(IN)FORMING CONFLICT PREVENTION, RESPONSE AND RESOLUTION:

THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN VIOLENT CONFLICT

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METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL MEDIA

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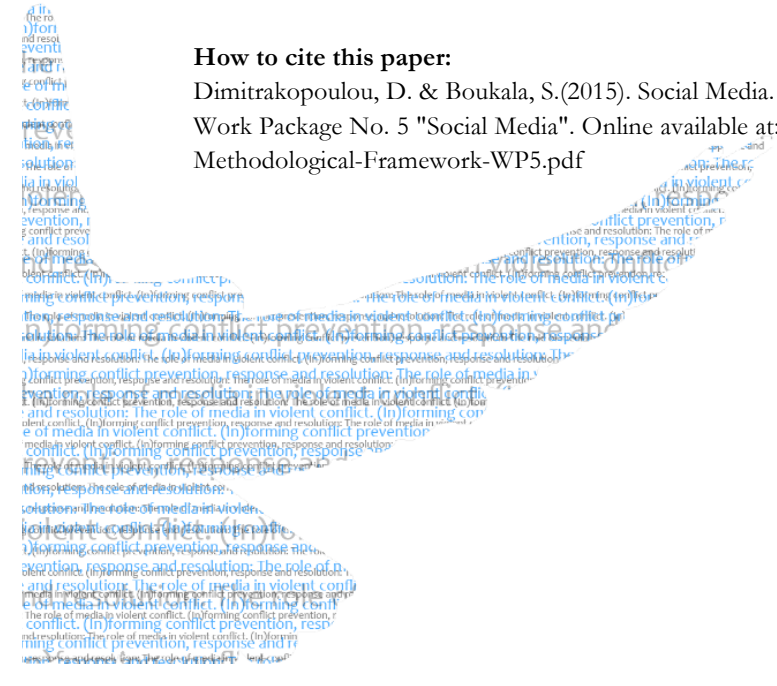

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL MEDIA

(EXECUTIVE SUMMARY)

WP5's 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 and building on the three main functions of social media that have been discussed in the theoretical working paper, namely as a. direct and interactive communication channels, b. alternative information providers/sources and c. self-organized participatory networks, we approach our research areas through two main research areas, a. conflict-related and b. actor-related.

WP5 employs a combination of methodological approaches that aim to be complementary and address the complex area of our study. First, we follow the multi-step methodological strategy that is common for all content WPs (5-8) and aims to study and analyze conflict-related discourse over an extended time range, in different conflict phases and in various conflict cases. On the next level, WP5 focuses on the interactions developed between the various kinds of actors involved using social network analysis. WP5 develops further linkages to the interviewing working group by incorporating social media related questions to the questionnaire models developed in WP1-4. The methodological approach consists of three interrelated stages: 1. preliminary qualitative pilot study, 2a. quantitative automated content analysis, 2b. quantitative social networks analysis and 3. qualitative in-depth analysis of selected case studies.

To deal with the complexities and challenges of WP5, we will follow a mixed approach in our sampling, consisting of an actor-based and a spaces-based approach. Regarding the first approach, we will identify and compile, in close cooperation with the interview work package leaders as well as the conflict leaders, detailed lists of prominent and highly involved actors on social media in order to track their activity and explore their deployed narrative as well as their networking patterns and linkages. Following the second approach, we aim to track and monitor popular 'spaces' where the social media narrative is taking place, e.g. Facebook groups and pages, Twitter group accounts and hashtags threads. Our sampling strategy takes into account the following criteria, a. conflict specifications, b. diversity and c. accessibility & availability of material.

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METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL MEDIA

Introduction

The present paper builds on the conceptual background provided in the first working paper of WP5 and develops the methodological framework to study the role of social media and networks in violent conflicts. In the conceptual paper, we developed the main conceptual definitions that play a central role in our research and inform our methodological approach. Providing a detailed theoretical background, we were able to draw a clear conceptual map that highlights the important changes introduced by social media and networks and studies these profound changes within the scope of INFOCORE, namely the role and the impact of social media in violent conflicts.

