBC: "Social media is a warzone for us here in Israel. It is a way to communicate with a large variety of audiences, worldwide, without an editor interfering. Here we can have our own campaigns, we can decide the size of the headline, what that headline will be, exactly which pictures and footage to upload. So it really enables

us to reach millions and millions of people who use social media as their sole source of information."
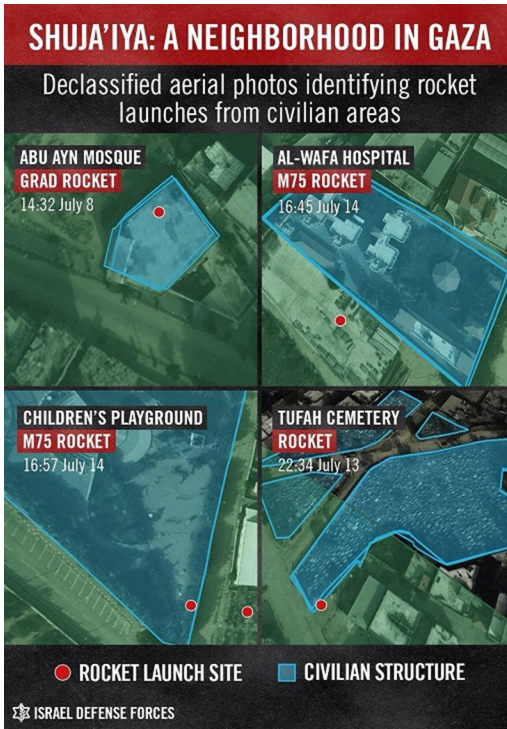


Source: https://www.facebook.com/idfonline

## Hamas Israel Conflict in Gaza, May 2021

The recent conflict in Gaza has revealed some fascinating aspects of the use of social media in a conflict scenario and maybe as a harbinger to future warfare. In the 11 days of conflict in May 2021, when Hamas launched rockets at Israel and Israel replied by bombing targets in the Gaza Strip, the social media turned into a battlefield. Moreover, it showed that social media has come to play an increasingly significant role in any conflict today.

This was a military conflict and psychological warfare was conducted in the media and on social networks. It aimed at influencing public opinion

both domestically and internationally. Throughout the conflict, a storm of misinformation on social media was observed. Misinformation about the violence between Israelis and Palestinians flourished on *Facebook, Twitter, TikTok* and other social media. False claims had been widely shared worldwide, at times with misidentified or mischaracterised photos and videos or fake rumours about Israeli troop movements or Palestinian threats. As per the analysis by *The New York Times*, the lies were amplified as they had been shared many times on Facebook and Twitter, spreading to *WhatsApp* and *Telegram* groups that have thousands of members. The effect of the misinformation was potentially deadly when suspicions and distrust already ran high.[25]



Both sides are likely to continue trying to use the internet to marshal global opinion in their favour. The IDF has a strong presence online. It has

1.3 million followers on Twitter and more than 70,000 on TikTok, where it has been posting videos of its forces in action and scenes from inside Israel. The Israeli government used its Twitter accounts to counter Hamas propaganda and defend its military campaign. For example, the IDF Twitter account provided regular operational updates and broadcast video of the Iron Dome anti-missile system intercepting rockets from Gaza. The Chinese-owned site TikTok has a vast, mostly younger audience, with an estimated 700 million active monthly users worldwide. An Israeli analyst told the BBC, "Maybe nobody thought that TikTok would be a powerful or important platform in Israel."[26]

Both sides committed mistakes while trying to put up videos due to extreme time pressure. In a 28-second video posted on Twitter by *Ofir Gendelman*, a spokesman for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, showed Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip launching rocket attacks at Israelis from densely populated civilian areas. It was shared hundreds of times as the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis escalated. However, this was not from Gaza. This particular video could be found on many YouTube channels and other video-hosting sites from 2018. And according to captions on older versions of the video, it showed militants firing rockets not from Gaza but from Syria or Libya. Arabic and Israeli news outlets shared many misleading or blatantly deceptive videos spread on YouTube and Facebook. For example, TikTok users boosted false claims that Israeli forces had set the Al-Aqsa Mosque on fire.

