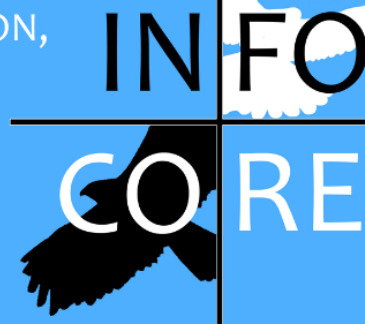(IN)FORMING CONFLICT PREVENTION,
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THE ROLE OF MEDIA
IN VIOLENT CONFLICT

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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN VIOLENT CONFLICT
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR WP5

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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN VIOLENT CONFLICT

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR WP5

Introduction

The growing importance of social media and networks in the recent social movements and mobilizations around the globe, from the 'Arab Spring' to the Indignants' movement in Europe, has intensified the discussion on their actual role in contemporary conflict-burden societies. The changing dynamics between political actors, journalists and citizens, mainly through the Web 2.0 platforms, have stimulated several claims for the transformation of their relations as well as for the facilitation of new forms of political participation. While their actual impact on the transformation of politics remains widely debatable, the unquestionable massive popularity of social networks in conflict-ridden societies and the profound changes in the flow of information across the online social media are challenging the timeliness of mediated political participation in the contemporary globalized world.

Looking into the role of the new interactive and empowering media, it is important to study their development as techno-social systems, focusing on the dialectic relation of structure and agency (Giddens, 1984). As Fuchs (2014: 37) describes, "media are techno-social systems, in which information and communication technologies enable and constrain human activities that create knowledge that is produced, distributed and consumed with the help of technologies in a dynamic and reflexive process that connects technological structures and human agency". Under this light, our approach is informed by social theory and follows the innovations introduced by the new information and communication technologies that enrich and at the same time complicates human actions and interactions. The network infrastructure of the Internet allows multiple and multi-way communication and information flow between agents, combining both interpersonal (one-to-one), mass (one-to-many) and complex, yet dynamically equal communication (many-to-many).

The discussion on the role of social media and networks finds its roots in the emergence of the network society and the evolvement of the Internet as a result of the convergence of the audiovisual, information technology and telecommunications sector. The work of Manuel Castells on the network society is central, emphasizing that the "dominant functions and processes in the Information Age are increasingly organized around networks. Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture" (Castells, 1996: 500). Castells introduces the concept of "flows of information", underlining the crucial role of information flows in networks for the economic and social organization.

Modern society relies heavily on information. Feather (2008) describes this dimension aptly by providing a theoretical framework that includes the historical, the economic and the political dimensions of the information society, as well as the role of information professionals. Feather's framework enables us to combine forms of discontinuity, such as the empowering and more decentralized possibilities

granted by networks in social movements, with phenomena of continuity, as for example, the unequal access to digital systems and the benefits arising from the their utilization, the commodification of information and the structural power relationships in society. The information technologies are becoming a crucial driver of change in the fields of intellectual property, democracy, and privacy. Information Society constitutes a regulatory concept that incorporates the need for a political choice: the degree of equality of individuals in society, the ensuring of digital literacy, the scope and importance of the public interest and the public goods.

In the development of the flows of information, the Internet holds the key role as a catalyst of a novel platform for public discourse and public communication. According to Fuchs (2014: 37), "the Internet consists of both a technological infrastructure and (inter)acting humans, […] is a technological system and a social subsystem that both have a networked character: Together these parts form a techno-social system. The technological structure is a network that produces and reproduces human actions and social networks and is itself produced and reproduced by such practices".

The specification of the online platforms, as Web 1.0, Web 2.0 or Web 3.0, marks distinctively the social dynamics that define the evolution of the Internet. Fuchs et. al (2010: 43) provide a comprehensive approach for the three 'generations' of the Internet, founding them on "the idea of knowledge as a threefold dynamic process of cognition, communication, and co-operation [...] The (analytical) distinction indicates that all Web 3.0 applications (co-operation) and processes also include aspects of communication and cognition and that all Web 2.0 applications (communication) also include cognition". The distinction is based on the insight of knowledge as a threefold process that all communication processes require cognition, but not all cognition processes result in communication, and that all co-operation processes require communication and cognition, but not all cognition and communication processes result in co-operation.

