

Journal of Peace, Development and Communication



Volume 05, Issue 04, Dec 2021
 pISSN: 2663-7898, eISSN: 2663-7901
 Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36968/JPDC-V05-I04-06>
 Homepage: <https://pdfpk.net/pdf/>
 Email: se.jpdc@pdfpk.net

Article:	How Social Media is Shaping Conflicts: Evidences from Contemporary Research
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Published:	31 th Dec 2021
Publisher Information:	Journal of Peace, Development and Communication (JPDC)
To Cite this Article:	Rehman, Ur, Shams., & Riaz, Saqib. (2021). "How Social Media is Shaping Conflicts: Evidence from Contemporary Research" <i>Journal of Peace, Development and Communication</i> , vol. 05, no. 04, 2021, pp. 76–94, https://doi.org/10.36968/JPDC-V05-I04-06
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ABSTRACT

The growing use of social media in contemporaneous conflicts and its penetration into modern warfare is a thing to be pondered. Social media has redefined social movements, collective actions, and empowered marginalized groups to have a say in international affairs. While there has been a large body of literature examining how the traditional media depicts conflicts and violent events, the role of social media in shaping conflicts has been overlooked. Consulting an extensive literature related to social media and contemporary conflicts, this study explored the pivotal role of social media in the escalation of recent civil uprisings and the consequences of digital activism on changing conflict dynamics. This study also analyzed the usage of social media by militant organizations and insurgent groups for their vested interests and validated the insurgent public sphere role of social media in shaping conflicts.

Keywords: Social media, conflict, uprising, protracted, insurgency

Introduction

The smartphone revolution has added an unprecedented growth of social media platforms, mobile applications, instant messaging services, blogs, and let mobile phone users surf and stream with great speeds and empowered individuals to communicate, collaborate and navigate virtually beyond the boundaries of time and space (Lai & To, 2015). The rapid digital transformation has also changed the nature of social and political discourse by transforming the traditional role of people from content consumers to content producers (Mayfield III, 2010), through a variety of functionalities like blogs, wikis, comments, likes, annotations, tweets and more (Thurman, 2008). The last decade has witnessed social media as the dominant source of news and information as it gives access to news in real-time. It has altered the communication experience altogether and how audiences absorb and consume information.

Social media has also been instrumental in shaping contemporaneous and contentious conflicts and empowering activists to mobilize for collective action in support of their parties in cyber domains, on the land, air, and sea (Lange-Ionatamishvili, Svetoka, & Geers, 2015). The Arab spring and other popular social movements have triggered the commencement of a vast amount of scholarly work on the usage and impact of social networking sites during volatile conflicts and have empirically validated the impact of social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram, etc. in mobilizing popular protests around the globe and also influencing public opinion to be part of these protest movements (El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2012; Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheafer, 2013). The growing role of social media platforms in contentious politics has been debated in recent journalism scholarship due to their ability to organize dissatisfied citizens to

mobilize for collective action. The findings of recent studies on the role of social media platforms in contemporary social movements point out that it has exhibited a "radical", "outrage" "insurgent" or "anti-establishment", role (Arditi, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). In this context, this article aims to shed light on the role of social media in shaping conflict dynamics in the digital age.

Rise of Social Media

Social media platforms are primarily Internet-based applications built on the technological and ideological foundations of Web 2.0. Social media has enabled the creation and dissemination of user-generated content across the globe in real-time (Karimov & Brengman, 2011; Lai & Turban, 2008). Before the emergence of Web 2.0 functionalities, the internet was simply a medium of consumption, but the rapid distribution of Web 2.0 Applications paved the way for an evolutionary leap forward to make social media an interactive component of the web in the first decade of the 21st century (Obar & Wildman, 2015). Shirky (2011) also argues that access to the conversation is more significant than access to information and social media will perform the same role as the printing press, telegraph, or postal service did to enhance freedom of speech and develop a public opinion.

Although social media and social networks are often used interchangeably according to the framework of Kaplan and Haenlein, Social media is not limited to social networks and can be classified into six groups based on their functionalities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). These groups include Social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, My Space), collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), Blogs and microblog sites (e.g. Twitter, Tumblr), Virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft), and Virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life, Farmville). The real development in social media

platforms came with Friendster in 2002, which was followed by LinkedIn and Myspace in 2003, Facebook in 2004, YouTube in 2005, Twitter in 2006, Tumblr in 2006, Sina Weibo in 2009, and the launch of Pinterest and Instagram in 2010. The rapid explosion of social media has transformed the world and has been a catalyst for social change (Baird & Parasnis, 2011).