In the use of social media, the IDF has been highly proficient for many years. But Hamas has vastly expanded its skills at this over the past decade.

## Use of Media for Military Deception

Militaries around the world have used deception and trickery against their enemies since long.[27] For example, two years ago, the Israeli army

reportedly faked soldiers' injuries at the scene of a Hezbollah missile strike, evacuated them in bandages to a hospital in a helicopter. It was reported then that the army orchestrated the injuries to trick Hezbollah into thinking that it had inflicted casualties and so agree to a cease-fire.

After days of airstrikes, late on May 13, 2021, Israel announced it was calling up its reservists and concentrating troops along the border before a possible ground invasion. Israel began firing artillery shells across the border at targets inside Gaza. Finally, Israel started to scramble forces along the border in what looked to be final preparations for an invasion. Then came the statement to the media, issued simultaneously in Hebrew and Arabic on Twitter, that invasion was underway. Just after midnight, the Israeli military sent out a warning statement to the media, "IDF air and ground troops are currently attacking in the Gaza Strip." The vaguely worded statement set off frantic speculation that Israel had launched a ground invasion of Gaza. This would cause a bloody escalation of the operation against Hamas militants.

Military officials assured most Israeli journalists that no ground invasion had been put in motion. However, Several reporters from foreign news outlets, were told categorically that IDF troops had entered the Palestinian territory and reported that information accordingly, leading several leading media houses around the world, including Washington Post, The New York Times  and AFP to publish articles stating that an Israeli ground assault on Gaza had begun. They cited the IDF's English-language spokesperson Jonathan Conricus. Hours later, the IDF issued a "clarification." There were no troops inside Gaza. By then, several major news outlets had reported the ground offensive was underway. NBC News did not report that a ground invasion had taken place. This led to broad speculation that this false report was made to convince Hamas that an Israeli ground invasion was occurring in northern Gaza. This prompted

the terror group to send out  some of its reconnaissance troops and anti-tank guided missile teams to confront the Israeli troops, where they were struck by the infantrymen, tanks and artillery cannons that were positioned inside Israel. The Israeli actions sent Hamas fighters rushing into defensive positions in an underground network of tunnels known as "the Metro." Israel sent in 160 warplanes and bombarded the tunnels for 40 minutes. It was reported that scores of militants had been killed, though it was impossible to say the exact numbers. Hamas did not comment on the incident.

The IDF officially denied that it had  misled the foreign press intentionally about the non-existent ground invasion. It said that the incident was the result of an internal miscommunication. However, Conricus told reporters he took "personal responsibility" for the incorrect information. The IDF did not explain the extended amount of time between it becoming aware of the significant error and officials issuing a correction.  Ground invasions of Gaza are extremely rare, and such a major step would not be taken at the drop of a hat. While the IDF attempted to play down the incident as a misunderstanding, Israeli military commentators stated that the media had been used as part of an elaborate ploy to lure Hamas militants into a trap that may have killed dozens of fighters. Or Heller, a veteran military correspondent on Israel's Channel 13 TV said, "What we saw tonight was a very sophisticated operation that had a media aspect to it. They didn't lie. It was a manipulation. It was smart and it was successful." Heller said veteran Israeli correspondents knew that there was no chance of Israel sending troops across enemy lines at this stage. Military correspondents even gave statements on Twitter, assuring the public that there was no ground operation.

