

SOCIAL MEDIA AND CONFLICT: UNDERSTANDING RISKS AND RESILIENCE

Research Findings From Ethiopia, Iraq, Myanmar, and Nigeria

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Summary

The weaponization of social media is shifting peace and conflict dynamics in the world's fragile states. From disinformation campaigns to electoral manipulation and online recruitment by violent extremist organizations, digital threats exacerbate conflict drivers, open new avenues for spoilers, and foster echo chambers that complicate efforts to prevent or counter violent conflict. Peacebuilding needs to incorporate a digital lens. To inform future research and programming, Mercy Corps (i) developed a digital risk assessment framework, which outlines how to incorporate social media assessments into peacebuilding, and (ii) conducted case studies on the weaponization of social media in Ethiopia, Iraq, Myanmar, and Nigeria. This brief summarizes key findings and implications from that research.

Methodology This brief is based on a review of secondary literature; a digital questionnaire shared with Mercy Corps team members and partners in the four case study countries; and key informant interviews with staff and local community-based experts working on issues related to peacebuilding and social media.

Key Findings

Finding 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. This research aimed, in part, to document different pathways by which social media influences behavior in a manner that increases risks of violence. Such pathways include:

- › *Online echo chambers can intensify perceptions of threat.*
Social media naturally creates



Photo Credit: J. Zoeherman / Mercy Corps / South Sudan 2014

¹ Keith Proctor is currently Technical Advisor and Team Lead, Evaluation and Research, at the International Republican Institute.

insulated information environments that promote consensus-building and polarization. Particularly in environments of intergroup conflict or community-state tensions, social media spaces appeared to intensify perceptions of threat, raise emotional stakes, and lend urgency to calls for action.

- › *The speed and breadth of communication facilitates mobilization.* The diffusion of peer-to-peer communication has reduced the costs of collective action and information-sharing, providing a means for identity-based groups to coordinate across disparate locations. An inciting event, which might have otherwise fizzled out or remained highly local, can now go viral. External actors can pile on, hyping up the emotional salience, identifying culprits, demanding action.
- › *Online hate speech can heighten the perceived vulnerability of marginalized groups, undermining social cohesion.* Social media can have a chilling effect on real world interactions across intercommunal divides. Respondents described how hate speech reduced offline interactions, for example by dissuading vulnerable groups from visiting neighborhoods they perceived as increasingly unsafe.
- › *Online platforms incentivize not only connection but performance.* Influencers competing for clicks or constituencies might amp up online rhetoric attacking marginalized groups, for example, or a live-streamed act of vandalism or violence can win accolades and imitators.
- › *False stories often outpace efforts to verify and correct.* The impulse to share alarming or inciteful stories is often automatic. Verification and correction simply take too long. Conflicts often have a “wag the dog” dynamic, with fake stories about intergroup attacks catalyzing rapid off-line retaliation. Disinformation may eventually be debunked, but not before catalyzing real acts of violence and sowing new sources of hostility.

Peacebuilding needs to incorporate a digital approach, one that grapples not simply with the information being communicated, but how the channels of communication shape the message and its audience.

Finding 2: Social media threats are not restricted to social media users. This research documented cases in which online narratives appeared to “spill over,” reaching populations with limited or no Internet connection. False or inflammatory narratives that become popular online travel by word of mouth or text, as a rumor voiced in the marketplace. In rural communities in Nigeria’s Middle Belt, participants described religious leaders echoing online conspiracy theories while preaching to their congregants. Among traditional media actors, such as radio stations or newspapers, the desire to stay relevant amid competition from bloggers and e-journalists leads some editors to publish stories from the internet without verification or fact-checking. In Ethiopia, long-standing suspicions of state-dominated media have fostered an appetite for alternative, non-official sources of information. Participants described conspiracy theories popularized in online spaces as circulating via SMS chains, expanding the reach of disinformation in rural communities and/or as a method to circumvent occasional top-down internet blackouts implemented by the state. ***Addressing digital threats will demand a focus not simply on communities with high internet penetration and social media uptake. While social media platforms act as a petri dish for dis- and misinformation, counter measures need to encompass communities that are largely offline but still vulnerable to lower-tech methods of spread.***