With the rapid adoption and widespread use of social media, communication scholars have been engaged in exploring the intersection of social networking and social change. On the one hand, Social media platforms have fostered social and political ties by diminishing traditional constraints of time and space and on the other hand, it has strengthened the democratic process by enabling common citizens to influence public affairs (Rinnawi, 2006). The social media platforms have opened new possibilities as well as new challenges for socio-political change and proved to be a vital medium of communication during local and global crises from violent conflicts to natural disasters. Barry Wellman maintained that social media platforms are "profoundly transforming the nature of communities, sociality, and interpersonal relations" (Castells, 2013).

Mediatization of Conflicts in the Digital Era

In mass communication scholarship, a vast amount of scholarly literature provides insights into the role of media in wars (Basilaia et al., 2013; Greenwood & Jenkins, 2015; Griffin, 2004; Lance Bennett et al., 2008; Wolfsfeld & Gadi, 1997); terrorism and media (Liebes & Kampf, 2009; Norris et al., 2004; Yarchi et al., 2013) and popular uprisings (Wolfsfeld et al., 2008; Wolfsfeld & Gadi, 1997), but the vast majority of literature devoted to its significance of traditional media in conflicts and contentious politics, and do not account for the growing role of social media, which in view to Kuntsman (2010) has transformed "modes of witnessing, feeling and remembering violent and traumatic events" and have been emerged as a big threat to the monopoly of news media.

In his breakthrough work *Mediatized Conflict*, Cottle (2006) uses the phrase 'mediatized conflict' to "emphasize the complex ways in which media are often implicated within conflicts while disseminating ideas and images about them". Hoskins and O'loughlin (2010) provide insight into 'mediatization' as the process of media's increased penetration into warfare and significant development in embedded journalism practices in the recent past. According to their theory of mediatized wars, in contemporaneous wars and conflicts, the role of mass media must be taken into account as media and wars go hand in hand.

The effects of new emerging communication technologies have always proved helpful in wars and to those challenging the regimes, whether their struggle is for ideology, land, or power. As Richard N. Haass (2011) asserts, "the printing press, telegraph, telephone, radio, television, and cassettes all posed challenges to the existing order of their day. And like these earlier technologies, social media are not decisive: they can be repressed by governments well as employed by the government to motivate their supporters". The development of the printing press was instrumental in Martin Luther's rebellion against Catholic Church in the 15th century, Telegraph helped President Abraham Lincoln to win the war against confederates in the United States (Wheeler, 2009). Radio was effectively used as a propaganda tool by allied forces in World War I and World War II while Cinema, radio, and other sophisticated communication technologies were used by Hitler and his propaganda minister Goebbels, to propagate anti-Semitism and solidify support for the Nazi party (Rentschler, 1996). The cold war demonstrated the importance of media in shaping and devolving ideological narratives, through the use of print, radio, and television. Vietnam War is considered as 'First Televised War' and 'the uncensored war' as the news from frontlines was broadcasted through television (Hallin, 1989). The 'CNN effect' was coined during the first Gulf War in 1991 to explain real-time television reporting of humanitarian crises worldwide. The mass

media has also played a central role in Balkan Wars, Afghanistan, Sudan, and other modern conflicts, including the war on terror, initiated by the United States in 2001.

The internet and particularly social media have outpaced television in recent conflict coverage. Gil Scot-Heron (1970) stated, “The revolution will not be televised” ... but it might be tweeted. The social media platforms have taken wars and conflicts from battlefields to the cyber domains and if wars in pre-historic times were fought with sticks and stones, now smartphones and keyboards are weapons of modern warfare. The growing role of social media in wars and conflicts has given rise to a field of study, coined by Hagar (2007) as ‘crisis informatics’. The growing importance of social media and digital networks in mobilizing the general public by protest groups, social movements, and insurgents, and monitoring rebels and active protesters by regimes and governments are transforming the dynamics of contemporaneous conflicts.