This incident caused a furore in western media. Based on its analysis of the army's statement and on the ground reporting in Gaza the Associated Press concluded that there was no ground incursion. it did not report there was one. However, others said the military had misled them or even lied when asked to clarify the initial statement and its ambiguous use of the word "in". It was felt that the foreign media had been turned into an accessory of sorts. Daniel Estrin, NPR's correspondent in Jerusalem, said, "If they used us, it's unacceptable. And if not, then what's the story and why is the Israeli media widely reporting that we were duped?" Felicia Schwartz, a correspondent for The Wall Street Journal, said she alerted news of a ground offensive after receiving explicit confirmation from Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus, a military spokesman. In a statement posted on

Twitter, she said Conricus "told me directly, `There are ground troops in Gaza.' That was the basis for a first story saying so. He retracted that statement two hours later and I changed the story to reflect that, and that is noted in the text and will be corrected."

Speaking to reporters on May14, 2021, Lt Col Conricus blamed an "internal miscommunication." He said, "These things can sometimes happen in the midst of a complex operation with many moving parts and with an unclear picture of what was happening. As soon as I understood that I had the wrong information, I updated the relevant people with a clarification. Yes. As it's written in the statement: Indeed, ground forces are attacking in Gaza. That is that they are in the Strip." On the same day, IDF spokesperson Hidai Zilberman told Israeli military correspondents explicitly that no soldiers, tanks or cannons entered Gaza during the assault but had instead been positioned within Israeli territory on berms located along the border.[28]

The misleading statement of May 14, 2021 further strained a rocky relationship between the IDF and the foreign media. A former military spokesman to the foreign media, Peter Lerner, said that the Israeli public, in general, has long felt the international media focus too heavily on the Palestinian side of the story while minimising Israeli concerns and suffering. The army is similarly inclined. Lerner said he felt it was unlikely the military intentionally lied, but the damage was done regardless. He added, "Your currency is credibility. I think this is a crisis of that credibility in the way it's being portrayed."[29]

The possibility that the military had used the international media for deception purposes in Gaza generated sharp questions for Colonel Conricus in a conference call. The representatives of The Wall Street Journal, *The Times, The Washington Post, National Public Radio* and *Agence*

*France-Presse*, all of which had reported a ground invasion early Friday, peppered Colonel Conricus with questions about whether they had been turned into accessories to the military, why it had taken hours for the invasion report to be reversed, and how they would be able to trust the military's statements going forward.[30] Colonel Conricus, a veteran officer and spokesman, said there had been no "attempt to try to fool anybody or to cause you to write anything that isn't true. I can understand that it may look differently." He called it "frankly embarrassing."

This prompted objections from several correspondents, saying it put them at greater risk. A military analyst for the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, Amos Harel, said that involving the office in a pattern of duping journalists would be an alarming development. He stated, "It's a very dangerous place for the IDF to be, to be suspected of misleading the international press, especially when we're on the verge of an escalation with Hamas, and Israel depends so heavily on trying to explain itself with the international media. It's risky for journalists, too. The Israeli Army may be forgetting that foreign journalists are on both sides of the fence, and it could be dangerous for them if they're suspected of being used for Israeli psychological operations."[31] To add to the confusion about the specific Gaza deception issue, Israel's Channel 10 reported that a General Staff Deception Unit had been created recently. It was activated to cause Hamas to think that a ground invasion was underway.

## Use of Kinetic Power against Information Warfare

It was reported that two Israeli airstrikes against targets in Gaza were intended to hit Hamas cyber operations centres. A strike on May 14th is stated to have hit what Israeli Air Force sources called "a cyber-equipment storage site in the northern Gaza Strip belonging to Hamas military intelligence." The site was apparently also serving as a data centre.

