SOCIAL MEDIA AND CONFLICT: UNDERSTANDING RISKS AND RESILIENCE

Research Summary and Policy Brief

JULY 2021

Information has been used throughout history as a weapon to stoke or intensify violent conflict by mobilizing fighters or supporters, rallying the public or allies, and undermining or deceiving adversaries. Technology and the internet have been game-changers: the cost of production and dissemination of weaponized information is low, and the reach of the information is comparatively exponential. A superpower's leaflet drop during the Cold War is today's altered video shared virally over social media.

To better understand and address the threats and opportunities surrounding social media in conflict-affected environments, Mercy Corps undertook research across four country contexts—Ethiopia, Iraq, Myanmar, and Nigeria. This brief highlights our key findings from this research about the dynamics of social media and conflict as well as a framework for assessing these challenges, and provides some recommendations for responses.

Key findings on social media's impact on conflict

1: Social media is transforming how, when, and whether conflicts manifest in fragile states. Social media does not simply provide an additional communication avenue; rather, social media spaces—by virtue of their mobilizing, value-setting, and perception-shaping powers—increasingly frame today's conflicts and guide how they are conducted.

2: Social media threats are not restricted to social media users. Online narratives appear to "spill over," reaching populations with limited or no internet connection. False or inflammatory narratives that become popular online may then travel by text or word of mouth, as a rumor voiced in the marketplace. Also, the desire of radio stations or newspapers to stay relevant amid competition from bloggers and e-journalists leads some editors to publish stories found online without verification or fact-checking.

3: Ethnic and sectarian tensions appear particularly susceptible to the weaponization of social media. Social media rewards identification and connection within a group, but this can be at the expense of inter-group cohesion. Across the case study countries, online platforms routinely fueled communal tensions that centered on ethnic and sectarian identities.

4: The dangers associated with the use of social media as a weapon are particularly pronounced during 'windows of risk.' Windows of risk are events or periods of elevated danger in any conflict—i.e., times during which an uptick in online and offline tensions provide digital 'influencers' with increased opportunities for escalation.

5: There are a variety of key online 'influencers' with the ability to mobilize key constituencies either to promote social cohesion or to sow division. Categories of influencers common across the case study contexts include online diaspora communities, state actors, non-state armed actors, politicians and political parties, religious leaders, and online activists.

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6: COVID-19 has exacerbated inter-group and community-state conflicts that play out online. Political actors, from Iraq to Myanmar, have used online platforms to blame the virus on outsiders, vulnerable communities, the government, or international aid actors, which, in turn, has exacerbated existing grievances as well as undermined public trust.

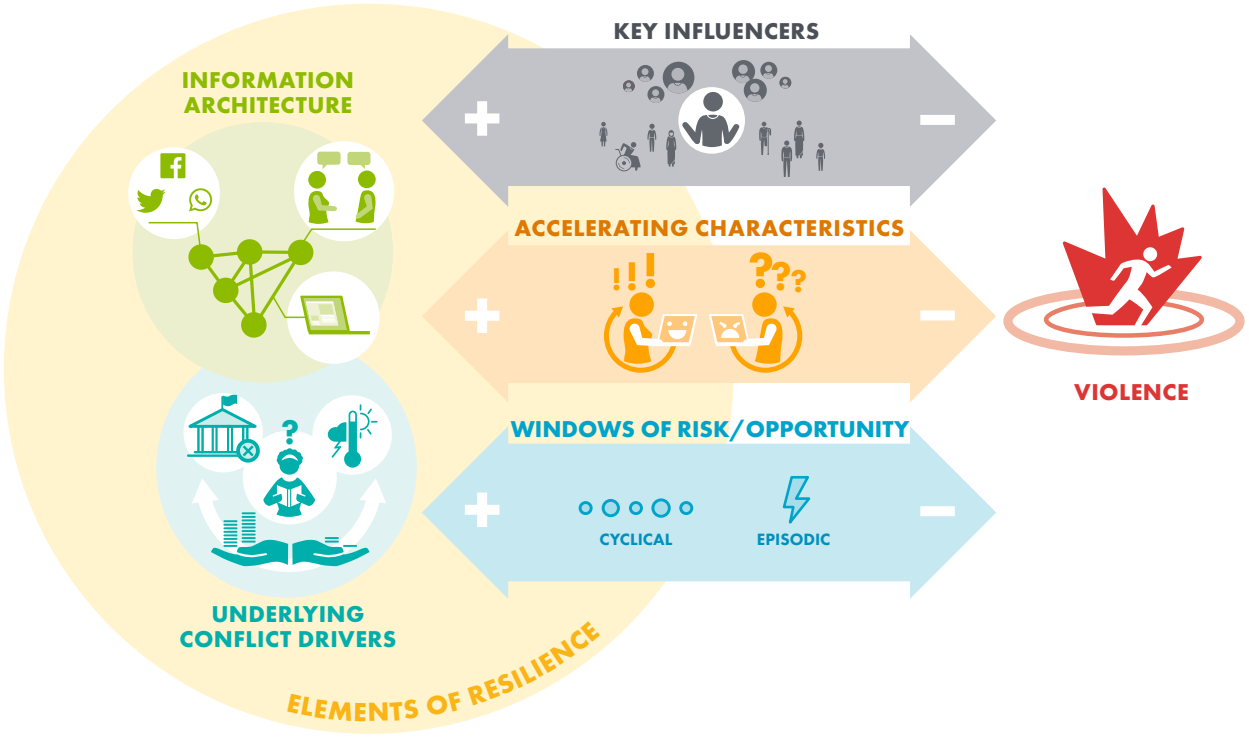
7: Top-down efforts to police online disinformation may open the door to a crackdown on speech and activism. Despite the opposition of civil society, these efforts are popular in some quarters, due to a growing recognition of the dangers of digital hate speech and disinformation.