Social media are transforming the way people transmit and share information, while at the same time provide the tools for building innovative structures of organization and mobilization of different actors. These sweeping shifts have intensified the discussion on their actual role in contemporary conflict-burden societies, especially after their role in Iran (2009), Tunisia (2010), Egypt (2011) and the following so-called 'Arab Spring' movements. 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.

In our conceptual analysis, we highlighted a series of technological, communication and organizational shifts that have influenced the information and communication flow and structure as well as the interrelations and interactions between the different actors (politicians and political groups, journalists, users/audiences, NGOs) who were, until recently, heavily relying on the mediating role of journalists and the media. Following our theoretical working paper, we will focus on social media and networks in their role within conflict-ridden societies as a. direct and interactive communication channels, b. alternative information providers/sources and c. self-organized participatory networks for mobilization purposes.

Conceptual background

In the analysis of Web 2.0 platforms, it is important to distinguish between social media and social networks. Whereas often both terms are used interchangeably, it is important to understand that social media are based on user-generated and collaborative content and support social interaction between actors/users. Social networks are based on the pattern of online communities of people who are connected and share similar interests and activities. Within conflicts, social media and networks change dynamically the information and communication flow as well as the interaction patterns between political actors, journalists and citizens. The mediating role of journalists is directly challenged as social media

enable any user to actively create, share and comment on available content across various platforms. With these powerful new tools, users take a prominent role in the information and communication processes.

Social media as direct and interactive communication channels

The distributed, dynamic, and fluid structure of social media enables users to circumvent professional and political restrictions on news production (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013) and allows direct communication between political and social actors and the citizens, free from the norms and structural constraints of traditional journalism (Stromer-Gallery & Jamieson, 2001). This revolutionary transgression of mediation reallocates the power from the exclusive information and communication function of journalists and media to the hands of ordinary people. The role of social media in providing exclusive and unfiltered content during protests or riots validates their value as direct and interactive communication channels, e.g. by connecting Western and Arab individuals to participants in the case of the Arab uprisings, identifying protestors in Tahrir Square in Egypt or watching horrific videos of murdered civilians in Syria and Lybia (Aday et al., 2012).

Social media have created new direct and interactive communication channels that can bypass the hierarchical filters of traditional mass media that used to rely heavily on established institutions and authority figures for information and create direct and influential linkages between single and anonymous users or organized citizen groups and mainstream mass media. This way, the gatekeeping function of mass media is challenged as new players enter the field, who are potentially able of establishing direct contacts with interested political and social actors. At the same time, the removing of filters can create a series of problems as fabricated or false information may mistaken for true facts, while excessive information overload can lead to misinformation as well. Definitely, not every application of technology is productive, while many of the anticipated benefits of new technologies remain out of reach (Garrett, 2006).

However, social media have proven to play a central role in major conflict areas, as for example, in the case of the Syrian civil war, which has been illustrated as the most socially mediated conflict in history (Lynch et al., 2014). In many cases, the material that circulated on social media did not only keep the citizens in the rest of the world informed regarding latest developments in the country but also provided crucial knowledge to foreign governments on the actors on the ground (Aday et al., 2012). International traditional media did often broadcast online videos of citizen journalists rather than their own correspondents for real-time and on-the-ground reporting of the protests in Tunisia and Egypt (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011). This way, social media provided directly through their own channels, unfiltered and unmediated original content that was not only shared between protestors and civilians in the respective countries, but with the international community as well.