The building also housed civilian media offices of NPR, the Associated Press and Al-Jazeera. In a second airstrike on May 19, the Israeli military said it hit a "hideout apartment that was used by the terror operatives for offensive cyber activity against Israeli targets." This was not the first example of using kinetic means against cyber means. The IDF carried out the first attack in May 2019. It bombed a building it believed to be the Hamas cyber unit's headquarters. This was described by the security experts as the first kinetic response to a cyber-attack.[32]
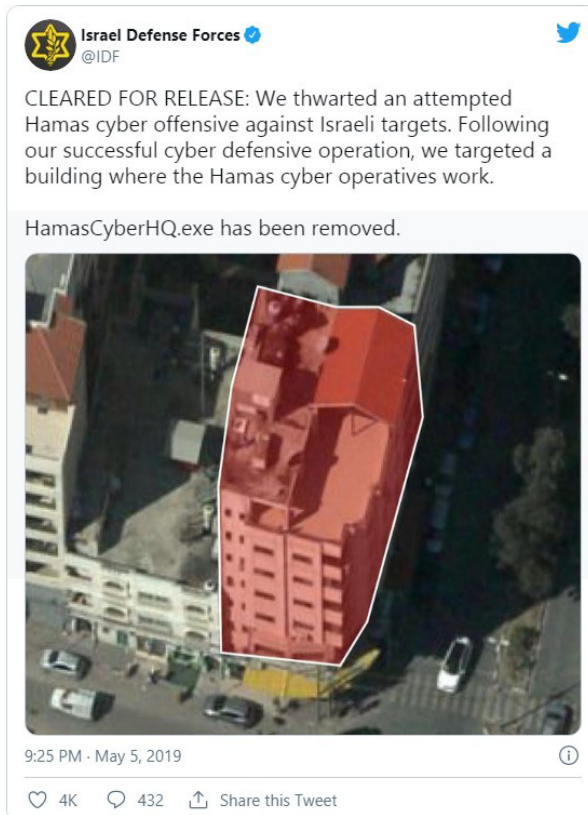


During Operation Guardian of the Walls, Palestinians had far more success in telling their side of the story on social media. It eroded Israel's edge in the battle of perspectives. Palestinians and those sympathetic to

their plight worldwide have made social media a central weapon in the narrative fight against Israel. Those weapons are deployed on many fronts using different platforms to target multiple audiences in the region and worldwide.  They also used apps to coordinate actions among themselves. Michael Bröning, executive director of the German think tank Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's office in New York, said, "It's like a TikTok intifada." Gabriel Weimann, a professor of communication at Haifa University in Israel, told the BBC, "From the Israeli side you see a counter flow, which I must say is less powerful, not organised at all, and if you ask me less persuasive. Maybe because in Israel nobody thought that TikTok would be a powerful or important platform." Arrival of new platforms like Telegram and TikTok have allowed younger people to engage with this explosion online. Now social media platforms are a key delivery system for news consumption. Many people on the apps can experience the complexities of the region in real-time.[33]

Hamas's social media efforts are not reaching certain Palestinians following the conflict. Dana El Kurd, an assistant professor at the Doha Institute of Graduate Studies in Qatar said,  "I don't see that Hamas is using social media effectively because it's not getting to me. It's just not out there, and I consider myself pretty plugged in." Still, Israel struggles now to outcompete everyday Palestinians on social media, despite the weakness of Hamas.

## Role of Social Media Companies

The sophisticated algorithms that social media companies like Facebook, TikTok, Twitter and Instagram employ to ensure that the user sees only the kind of content they want to see. The objective on both sides is not to change people's minds but to reinforce the people's views whose minds are already made up and provide them with talking points and content

that they can share among their own networks. The power of this tool is so powerful that it cannot be ignored or characterised just as a facilitator.[34] Social media platforms maintain that they have been vigilant in policing inaccurate content and incitements to violence. Policing misinformation can be a double-edged sword, particularly in political conflicts where the truth is sometimes subjective. Even if platforms have the best intentions, being too heavy-handed in flagging and correcting information might have the opposite of the intended effect. Applying moderation policies consistently and efficiently poses substantial logistical challenges. Few users on either side of the conflict appear to be satisfied with the results.

Efforts to remove inflammatory content have also spurred allegations of prejudice and overreach. Instagram and Twitter blamed technical glitches after posts mentioning the eviction of Palestinians from the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood were wrongly deleted. Benny Gantz, Israel's Defense Minister, told Facebook and TikTok executives that extremists spread disinformation about the conflict. He urged them to take action to prevent violence. According to Israel National News, the executives of both companies promised to "act quickly and effectively to prevent incitement on their networks." On the other hand, Pro-Palestinian activists have cited many instances of their content being taken down by Facebook and Instagram.