8: Online and offline civil society actors are important to societal resilience to digital threats. The research documented community-based actors working to counter digital threats, particularly disinformation and hate speech, by countering false narratives in real time, flagging inflammatory content for removal by social media companies, and/or providing non-partisan online spaces for intercommunal engagement.

Understanding risks from social media - and sources of resilience

From the research, Mercy Corps developed a six-part analytical framework that identifies several factors which, together or individually, can contribute to conflict and violence. A country's **information architecture** interacts with its **underlying conflict drivers**. **Key influencers** can exacerbate issues driving conflict by taking advantage of social media's **accelerating characteristics**, particularly during **windows of risk**. All of these factors may be countered or mitigated by a society's **sources of resilience**. Indeed, in different societies these factors may possess constructive attributes that foster resilience: an information architecture that is accessible and inclusive; key influencers that mobilize to counter misinformation; accelerating characteristics that facilitate organizing; and even windows of risk that present moments to focus reform.

A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING RISKS AND RESILIENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND CONFLICT



Below we outline guidance for using the framework to assess the risks of online harms in contributing to violent conflict, as well as opportunities to bolster resilience.

Social Media's Impact on Conflict: Structural Elements

There are factors that are endemic to social media and conflict whose roles must be understood in order to be addressed.

- Map the country's **information architecture** relative to social media. What are the main elements shaping the environment for social media? Relevant indicators include: *the levels of digital connectivity; how social media use varies by class, age, gender, or geography; relative trust and influence of information sources in the community; relative popularity of social media platforms; the effect of changes in the legal framework, marketplace, or infrastructure on coverage; and the impact of social media on offline information channels.*

- Monitor and assess the prevalence of **conflict drivers** and dynamics on social media, such as *heightened perceptions between and among identity groups of threat and vulnerability that undermine social cohesion; online misinformation and disinformation that inflames perceptions of unfair or unequal access to resources or employment; attitudes toward violence that may be fostered and legitimized in online 'echo chambers'* (e.g., acceptance of the use of violence to protect the family or avenge past aggressions); *and prevalence of online hate speech and conflict 'triggers,'* including routinely deployed false narratives, pejorative terms, and insults.

- Identify and assess **key influencers** to shed light on the nature and scope of social media risks. Who are the key actors—politicians, critics, celebrities, or religious leaders—shaping what information people receive and how they receive it? Among factors to consider are the influencers' *interests and incentives; operational capacities* (e.g., social media following); *relevant communication channels; transnational links* with organizations and actors outside the state; *type of methods and tactics* (e.g., information operations, political manipulation, digital hate speech, radicalization and recruitment); and *competition* from other key actors resulting in an escalation or radicalization of activities or rhetoric.

- Identify and assess **windows of risk** for conflict and the role of social media. What periods of time or public moments may serve as flashpoints for conflict? Which actors have the resources, following, or authority to instigate—or prevent—them? These windows might be cyclical (e.g., elections, livestock herding seasons, commemorations) or *sporadic* (e.g., the onset of negotiations or disarmament activities).