Social Media and Popular Uprisings

The findings of recent studies on the role of social media platforms in contemporary social movements point out that it has exhibited a "radical", "outrage" "insurgent" or "anti-establishment", role (Arditi, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). The graphic images of violent clashes between social media mobilized protesters and regime forces in Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Ukraine present a searing example of communication technology's role in protest movements (Brooking & Singer, 2016). Lee et al. (2018) believe that dissidents and marginalized groups can reach global audiences to publicize their narrative through social media platforms and they do not need traditional media anymore to highlights their sufferings. The first significant public attention to the role of social media in social movements can be traced to the Iranian post-election demonstration in June 2009, when two million tweets related to the

protests were disseminated through popular micro-blogging social media platforms (Gaffney, 2010). Since the Iranian government has censored broadcast mediums, social media tools including "Internet, email, satellite television, and cell phones helped not only to organize people but also to shape public opinion". Christensen (2011) observed that Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube played a crucial role in Iranian and Egyptian demonstrations; even afterward the Iranian government introduced countermeasures to monitor and censor social media platforms.

The revolutionary wave of Arab Spring that shook the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East since 2011, has got most acknowledgment for its success to the crucial role of social media in reshaping the nature of politics and challenging authoritarian regimes of the region (Bruns et al., 2013; Khondker, 2011; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). The mass movements against autocratic states began in 2010 with a demonstration against Tunisian dictator Ben Ali and quickly spread across the Middle East and North Africa and protesters using Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and popular social media platforms to organize supporters to mobilize for collective action from streets to the global community and international media sources (Aday et al., 2012). During the "Arab Spring" Citizens were able to produce content with handheld devices and disseminate worldwide through social media on major events such as Day of Anger, 'March of Millions' and Day of Rage' (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Halverson et al., 2013; Kirkpatrick et al., 2011; Mortensen, 2011; Shehabat, 2012). During this time, cyber activists played a pivotal role through well-coordinated social media campaigns to topple autocratic regimes of their home countries. Social media transformed voices of discontent into a collective movement having shared goals to bring social and political change (Howard & Hussain, 2011). One Tunisian internet activist expounded the pivotal role of Facebook in mobilization as:

“Facebook is pretty much the GPS for this revolution. Without the street, there is no revolution, but add Facebook to the street and you get real potential” (Pollock, 2011).

There is no denying the fact that social media has been instrumental during 'Arab Spring' in shaping public debates and mobilizing people to revolt against atrocities of rogue states (Harb, 2011; Kavanaugh et al., 2013; Khamis & Vaughn, 2011). In many countries, state governments attempt to scrutinize discussions on online platforms by blocking internet services and restricting social networking sites. (Skinner, 2011).

Following the 'Arab Spring', Social media platforms also played a vital role in the mass protests held in many western democracies including, 15M Indignant movement in Spain (also referred to as *indignados*), Greek 'indignant citizens (called *aganaktismenoi*), the Portuguese Geração à Rasca, and Occupy movements in the United States and other countries, in which rapid technological innovation contributed to transforming mobilization dynamics and empowered citizens to play an active part in new information process (Jenkins, 2006). The 2011 Spanish 15-M is an example of a networked social movement (Castells, 2015), that originated and mobilized mostly through social media and it also influenced news coverage in traditional media and facilitated people to assemble and struggle for their legitimate rights. This movement had also a profound impact on the spread of Occupy Wall Street Movement in the United States, which was later spread to 950 cities in 80 countries. A common attribute of these mobilizations was the extensive use of social media to organize, coordinate and communicate protest activities to bring diverse social groups for collective action. Social media has been proved a big advantage to locate, contact, and motivate geographically dispersed people and so mobilization-related issues were solved (Diani, 2000). Pierskalla and Hollenbach (2013) in their study related to violence and mobile coverage found that the ratio of violent events was higher in those locations having better access to wireless technology. The Ukraine #Euromaidan protest is considered as first truly