**Facebook**.   Facebook set up a 24-hour special operations centre to monitor hate speech and misinformation flowing from the region as violence flared, similar to emergency actions taken surrounding contested elections in other countries. The company's executives were also in contact with top Israeli and Palestinian officials. Monika Bickert, Facebook's Vice president for content policy said that Facebook established a task force of Hebrew and Arabic speaking monitors to identify and moderate disinformation. All of these people are real-time communicating with one

another so they can quickly spot and respond to the changing landscape. The aim is to find out the interplay between those trends and our content policy, get updated guidance to reviewers and ensure that we're implementing that guidance very quickly. The work is labour intensive and Facebook hasn't said how long this targeted moderation effort would continue.[35] Bickert did not share details about what trends Facebook sees in the misinformation on the violence on the ground.[36] Since Hamas is designated as a terrorist organisation by the U.S. State Department, some social platforms' rules, mainly Facebook's, bar posts by the group.

**TikTok.** A spokesperson from TikTok told the BBC in an emailed statement, "Our teams have been working swiftly to remove misinformation, attempts to incite violence, and other content that violates our Community Guidelines, and will continue to do so."[37]

**WhatsApp.** Representatives from WhatsApp said they did not have access to messages being shared in private chats. However, they would ban accounts they believed were involved in violence. The application had put a limit on how many times someone could forward messages to prevent misinformation from spreading. However, it is unclear how effective that was.

## Analysis of Israel's Operation Guardian of the Walls

Destruction of the high-rise al-Jalaa Tower in Gaza, which was used in part by Al Jazeera and the foreign media, including the American news agency AP, drew widespread international criticism. It was felt that targets of this kind should be discussed at the highest political level and all international implications should have been considered. Negative public opinion and criticism toward Israel would translate into pressure on decision-makers in the United States to stop the conflict. President Biden called Prime Minister Netanyahu following the incident, and some of Israel's closest

friends, such as Senator Bob Menendez, publicly criticised Israel for its damage to the building stating that the target could be waived given its sensitivity, and it was essential, if possible, to reveal intelligence about Hamas's use of this building.

The IDF deception exercise was part of the plan to attack the Hamas tunnel network. It was an excellent and practical move. But the announcement by senior IDF spokespeople that ground troops had entered the Strip was perceived as part of the deception. The incident damaged credibility because it caused the media to report something that was false. People responsible for communications had carried out extensive and professional activities on social media, including uploading information, photos, videos, testimonies, stories, and graphics. The official Israeli activity was carried out with remarkable coordination and cooperation with many volunteers and pro-Israel organisations in Israel and worldwide. However, the intensity of the online activity of Israel's opponents and critics was found to be greater and more powerful; they mobilised more people and money toward their effort.

It was felt that the number of active people in social networks in Israel and abroad should be increased and more resources should be invested. Since technology is constantly evolving, additional resources are required to integrate new technologies like artificial intelligence to disseminate information. There is also a need for a national spokesperson to address both the Israeli and the global target audience.[38] For Israel, public support via social media affected its conflict intensity significantly and decreased it following an increase in support for Hamas. Shifts in public support could constrain Israel's ability to fight. Consequently, it increases the activity on social media[39]. But, there is no such variation in Hamas's conflict intensity.

Israel has not been able to reach out to progressive and liberal audiences and immigrant communities in the United States and Western Europe.

Of late, the African American, Muslim, Hispanic and liberal young communities in the U.S. have grown into great political and media power and their influence on decision makers has risen significantly. Having a dialogue with these groups is very important for Israel and that requires more effort and resources.[40]

## The Russian Scene

In Estonia  2007, Russia used Information Warare to sow divisions by amplifying historical angst over efforts to move the Bronze Soldier statue. Russian information strategy against Estonia was a multifaceted information operation approach through:-[41]

- Timely diplomatic messaging from President Putin against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) expansion.