Social media as alternative information providers/ sources: from 'intellectuals' to 'produsers'

Gramsci emphasized the role of journalists in his work and claimed that 'the traditional and vulgarised type of the intellectual is given by the man of letters, the philosopher, the artist. Therefore, journalists, who claim to be men of letters, philosophers, artists, also regard themselves as the 'true' intellectuals' (1971:9). Furthermore, as Gramsci notes, intellectuals (organic and traditional) can be intellectuals only if they feel the elementary passions of the people, understand them and impart knowledge to them (1971:418). In this way intellectuals will be accepted by the masses and establish their hegemonic knowledge. Intellectuals, indeed, can be characterised as the 'articulators of hegemony' (Showstack-Sassoon, 1980) Hence, journalists and the mainstream media as intellectuals exercise ideological power over the masses and constitute their knowledge regarding 'Us' and 'Them'. The question that then arises is how knowledge is shaped in the terrain of digital cosmopolitanism or from a neo-Foucauldian perspective (1973, 1980), whether and how the new media could be used as means of power-knowledge. The developments that Web 2.0 has introduced and the subsequent explosive growth of social media and networks have enabled the active involvement of the public in the provision of information. Social media have substantially increased information dissemination in all contexts of conflict. In a conflict environment, individuals or collective groups can act as on-the-spot reporters and first-hand witnesses who can produce their own news stories, bypassing the mediating role of journalists. News is transformed into a participatory activity to which people contribute their own stories and experiences, and their reactions to events that they can transmit directly through the available online tools or serve as alternative and first-hand sources for professional journalists. This way, the public becomes 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 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. Citizen journalism can prove of vital importance for conflict-ridden societies and specifically in countries with undemocratic regimes and constrained civil liberties (Bock, 2012). It proposes a different model of selection and use of sources, as it involves a reallocation of power, which does not come exclusively from the official institutional institutions. At the same time, it proposes an alternative use of sources, as individuals are able to describe directly their lived experiences, challenging the professional journalistic standards of detached and objective reporting (Atton, 2009). While mainstream media rely extensively on elite groups, alternative media can offer a wider range of "voices" that wait to be heard.

Citizen reporting may prove very effective in cases of exposing oppression by governments or broadcasting violence between groups of different identities, as well as during conflict escalation cases where extreme measures of censorship may be imposed by totalitarian regimes. Social media add capacities to social movements that allow 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). Although the growth of social media have provided more people with the necessary tools to record and share their experiences not only at local but also at global scale, their role still remains unclear and their possible influence and effects are still unpredictable and detectable to single cases only. At the same time, the cultivation of propaganda and hate speech is growing on social media and poses serious threats to individuals and activists' groups, while new forms of propaganda and misinformation may emerge (Kamilindi, 2007; Paterson et al., 2012). In any case, despite their weaknesses, social media shape a new terrain in the exercise of power and knowledge, challenge the role of journalists as intellectuals and establish a new class of media users, the 'produsers'.

Social media as self-organized participatory networks

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 contemporary social movements in conflict-ridden societies.[1] They appear as aspiring tools for the creation of new opportunities for social movements and self-organized protest networks by creating low-cost forms of participation, promoting collective identity and creating the sense of community (Garett, 2006). According to Anderson (2006[1983]) print capitalism led to the creation of imagined communities. We assume that it is the 'digital capitalism' that nowadays establishes imagined communities and a form of deterritorialization (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) that refer to the weakening of ties between actors and space. In many conflict cases, digital media tools were integral to the operations of activists and combatants, used to organize and mobilize forces and demonstrations and to create media content to influence the outcome of the conflict (Sigal, 2009).

Web 2.0 platforms allow political action to be organized on a scale and at a speed that was never possible before. By enabling the fast, easy and low-cost diffusion of protest ideas, tactics, and strategies, as well as facilitating group formation, recruitment and retention and improving group efficiency, social media and networks allow social movements to overcome problems historically associated with collective mobilization (Ayres, 1999). 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.

[1] See, for example, the protests in the Philippines (2001), Lebanon (2006), Pakistan (2007), Kenya and Georgia (2008), Moldova (2009), Iran (2009), Arab Spring (2010-2013), Syria (2012-2014).

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. In this sense, the technical capacities of social media should not outweigh the importance of people's behaviour and decision to act and react. The sustainability and long-term consistency of movements on social media should be further examined as mobilization activity may not continue for extended periods. Another possible risk for the mobilization efficiency of social media and networks is the possible demobilization actions exercised by authoritarian elites who control the infrastructure on which they operate. For example, they can impose legal, regulatory or extralegal restrictions, including various levels of censorship, shut down communications and media infrastructure, cyberattack web sites and internet service providers or attack physically or harass people who seek to gather or disseminate information (see Sigal, 2009).