consequential social media uprising leading to the removal of the president and annexation of Crimea, while the role of social media in other protest movements like Gezi Park in Turkey, Los Indignados in Spain, and Occupy Wall Street in the United States have also been phenomenal. A Facebook post by renowned Ukrainian journalist Mustafa Nayyem on November 21, 2013, to gather at the Independent Square, triggered an unprecedented citizen uprising, popularly known as 'Euromaidan, against the government of the incumbent Ukrainian President, Viktor Yanukovich. Facebook was the tenth most popular website in Ukraine as of October 2013, but suddenly it becomes the prime internet platform among masses to connect and reach out to wider audiences to support their cause (Bohdanova, 2014). The Russian Social media platforms VKontakte (VK) and Odnoklassniki reached 30 million subscribers during these protests and Twitter was also used mainly among youth, and Twitter hashtags like #euromaiden, #євромайдан and# евромайдан provided international audiences real-time coverage of the protest events (Rozumski, 2015). In 2014, Hong Kong civil-disobedience movement, also known as the "Umbrella Revolution", the role of social media was pivotal, as it not only mobilized the general public for collective activism but also acted as a news source of an international audience as local news outlets censor protest activities to safeguard business relation with mainland China. The Syrian war is considered as most socially mediated conflict in the history of armed conflicts (Lynch, Freelon, & Aday, 2014) where social media was extensively used to document and highlight horrors of war, and these platforms were also widely used for information sharing, spreading propaganda and recruiting fighters. The graphic images of civilians injured and killed were widely circulated through social media to draw international attention, so the Syrian government restricted access to the Internet. Lynch et al. (2014) also believed that the "Syrian revolution is the most documented revolution in history", in which multiple social media platforms were employed by conflict parties to mobilize

its supporters, organize protest movements, counter regime's propaganda, and gain the sympathy of the international audience (Baiazy, 2012). The Syrian regime also used extensive use of online media to launch a counteroffensive by deploying a digital army, named as 'Syrian Electronic Army', to operate online spamming campaigns, hacking popular opposition websites, and uploading pro-regime videos (Khamis et al., 2012; Youmans & York, 2012). The 2 million YouTube videos uploaded in the first two years of Syrian revolt have made some scholars refer to it as the 'YouTube revolution', as contrary to the Egyptian 'Facebook revolution' or the Iranian 'Twitter's revolution' (Khatib, 2015).

Social Media and Protracted Conflicts

The 2012 Gaza conflict between Israel and Hamas is considered as first 'Twitter War' as the Defense Force of Israel announced via Twitter its attack on the Gaza strip and soon after Twitter became a battlefield as thousands of supporters exchanged news and views on social media platforms under the hashtags #GazaUnderAttack, #IsraelUnderFire to mobilize support and shape the narrative about their groups (Zeitzoff, 2017). Both Israel and Hamas extensively used social media via English language Twitter feeds to sway international opinion (Borger, 2012; Sutter, 2012). Zeitzoff (2017) asserts that public support for warring parties was a better indicator of transformations in conflict intensity than the official position of international mediators like the United Nations and the United States. During this conflict, each side employed social media tools to validate their actions and disparage the opposite side. The growing role of digital media in the Israel-Palestine conflict has transformed it from political conflict into media war (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011). Tawil-Souri and Aouragh (2014) speak of Palestinian resistance against Israeli-imposed internet restrictions or cyber-colonialism through campaigns like 'Enough Walls' and refer to it as 'Intifada 3.0'. Najjar (2010) discusses the sophisticated use of social media by

Palestinian and their supporters during the operation of Cast Lead (2008–2009). Seo (2014) in her study about the 2012 Gaza conflict analyzed images posted by warring parties on Twitter to understand visual propaganda techniques.

The other protracted and intractable conflict Kashmir has also utilized new communication tools to build its narrative, mobilize support and gain international recognition. The sophisticated use of social media by Kashmir-based young separatist leader, Burhan Wani attracted worldwide attention to the once forgotten and protracted Kashmir conflict. Burhan Wani was perhaps the first tech-savvy militant, who soon became a cult figure in Kashmir through his sophisticated use of social media. The editor of *Rising Kashmir*, Shujaat Bukhari (*Rising Kashmir*, 2016) noted that Burhan Wani's video messages disseminated through various social media platforms, would 'go viral in Kashmir' and these videos include 'the topics of Indian injustice and the need for young people to stand up to oppression. Wani had become a 'poster boy' and 'folk hero' even before his death due to his vibrant use of social media to communicate, motivate and recruit youth from across Kashmir, unlike other militants who preferred to hide their identities (Nath, 2019; Riyaz-Ur-Rehman, 2016). The rise of social media and the proliferation of smartphones in the early 2000s have been crucial in disrupting the Indian hegemonic narrative regarding the Kashmir conflict. Kashmir witnessed the first extensive use of social media for collective activism during 2010 unrest in the region (Andrabi, 2010). During this time, the state government had imposed restrictions on local newspapers seized printed copies on many occasions, and also banned news channels alleging that they broadcasted 'provocative speeches by secessionist elements which create law and order problems' (*Greater Kashmir*, 2010). The seven-month internet lockdown in Jammu & Kashmir after the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian constitution is considered the longest-running internet shutdown in history. In the aftermath of young militant leader Burhan