Technologies of empowerment

Social media and networks are based on the technological tools and the ideological foundations of Web 2.0[1] and enable the production, distribution and exchange of user-generated content. They transform the global media landscape by transposing the power of information and communication to the public that had until recently a passive role in the mass communication process.[2] Though the term was originally used to identify the second coming of the Web after the dotcom burst and restore confidence in the industry (O'Reilly & Batelle, 2009), it became inherent in the new WWW applications through its widespread use. The popularity of Web 2.0 applications demonstrates that, regardless of their levels of technical expertise, users can wield technologies in more active ways than has ever been possible. In addition to referring to various communication tools and platforms, including social networking sites,

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[1] Tim O'Reilly (2005) coined the term Web 2.0 to refer to a new generation of web-based services that put emphasis on social networking, collaboration and participation.
[2] Web 2.0 tools refer to the sites and services that emerged during the early 2000s, such as blogs (e.g. Blogspot, Wordpress), wikis (e.g. Wikipedia), microblogs (e.g. Twitter), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn), video (e.g. YouTube), image (e.g. Flickr), file sharing platforms (e.g. We, Dropbox), and related tools that allow participants to create and share their own content.

social media also hints at a cultural mindset that emerged in the mid-2000s as part of the technical and business phenomenon referred to as Web 2.0 (boyd, 2014).

It is important to distinguish between social media and social networking sites. Whereas often both terms are used interchangeably, it is important to understand that social media are based on user-generated content produced by "the people formerly known as the audience" (Rosen, 2006). Social media have been defined on multiple levels, starting from more operational definitions, such as the one provided by Lovink (2011: 5): "Social media indicate a shift from HTML-based linking practices of the open web to linking and recommendation, which happen inside closed systems. Web 2.0 has three distinguishing features: it is easy to use, it facilitates sociality, and it provides users with free publishing and production platforms that allow them to upload content in any form, be it pictures, videos, or text". Social media are often contrasted to traditional media by highlighting their distinguishing features: "Social media refers to a set of online tools that supports social interaction between users. The term is often used to contrast with more traditional media such as television and books that deliver content to mass populations but do not facilitate the creation or sharing of content by users" (Hansen et. al, 2010: 12) as well as their ability to "blur the distinction between personal communication and the broadcast model of messages sent to nobody in particular" (Meikle & Young, 2012: 61).

In many definitions, the notions of collaboration and collective actions are central as noted in the following definition provided by Shirky (2008), highlighting that social media are tools that increase our ability to share, to co-operate, with one another, and to take collective action. Gauntlett (2011: 4) characterizes Web 2.0 as a "collective allotment", observing that online sites and services become more powerful the more they embrace the constantly growing networks of potential collaborators. Social media enable users and lay publics to create their own content and decide on the range of its dissemination through the various available and easily accessible platforms. Van Dijck (2013: 11) focuses on the first component of the term, namely *social*, to highlight that the platforms are user-centered and facilitate communal activities: "Social media can be seen as online facilitators or enhancers of *human* networks – webs of people that promote connectedness as a social value" (emphasis in the original).

Social network sites (SNS)[3] are built on the pattern of online communities of people who are connected and share similar interests and activities. Boyd & Ellison (2008: 211) provide a robust and articulated definition of SNS, describing them as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site".

Central to the notion of social media and SNSs is the term *networked publics*, which was initially used by Ito (2008: 2) to "reference a linked set of social, cultural, and technological developments that have accompanied the growing engagement with digitally networked media". Boyd (2014) enhances the idea of

[3] We follow the term "social network sites" instead of "social networking sites" on the rationale employed by boyd & Ellison, 2008: 211.

networked publics by drawing on a broader notion of publics, arguing that publics are where identities are enacted and marginalized individuals create powerful communities in resistance to hegemonic publics, while emerging when audiences come together around shared understandings of the world. The emancipatory power of social media is crucial to understand the importance of networking, collaboration and participation. These concepts, directly linked to social media, are key concepts to understand the real impact and dimensions of contemporary *participatory media culture*. In the definition of Jenkins (2006), the term participatory culture contrasts with older notions of passive media consumption. Rather than talking about media producers and consumers occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other and contribute actively and prospectively equally to social media production (Jenkins & Deuze, 2008).