- Social media manipulation to spread disinformation.

- Malicious cyber-attacks to disrupt government, media and banking institutions.
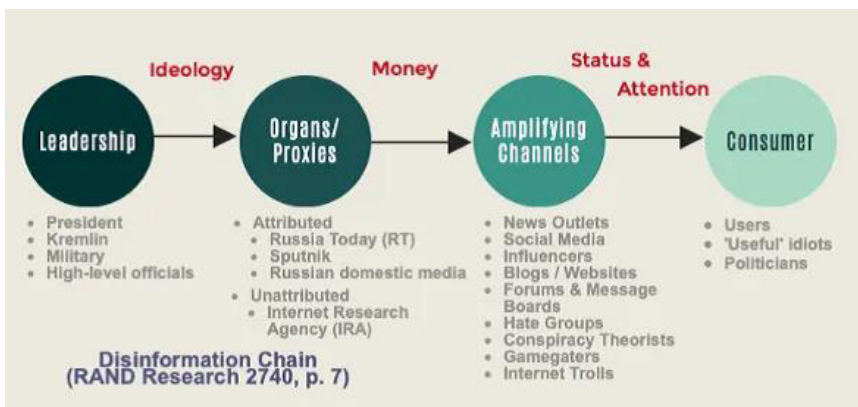


RAND Disinformation Chain. Source: RAND Corporation

RAND's research team refers to this approach as the disinformation chain that is driven by leadership (Putin), proxies (Kremlin-backed hacker) and amplification channels (social media, news outlets) to target the consumer (Estonians).[42] Russia has continued to improve its Techniques, Tactics and Procedures (TTPs) against other nations. During the 2014 Ukraine conflict, Russia integrated cyber warfare, electronic warfare, media outlets and social media  by collecting indications and warnings on soldiers positioning by sending fake social media posts to their family's page. Russia used Ukrainian soldiers' reliance on mobile technology to adjust target sets designed to create fear, confusion, and chaos.

During the 2016 U.S. presidential elections American polarisation was exploited by Russia to achieve its objective by fomenting confusion, chaos and distrust. The  Mueller report of 2019 documented how the Internet Research Agency (IRA) paid about $100,000 for over 3,500 advertisements that specifically campaigned against some candidates and benefitted others during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections. 470 IRA-controlled Facebook accounts made more than 80,000 posts, between 2015 and 2017,  resulting in targeted social media manipulation and IW messaging. These reached at least 29 million U.S. persons before deactivation.

Russia is leveraging social media warfare to unrelentingly attack the U.S. to erode the public's belief in the democratic system to regain its former status as a Great Power.

## Dichotomy between Freedom of Speech in Social Media and National Security Concerns

**Social Media.** Social media platforms are private players. The largest actors, like Facebook, Google, Twitter and Microsoft are global corporations. They have no public accountability. There is no regulatory oversight.

Social media platforms are the vehicle. They are not the wrongdoer that is making false narratives. They hold data that could aid in uncovering the perpetrators. However, they are not law enforcers. They do not have mandate to address issues of national security.

There is a sheer scale of challenge. On any given day, between 0.5 per cent to 1.5 per cent of all tweets qualify as violent or hate speech. This means hundreds of millions of posts a year that are encountered by the same number of users. Problems on the other platforms are similar. For example, on Facebook, websites promoting coronavirus conspiracy theories have more than ten times the engagement of public health organisations.

According to the law they do not police their platforms. They do it as per their internal policies. For identifying disinformation material, it becomes problematic. It is usually context-sensitive and not always clear what is and is not in the category to be taken down. It is tough for a platform to know what is intentionally false with the aim of either influencing a country's politics directly or by sowing discord and division in that country. Figuring that out needs a complex understanding of the political, social and cultural context. A platform requires a definition to know what to seek out and takedown. Social media platforms make decisions about content take-downs according to criteria that include corporate risk factors.