Finding 3: Ethnic and sectarian tensions appear particularly vulnerable to the weaponization of social media. Social media rewards in-group identification and connection, but this can be at the expense of inter-group (“bridging”) social capital. Across the case study countries, online platforms routinely fueled communal tensions that centered on ethnic and sectarian identities. In Ethiopia, inter-ethnic tensions have provided ready fodder for online conflicts that spill over into offline violence. In Myanmar, years of deliberate disinformation campaigns by Buddhist nationalists helped build resentment against the Muslim Rohingyas in Rakhine, setting the stage for a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing in 2017. Anti-Muslim speech continues to circulate today. In Iraq, ethnic and sectarian tensions play out routinely in online spaces, with conflict actors utilizing disinformation to attack minorities, or to gain the sympathy and support of the oppressed. The ISIS media network has been circulating online videos of Shia or Kurdish militias perpetrating human rights abuses among Sunni communities as part of a digital outreach campaign. ***Conflict mitigation, peace-building, and social cohesion gains risk being undermined by the uptake of social media***

in target communities. Programs will need to incorporate a digital strategy that grapples with how online platforms are amplifying intergroup tensions and identities.

Finding 4: The dangers associated with digital platform manipulation are particularly pronounced during windows of risk. Windows of risk describe events or periods of elevated danger -- i.e., times during which an uptick in on- and offline tensions provide digital influencers with increased opportunities for escalation. While windows of risk are apparent in any conflict environment, they tend to be amplified by social media. Examples from the case studies include:

- › *Elections and political campaigns* are often characterized by spiking partisanship and intergroup contestation. Across contexts, politicians and their supporters employed social media to smear opponents and gin up intergroup conflict to drive (or depress) turnout.
- › *Cultural celebrations and religious festivals* can also “amp up” differences between ethnic or sectarian identity groups, sparking on- and offline confrontations.
- › *Periods of resource-gathering*, particularly where land use or access is a flash point. In Nigeria’s Middle Belt planting and harvest seasons routinely catalyze an uptick in intergroup hostilities between farmers and herders that play out in digital space.
- › *Politically-salient anniversaries*, including the deaths of prominent leaders or past acts of violence.
- › *Viral acts of violence*, including terrorist attacks or assassinations. For example, the killing of a renowned artist in Ethiopia last year catalyzed widespread conflict principally fueled through social media and fomented by political leaders, activists, and the global diaspora.



Photo Credit: D. Evans / Mercy Corps / Guatemala 2019

Conflict assessments should seek to anticipate windows of risk and identify how they may be exacerbated or manipulated via social media. Ideally, this would inform preemptive measures and partnerships with community and civil society.

Finding 5: Key influencers vary, though some archetypes are common. This research identified categories of online influencers with the ability to mobilize key constituencies either to promote social cohesion or to sow division. Examples common across these contexts include:

- › *Online diaspora communities*, many of whom are well-resourced, digitally-savvy, and shielded from retaliation (coming from the state or rival groups) by living abroad.
- › *State actors*, including military or security sectors, who use social media to spread propaganda, identify and prosecute critics, or, via service denials and internet blackouts, to reduce communications and the visibility of ongoing conflicts.
- › *Non-state armed actors*, such as Nigeria’s Boko Haram, Myanmar’s Arakan Army, and Iraq’s ethnic and sectarian militias, who utilize social media to identify enemies, root out supposed ISIS sympathizers, and facilitate the suppression of local communities.
- › *Politicians and political parties* who use social media as a campaign platform. In the worst cases, they use social media to attack rivals, intimidate opposition constituencies, and flood the internet with propaganda.