Participation is a key concept that addresses the main differences between the traditional (old) media and the social (new) media and focuses mainly on the empowerment of the audience/users of media towards a more active information and communication role. The changes transform the relation between the main actors in political communication, namely political actors, journalists and citizens. Social media and networks enable any user to participate in the mediation process by actively searching, sharing and commenting on available content (Bruns, 2005). The distributed, dynamic, and fluid structure of social media enables them to circumvent professional and political restrictions on news production (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013) and has given rise to new forms of journalism defined as citizen, alternative or participatory journalism (Deuze, 2009b; Kelly et al., 2009; Domingo, 2008; Atton & Hamilton 2008; Siapera & Dimitrakopoulou, 2012), but also new forms of propaganda and misinformation (Kamilindi, 2007; Paterson et al., 2012).

Social media in conflicts

The last few years we have witnessed a growing heated debate among scholars, politicians and journalists regarding the role of the Internet in contemporary social movements and conflict-ridden societies. Social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube which facilitate and support user-generated content, have taken up a leading role as communication and mobilization tools in the development and coordination of a series of recent social movements, such as the protests in the Philippines in 2001, the incidents in Moldova in 2009, the student protests in Britain at the end of 2010 as well as the outbreak of revolution in the Arab world, the so-called *Arab Spring*.

The open and decentralized character of the Internet has inspired many scholars to envisage a rejuvenation of democracy, focusing on the (latent) democratic potentials of the new media as interactive platforms that can motivate and fulfill the active participation of the citizens in the political process (Rheingold, 2000; Becker and Slaton, 2000; Coleman & Hall, 2001; Levy, 2002). On the other hand, Internet skeptics suggest that the Internet will not itself alter traditional politics (Bucy & Gregson, 2001, Galdwell, 2010). According to Dahlgren (2001), it can actually generate a very fragmented public sphere based on isolated private discussions, while the abundance of information, in combination with the vast

amounts of offered entertainment and the options for personal socializing can lead people to restrain from public life (Norris, 2001).

Social media appear as aspiring tools for the creation of new opportunities for social movements. Web 2.0 platforms allow protestors to collaborate so that they can quickly organize and disseminate a message across the globe. By enabling the fast, easy and low-cost diffusion of protest ideas, tactics, and strategies, social media and networks allow social movements to overcome problems historically associated with collective mobilization (Ayres, 1999). At the same time, it allows politicians to establish direct communication with the citizens free from the norms and structural constraints of traditional journalism (Stromer-Gallery & Jamieson, 2001; Livingstone & Bober, 2004). Over the last years, the centre of attention was not the western societies, which were used in being the technology literate and information rich part of the world, but the Middle Eastern ones. Especially after 2009, there is considerable evidence advocating in favour of the empowering, liberating and yet engaging potentials of the online social media and networks as in the case of the protesters in Iran (Solow-Niederman, 2010) where Web services were actively used (Cardwell, 2009; Christensen, 2009, Cohen 2009, Schectman 2009) like Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and YouTube to organize, attract support, and share information about street protests after the June 2009 presidential elections (Gross, 2009). More recently, a revolutionary wave of demonstrations has swept the Arab countries as the so-called Arab Spring, using again the social media as means for raising awareness, communication and organization, facing at the same time strong Internet censorship. It is important, however, to approach the impact of social media in networked societies in a broader socio-political context while not neglecting the complexity of these transformations. As Seib (2012: 11) argues: "[…] the transformation of political life as seen during the Arab revolutions arose from more traditional issues related to economic welfare, oppressive government behavior, and the overall miserable kind of life forced upon millions of people by autocratic regimes".

Many scholars have started researching on whether the social media could be considered as an instrument of democratization in conflict-ridden societies in the Arab World. Howard & Hussain (2011) argue that social media - including Facebook and Twitter - as well as mobile phones made a difference in bringing democracy to Tunisia and Egypt towards the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011 respectively. As they explain, Arab people being interested in democracy could organize political action by with a speed and on a scale that could not have been seen before. Although, Howard and Hussain consider it premature to portray incidents in Tunisia and Egypt as a democratization wave, they insist on the catalytic role played by Arab social-movement leaders against the authoritarian rule.