Social Media's Impact on Conflict: Dynamic Elements

The accelerating characteristics of social media can trigger offline harm, while sources of resilience can act to prevent violent incidents or even bolster online peaceful behavior.

- Assess the context-specific attributes of social media that may serve as **accelerants** as they can transform the dynamics of a conflict. Social media spaces may act as *echo chambers*, where fears and biases are confirmed and perceptions of threat intensified. The *speed of dissemination* of hate speech and disinformation means perceptions can take hold before most tools can debunk or contextualize the allegations. The *diffusion of peer-to-peer communication* has reduced the costs of information-sharing and collective action—for malign or constructive purposes. *Online platforms incentivize not only connection but performance*—influencers may amp up rhetoric against marginalized groups to compete

for clicks or followers. *Social media may accelerate tit-for-tat, escalatory* provocations between groups. And it may provide individuals with *the sense they are part of something unifying, successful, or bigger than themselves*—even if malign or not true.

- By contrast, there are **elements of resilience** within society that mitigate social media's effects on conflict and may facilitate its positive role. These too should be assessed—both as a measure of social wellbeing as well as for strengthening responses. Positive elements include the presence of r*espected community or religious leaders and social media influencers; non-violent dispute resolution mechanisms;* and dynamics such as *inclusive governance and policy making* and *a culture of positive intergroup interactions* (e.g., trade, intermarriage).

Some recommendations for addressing social media harms

In addition to suggesting a framework for assessing digital threats, this research yields several recommendations for key stakeholders.

Social Media Platforms

- Adhere to global norms on business and human rights, including the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (respect human rights standards, conduct due diligence, address impacts) and the guidance and principles outlined by the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression concerning the role and responsibilities of digital access providers (e.g., consideration of context, due diligence, incorporating human rights standards in design, stakeholder engagement).

- Engage locally on a regular basis with governments and civil society actors, including regular information and data sharing. For example, while companies have advantages in data monitoring and analysis, they may lack adequate contextual understanding of local conflict dynamics, particularly during 'windows of risk.' Ad hoc collaborations between tech companies and civil society organizations to identify hate speech or dangerous speech during heightened periods of risk show promise for preventing the incidence of online harm; such partnerships should become central to companies' operations in conflict contexts and formalized in those contexts with a history of mass atrocities.

- Partner with governments, local technology companies, and the education sector to play an educational and awareness-raising role in equipping citizens against online dangers.

Donors

- Focus support on civil society actors—legal reformers, academics, or tech campaigners—in fostering an ecosystem of societal resilience to digital harm, especially given the grave disparities in resources for local actors relative to global technology companies.

- Increase investments in holistic, locally-led programming that seeks to address social media's contributions to conflict, ideally within a larger peacebuilding portfolio that addresses both online and offline drivers of conflict.

- Enable flexible program designs through which civil society actors can identify and address social media drivers of conflict through online and offline approaches, and adapt frequently and rapidly to changing social media dynamics. Through these investments, ensure adequate funding across the spectrum of analysis, implementation, and evaluation to promote increased learning of what works to reduce digital harm.

Governments

- Promote and protect human rights online as well as offline as the UN Human Rights Council has affirmed, including commitments in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (Article 19), ICCPR (Article 20), and Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (Pillars 1 and 3).
- Establish and adequately resource media and information literacy (MIL) education from the earliest stages of formal education, as well as for learning outside educational systems, e.g., pensioners and migrants.
- Consult and engage regularly with civil society actors about 'whole-of-society' responses to social media threats, including proportionate policies that respect human rights, especially freedom of expression. Upon request, facilitate and support civil society-led approaches to strengthening resilience to social media harms among vulnerable populations.

INGOs and Civil Society

- Review strategies and programs, especially those focused on peace and conflict, to incorporate a digital 'lens' to assess the impact of the harms and opportunities presented by social media.
- Ensure that initiatives for countering and strengthening resilience to social media harms are not solely for online activists but encompass offline counterparts from different sectors, given that those harms are spread offline as well.
- Identify and support existing sources of resilience to social media drivers of conflict, including influential local leaders already working to prevent or counter online harm, as well as sources of social cohesion in online and offline spaces that can serve as a bulwark against digital threats.

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Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.

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