Wani's killing in the summers of 2016, social media proved to be a game-changer for Kashmiris fighting against the brutal repression of the Indian state and it helped brought the forgotten Kashmir conflict back to the international limelight. The dreadful images Burhan Wani circulated through digital platforms protest resulted in widespread violent protests in Kashmir (Junaid, 2020). The images of pellet gun victims including 14 years old girl Insha Malik and other victims spread through social media platforms and “the spectacular brutality depicted in these pictures gained the world’s attention” (Nath, 2019). The renowned Kashmiri novelist, Waheed (2016) called it "The world's first mass blinding" in his opinion piece for *The Guardian*. These images represent the collective condition of Indian occupation and prompted several anti-pellet gun campaigns on social media platforms. Pakistani activist Jibran Nasir started a social media campaign hash-tagged #IndiaCantSee and #LetKashmirDecideand used morphed images of famous personalities including Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg and Bollywood actors showing how they would look like if they were wounded by pellet guns. (Ashiq, 2016; Thomas, 2016).

Social Media and Insurgent Movements

In the current age of mediatized conflicts, militant organizations and insurgent groups are utilizing social media platforms not only to coordinate with each other but also to promote their agenda to a wider audience. Although social movements and popular protests have been the main benefactors of social media, insurgent and subversive groups have also made extraordinary use of these technologies making the media-terrorism nexus more relevant (Dafoe & Lyall, 2015). During conflicts and volatile events, the insurgent groups have been signed using social media and other encrypted platforms to get their side of the story to the general public and their sympathizers, which is then picked up by national and international media (Zeitsoff, 2017).

The militant organization Al-Shahab and Boko Haram, operating in Sub-Saharan Africa, have embraced social media like other terrorist organizations to disseminate and attract international attention. On September 21, 2013, four members of Somalia-based terrorist group Al-Shahab, attacked Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, killing 67 people and 175 were wounded. The group through its official Twitter account claimed responsibility for the attack and live-tweeted throughout the operation (Anzalone, 2013). The Nigeria-based terrorist organization, Boko Haram is also active on various social media platforms uploads violent videos and images of terrorist activities and also shares community engagements to gain public sympathy (Bertram & Ellison, 2014). Ette and Joe (2018) in their analysis of the framing of the Boko Haram conflict in Nigerian newspapers and social media platforms, Twitter demonstrated the growing role of social media to sway the public sentiments of their users. The self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS) also used social media as a key tool to spread terror through posting beheading videos and recruiting thousands of foreign members (Martinez and Abdelaziz, 2014). When several social media platforms like Facebook, Google, and Twitter agreed to restrict the content of terrorist organizations on their platforms, ISIS decided to use alternative encrypted social media platforms like Telegram to maintain their presence in virtual spaces (Andrews & Seetharaman, 2016). Social media also facilitated ISIS to recruit at least 30,000 foreign fighters from some 100 countries, including western democracies, to join their ranks (Gohdes, 2018).

Conclusion

The findings of studies on the role of social media in contemporaneous conflicts all point to the crucial role of social media in collective action, protests, social movements, and intractable conflicts. The recent literature on conflicts and crises has revealed that citizens are increasingly taking part in collective action through the use of social media. Social media was instrumental in

organizing protests and shaping public opinion to overthrow authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen and also initiating a civil war in Syria and instigating political conflicts in Iraq and Libya. Social media has been a strategic tool in recent conflicts including, the Israel-Palestine Conflict, the so-called 'Arab Spring', the ongoing war in Syria, The new age militancy in Jammu & Kashmir, and among Pro-Western and Pro-Russian groups in Ukraine. Although social movements and popular protests have been the main benefactors of social media, insurgent and subversive groups have also made extraordinary use of these technologies making the media-terrorism nexus more relevant. It has proved to be strategic support for militant organizations like Al-Shabab, Boko Haram, and ISIS to propagate their ideology, recruit new members and disseminate information about their activities. In sum, the prominent role of social media in contemporary wars and conflicts challenges naive justifications that argue that it has been beneficial particularly to incumbents or challengers.

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