On the same wavelength, Khondker (2011) links the importance of social media during Arab Spring to the absence of free traditional media and further explains that social media were of high significance for the co-ordination, the scheduling and the communication of demonstrations against authoritarian leaders. Nevertheless, Khondker concentrates on the fragmented structure of the Middle East and North Africa region and argues that Saudi Arabia was not an ideal example of 'cyberactivism' as it had happened

in Tunisia and Egypt. In that regard, Stepanova (2011) warns against the reproduction of 'direct lessons' from the Arab Spring revolts to other regional and geopolitical contexts.

Furthermore, the US Institute for Peace has done considerable work in analyzing the role of social media in the case of the Syrian civil war (Lynch et al., 2014). In particular, they illustrate this war as the most socially mediated conflict in history. As they explain, the material circulated on social media not only informed citizens of the world on developments in the country but also led the international community. Nevertheless, as far as the impact of social media toward democratization is concerned, they go beyond the participation of citizens and activists in social networks to the role played by the Syrian Electronic Army. In so doing, they highlight that attention should also be turned towards the importance of social media for the establishment of power by authoritarian regimes. In another study of the Syrian civil war, Carter et. al (2014) outline another dimension of social media usage referring to foreign fighters and their source of information. What they specifically argue is that European and Western fighter heavily relied on social media and principally Twitter.

What is important, in order to understand the social networks' dynamics, is to acknowledge that these movements belonged to people, not to media (Seib, 2012) and to focus on the dynamic combination of a series of important functions of the social networks, namely their a. informational function as information can 'travel' instantly and easily, b. communicational function and the enabling of interaction, c. monitoring function and the possibility for instant action/reaction and d. organizational and mobilization function. As Castells (2012: 221) argues, the networking function of social movements is multimodal: they include social networks online and offline, as well as pre-existing social networks, and networks formed during the actions of the movement.

The rise of citizen journalism

The transformation of interactions between political actors, journalists and citizens through the new technologies have created the conditions for the emergence of a distinct form from professional journalism, often called citizen, participatory or alternative journalism. The terms used to identify the new journalistic practices on the web, range from interactive or online journalism to alternative journalism, participatory journalism, citizen journalism or public journalism.[4] The level and the form of public's participation in the journalistic process, determine whether it is a synergy between journalists and the public or exclusive journalistic activities of the citizens.[5]

The evolution of social networks with the new paradigm shift is currently defining to a great extent the type, the impact and the dynamics of action, reaction and interaction of the involved participants in a social network. According to Atton (2009), alternative journalism is an ongoing effort to review and

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[4] For on overview of relevant literature, see Dimitrakopoulou, 2011.

[5] However, the phenomenon of alternative journalism is not new. Already in the 19th century the first forms of alternative journalism made their appearance with the development of the radical British press. The radical socialist press in the U.S. in the early twentieth century followed, as did the marginal and feminist press between 1960 and 1970. Fanzines and zines appeared in the 1970s and were succeeded by pirate radio stations. At the end of the twentieth century, however, the attention has moved to new media and Web 2.0 technologies.

challenge the dominant approaches to journalism. The structure of this alternative journalistic practice appears as the counterbalance to traditional and conventional media production and disrupts its dominant forms, namely, the institutional dimension of mainstream media, the phenomena of capitalization and commercialization and the growing concentration of ownership. Citizen journalism is based on the assumption that the public space is in crisis (institutions, politics, journalism, political parties). It appears as effort to democratize journalism and thereby is questioning the added value of objectivity, which is supported by professional journalism.

The debate on a counterweight to professional, conventional, mainstream journalism was intensified around 1993, when the signs of fatigue and the loss of public's credibility in journalism became visible and overlapped with the innovative potentials of the new interactive technologies. According to Rosen (1999), the term public journalism appeared in the U.S. in 1993 as part of a movement that expressed concerns for the detachment of journalists and news organizations from the citizens and communities, as well as of U.S. citizens from public life. However, the term citizen journalism has been defined on various levels. If both its supporters and critics agree on one core thing, it is that it means different things to different people (Corrigan, 1999; Glasser, 1999; Lambeth, 1998; Voakes, 2004).