- › *Religious leaders* and their followers who are active on social media and use the platform variously to advance interfaith understanding, or to sow ethnic and sectarian divisions. Myanmar’s digitally-savvy, ultra-nationalist Buddhist organizations are an example of the latter.
- › *E-activists*, primarily youth, who use social media platforms to mobilize protests and advocate for political change. Examples include Nigeria’s Twitter #EndSARS protesters and Iraq’s “20 October Revolution” activists.

Conflict assessments should identify and track key social media influencers. Where possible, influencer assessments should incorporate attributes such as operational capacities and social media channels, constituencies, methods and tactics, competitors, and interests and incentives.

Finding 6: COVID-19 has exacerbated intergroup and community-state conflicts that play out online. In Iraq, ethnic and sectarian leaders, eager to score points with constituents, have used online platforms to blame the virus on outsiders, marginalized communities, the government, or international aid actors. In Myanmar, fears associated with the pandemic drive social media attacks on ethnic and sectarian minority groups, including Muslims and Christians. And in Nigeria, the perceived inadequacy of government assistance has exacerbated community-state frustrations and fed conspiracy theories that COVID-19 is a hoax perpetrated by government officials and shadowy outsiders.



Photo Credit: E. Millstein / Mercy Corps / Nigeria 2018

Public health crises appear to be particularly well-suited to the weaponization of social media. Periods of heightened fear and despair, diminished faith in formal or state authorities, and constraints on physical mobility (which may increase social media screen time) facilitate online rumors and disinformation and intercommunal scapegoating.

Finding 7: Top-down efforts to police online disinformation may open the door to a crackdown on speech and activism. The Iraqi parliament has introduced a cybercrime law under which “harming the reputation of the country online” would carry a life sentence. Similarly, in Nigeria the “Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill,” introduced in 2019, would empower authorities to imprison and/or fine individuals who transmit online statements that are deemed false, likely to influence an election, and/or “prejudicial to the security of Nigeria.” These efforts are popular in some quarters, due to a growing recognition of the dangers of digital hate speech and disinformation. However, civil society actors are raising alarms. *State efforts to criminalize disinformation are weighted with risk. Anti-hate speech laws may be used to curtail speech, muzzle journalists, and silence online dissent. Such heavy-handed efforts risk catalyzing a popular blowback that may exacerbate conflict risks. 2 Finally, an uptick in arrests and prosecutions may drive militant communities to anonymous or encrypted platforms where their activities will be more difficult to track.*

Finding 8: On- and offline civil society actors represent an important source of resilience to digital threats. This research documented community-based actors working to counter digital threats, particularly disinformation and hate speech. In Nigeria, interfaith groups and some traditional media -- such as Unity FM Radio in Jos -- work to mitigate digital threats by fact-checking dis- and misinformation circulating in social media. This research identified a

2 For instance, research on conflict has identified a link between repressive government actions and rising risks of violent extremism and civil war.

number of social media activist organizations that are attempting to counter false narratives in real time, flag inflammatory content for removal by social media companies, and/or provide non-partisan online spaces for intercommunal engagement. Examples include Ethiopia's Ethio Check, Myanmar's "Real or not?" online service, and Nigeria's Kaduna Youth Forum. In Myanmar, a Facebook reform campaign is being spear-headed by civil society organizations to push the tech company to reform



Photo Credit: M. Madukwe / Mercy Corps / Nigeria 2019

its practices and commit greater resources to combating disinformation and hate speech. ***Where possible, the work of these types of activist groups should be supported and enhanced. Though they represent an important bulwark against the rising threat of social media platform manipulation, in many cases their activities are badly constrained by shortages in funding and personnel.***

CONTACT

ADRIENNE BROOKS

Digital Communities Advisor | Technology for Development

abrooks@mercycorps.org

WILL FERROGGIARO

Senior Specialist | Peace and Technology

wferroggiaro@mercycorps.org

ADAM LICHTENHELD, PHD

Senior Researcher | Peace and Conflict

alichtenheld@mercycorps.org

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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.



45 SW Ankeny Street
Portland, Oregon 97204
888.842.0842

mercycorps.org