Social media companies are reluctant to let intelligence and law enforcement agencies look behind the privacy walls of active accounts. This would cause a public outcry as user privacy is at stake. However, making those walls impenetrable prevents those same agencies responsible for keeping us safe from doing their job. Recently, platforms like Facebook and Twitter have taken actions to ban political ads, hateful content and disclaimers on some types of content that is far-reaching and verifiably false. This shows that social media companies can make changes for the better.

**National Security Concerns.** Due to the very structure of the Internet, no Western nation has yet found a solution to stop or deter malicious foreign cyber activity. It's near impossible to know quickly and with certainty if a foreign government is behind a disinformation campaign, ransomware implant or data theft. With uncertain attribution, the government's hands are tied. Design of the platforms is to tie their profit to human psychology. In a system that monetises clicks, hate speech fueled by disinformation can quickly gain attention and engagement. It confirms pre-existing biases and plays out in a structure that rewards trends. Harmful and conspiratorial beliefs are spread via the proliferation of disinformation on social media by adversarial foreign actors seeking to harm national security.

Approach of social media platforms to curb this menace is not encouraging for security professionals. It is usually characterised by an ex-post response, lack of sustained action and an inadequate sense of urgency. Moreover, the mechanisms put in place by the platforms to identify what is termed fake news are unsuitable for this task. They rely on an obscure fact-checking exercise, whereas hostile states use highly sophisticated techniques. For greater transparency, security agencies should be made aware of how such decisions are made and how a platform's algorithms make recommendations and curate what we see and hear.[43]

There is the sensitive issue of the state demanding to see data without being intrusive into individual rights. However, one must understand that the 'Big Brother' is no longer the state. The tech giants have taken that position, who misuse privacy protections based on their own politically driven algorithms rather than submitting themselves to the government's due process. Recent data shows that requests by the governments to access user data are growing.

The challenge for both social media platforms and government agencies is to devise mechanisms and implement regulations that make accounts

linked to terrorist groups accessible to law enforcement agencies in real-time. Protecting communications between traffickers and terrorists should not be taken as privacy. Platforms know who these people are and can see what they are posting, even if it lies behind privacy settings. Owners of social media must understand that freedom and privacy are not all-or-nothing. A balance has to be struck as peoples' safety depends on it.[44]

## The Way Ahead

Today we live in a world where our national well-being depends not only the government but also on the social media through which we lead our digital lives. While thinking about national security, we consider concrete threats. We spend a lot of money preparing to meet those traditional threats. However, it's online disinformation that poses the biggest threat to our country. Mostly we stand defenceless. We worry that controlling the flow of online information might violate the principle of free speech. We use the products made by tech companies. We are reluctant to regulate their industry.

We have to use technology itself. The very technology that is cause of the problem, can be used to correct it too. Artificial Intelligence can help social media platforms spot lies, identify doctored videos and photographs and track the dissemination of falsehoods by domestic and foreign users. Social media companies can be persuaded, covertly or overtly, to cooperate with the national security apparatus.

A typical offensive strategy against a target population might consist of several steps:- [45]

- Take the population and break it down into communities based on number of criterias like hobbies, politics, interests, concerns, needs etc.

- Determine the social dynamics of communication and flow of ideas within each community.

- Determine who in each community is most susceptible to given types of messages.

- Determine what narratives of different types dominate the conversation in each community.

- Use all of the above to design and push a narrative likely to succeed in displacing a narrative unfavourable with one that is more favourable.

- Use continual monitoring and interaction to determine the success of the effort and adjust in real-time.

Today technologies exist that can perform each of these steps continuously and at a large scale. However, while current technologies support the manual application of psychological research results, they do not fully automate it. This would be the next stage in technology development. The same technologies can be used for defensive purposes. For example, one can use the techniques to break down the communities described above to detect adversararial efforts to push a narrative and examine that narrative's content. The technology can help researchers concentrate while searching through massive amounts of social media data.[46]

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