With the development of Internet tools and interactive applications and the use of the term for more than a decade, Nip (2006) spoke of the *second phase* of public journalism. In the first phase, news organizations proceeded to engage the public in interactive activities and practices, while in the second phase, the public started to develop itself the initiative for journalism and communication activities. From 2009 and onwards, there are constantly more examples that demonstrate the active involvement of the public in the news-production process (Dimitrakopoulou, 2011). This development enhances the active involvement of the public in the news process, causing cracks in the -until recently- strictly defined dichotomy between the producer and the consumer. The public can be involved in the determination (and configuration) of the news agenda, not only by producing original content, but also by developing critical contributions to the definition the news agenda set by the mainstream media.

The developments that Web 2.0 has introduced and the subsequent explosive growth of social media and networks, mark the *third phase* of public journalism and its transformation to alternative journalism. The field of information and communication is transformed into a more participatory media ecosystem, which evolves the news as social experiences. News are transformed into a participatory activity to which people contribute their own stories and experiences, and their reactions to events.

Citizen journalism proposes a different model of selection and use of sources, of news practices and redefinition of the journalistic values. Atton (2009) traces the conflict with traditional, mainstream journalism in three key points: (a) power does not come exclusively from the official institutional institutions and the professional category of journalists, (b) reliability and validity can derive from descriptions of lived experience and not only objectively detached reporting and (c) it is not mandatory to separate the facts from subjective opinion. Although Atton does not consider lived experiences as an

absolute value, he believes it can constitute the added value of alternative journalism, combining it with the capability of recording it through documented reports.

The purpose of citizen journalism is to reverse the hierarchy of access as it was identified by Glasgow University Media Group, giving voice to the ones marginalized by the mainstream media (Atton, 2002; Atton & Wickenden, 2005). While mainstream media rely extensively on elite groups, alternative media can offer a wider range of "voices" that wait to be heard. The practices of alternative journalism (Ramirez, 2005; Briggs, 2007; Bierhoff & Schmidt, 1997; Schaffer, 2009) provide first hand evidences, as well as collective and anti-hierarchical forms of organizations and a participatory, radical approach of citizen journalism (Atton, 2003).

To determine the moving boundary between news producers and the public, Bruns (2005) used the term *produsers*, combining the words and concepts of producers and users, while Rosen (2006) spoke of "the people formerly known as the audience". These changes determine the way in which power relations in the media industry and journalism are changing, shifting the power from journalists to the public. Gillmor (2006) compares the citizen journalism movement with the grassroots movement. Highlighting the shift of power from professional journalists to the public, Deuze (2009a) changes Rosen's term to "the people formerly known as the employers", focusing on the flat hierarchy in ownership and capital.

Traditional media have become aware of the growing interactive features of the new technologies and experiment with participatory forms of content production, in order to engage the public. Utilizing the characteristics of attention economy, traditional and mainstream media provide space to the public, promising "attention instead of money". In other words, media organizations acquire news material from the public (crowdsourcing), without having to pay anything, and the public makes use of the possibility to publish gaining 'voice'.

At the same time, the opportunity to participate in the professional journalistic process, but also the spontaneous and self-reactive journalistic activity of the public, reveal the redistribution of power in the contemporary media ecosystem among professional journalists and citizens. Citizen journalism aims to fill the gaps that believe mainstream media have created, resulting from commercialization, ownership concentration and the bureaucratic approach of the mainstream media.

Citizen journalism is based on the subjective testimony of the witness, who may have the dual role of the protagonist (source) and news-maker (journalist). Professional journalists remain, of course, strong actors in media organizations and act with increased professionalism and objective distance from the source. On the other hand, in the alternative and participatory forms of journalism, the political/ideological position of the citizens appears to be more important than the journalistic skills, while the distinct boundaries between the source and the journalist are blurred.

The main limitation for the development of citizen journalism remains that traditional media still play an important role in everyday life of the majority of people and dominate the information flows. The Internet brings potentially radical changes in the journalistic profession, but interactive multimedia and new technologies alone are insufficient to change the media field. Besides, it would be technologically

deterministic to conclude that certain technologies are more participatory or alternative than others. Especially in hard news, citizen journalism has limited access to formal institutional sources, while its dependence on commentaries and opinions make it vulnerable to criticisms for bias and subjectivity.

Citizen reporting may prove very effective in cases of exposing oppression by governments or broadcasting violence between groups of different identities, adding capacities to social movements that allows protesters to communicate and coordinate in ways that were not possible before (Bock, 2012). While social media appear in specific cases and conflict environments influential in the terms of a shift toward citizen power, the level of their influence remains a worth exploring issue (Seib, 2012). The work of Bock (2012) provides helpful resources in this direction as it provides an overview of the use of social media in the creation of 'smart crowds' and their effectiveness "in conflict early warning and early response when combined with building trust networks, community organizing, bounded crowd feeding, and restricted crowd feeding at grassroots, middle-, and top-levels of leadership so that early action can be initiated in locations where tensions are acute (ibid: 205).

Research agenda

WP5 studies social media as means of content production and dissemination used by all key actors studied in INFOCORE, namely political actors, professional journalists, experts/NGOs and users/lay publics. We regard social media as a platform where both official and unofficial information and communication is produced, shared and made public. From this starting point, we study the produced content from a horizontal view as all actors are potentially equal in terms of available content production and sharing tools online. The specific WP approaches the involved actors in their double role as producers/sources and users/publics.

Applying INFOCORE's content analysis and using social network analysis, WP5 examines the evolvement of the dynamic social media debate, assessing the dissemination of news and information on social media platforms and focusing on the complex and changing interactions between all actors involved through their social networking activity. This combined approach provides a unique opportunity to study the social media communication and social networking dynamics in conflict cases where web 2.0 platforms have proven to play a crucial role in the information, communication, networking, organization and mobilization of the interested actors.

Its overall objective is to analyze the key contextual factors that shape the production of conflict-related content in social media. It addresses social media as an alternative media environment to professional news media while interacting closely with it. At the same time, WP5 studies how the interactions between various kinds of actors are formed. It aims to provide a better and deeper understanding of how the different actors act, react and interact in times of intensive conflict as well as during attempts of conflict resolution and reconciliation. Using both qualitative as well as quantitative approaches, WP5 focuses on the following research topics that are approached through two main categories, a. conflict-related and b. actor-related research areas:

Conflict-related research areas

Information flow: Monitor the flow of information on social media and identify patterns in the social media debate, relating the respective rhetoric that is evolved on web 2.0 platforms to the involved actors.

Evolution of information: Track the propagation of information through social media and draw relations to the different phases of a conflict as portrayed on web 2.0 platforms and especially after particular events.

Emotional variance: Monitor the use of social media as tools for spreading propaganda or hate speech and analyze the kind of content that generates heated debate on social media and impacts on the escalation/de-escalation of conflict-related debate.

Actor-related research areas

Identity: Identify the typology of active social media actors that is developed online and evaluate heir role in the different phases of conflicts while monitor the actors that appear to lead the debate.

Group/Network activity: Identify the groups/networks that are constructed, organized and mobilized online and that dominate around a specific conflict-related debate.

Media content: Study the social/alternative in relation to the traditional/mainstream media that are leading the debate. Identify the social media content that influences the conflict coverage in traditional local, national, transnational/international media.

Beyond the focus on social media, the findings of WP5 will be associated with the results of the other content analytic WPs 6-8 (strategic communication, journalistic transformation, political debates) as well as with the interviewed actors that will be studied by WPs 1-4 (political actors, journalists, experts/NGOs, users/lay publics).

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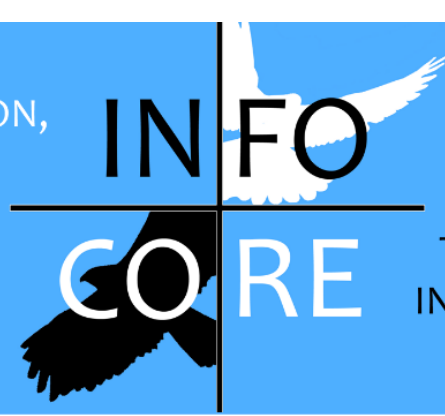
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