Research agenda

Building on the mixed-methods strategy that is shared among the content-analytic Work Packages 5-8 (see Annex I), 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 and building on the three main functions of social media that have been discussed above, namely as a. direct and interactive communication channels, b. alternative information providers/sources

and c. self-organized participatory networks, we approach our research areas through two main research areas, a. conflict-related and b. actor-related (table 1 below).

	Social media as direct & interactive communication channels	**Social media as information providers/sources**	**Social media as participatory networks**
Conflict-related research areas	What kind of content is distributed through social media? What types of communication patterns were developed? How is the conflict-related debate organized and evolved? Which characteristics of a conflict influence the debate?	What kinds of patterns emerge in the information flow in the social media debate? How are they related to the different phases of a conflict and especially after particular events? What kind of social media content influences the conflict coverage in traditional local, national, international media? How are social media used as tools for spreading propaganda or hate speech? What kind of content that generates heated debate and impacts on the escalation/de-escalation of the debate?	How is political action organized around networks in the different conflicts? What kinds of tactics/practices are used in the co-ordination and organization of collective mobilization? What is the life cycle of the formation of networks across the different phases of a conflict?
Actor-related research areas	Who are the active social media actors? What is their role in the different conflicts as well as the different phases of the conflict? Who is leading the debate? How do the different actors communicate and what kinds of patterns do emerge?	Which actors take a leading role in the dissemination of information in the different conflict cases? What is the role of citizen journalism in the different conflicts? What is the contribution of citizen journalists to the local, national, international news agenda?	How do different actors connect? What kind of networking patterns can be identified? How are the different groups/networks constructed, organized and mobilized?

Table 1: Matrix of research questions

Methodological design

WP5 employs a combination of methodological approaches that aim to be complementary and address the complex area of our study. First, we follow the multi-step methodological strategy that is common for all content WPs (5-8) and aims to study and analyze conflict-related discourse over an extended time range, in different conflict phases and in various conflict cases (see Annex I). Following the common methodological design is important because of its comparative function to the other content WPs 6-8 (strategic communication, journalistic transformation, political debates). At the same time, the specific research questions of our WP as well as the distinct discourse material on social media require a mixed-method approach that combines both a discourse and actors-related approach.

On the next level, WP5 focuses on the interactions developed between the various kinds of actors involved using social network analysis.

Following the tradition of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995), we aim to proceed to a social media ethnography in order to gain a better and deeper insight into the ways the different agents act, react and interact in times of intensive conflict as well as during attempts of conflict resolution and reconciliation. The involved actors are approached in their double role as producers/sources and users/publics. The development of the internet in the last few decades has raised questions about ethnography online and the role of the ethnographer in the cyberspace (Hine, 2000; Escobar, 1996) and led to the development of virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000, 2005), digital anthropology (Miller, 2012) and polymedia and ethnography (Madianou & Miller, 2013). However, we consider that a multi-sited ethnography in the terrain of social media that is accompanied by a critical discourse analysis could lead to a holistic study of the interpersonal interactions, the formation-deformation and reformation of hegemonic knowledge and the construction of in-groups and out-groups in social media. We argue that the introduction of ethnography in the study of social media texts can illustrate social dynamics in the use of this specific medium. The combination of discourse studies and ethnography is not an innovation that is introduced in our study. Androutsopoulos (2008) synthesized the systematic observation of specific sites and direct contact with its social actors with the study of online discourses and introduced the discourse-centred online ethnography. However, the lack of opportunity for direct contact with the social actors and the multi-sited nature of social media led us to adopt Marcus's ethnographic approach and synthesise it with discourse studies. Moreover, WP5 develops further linkages to the interviewing working group by incorporating social media related questions (see table 2 below) to the questionnaire models developed in WP1-4 (political actors, journalists, experts/NGOs, users/lay publics). The methodological approach consists of three interrelated stages: 1. preliminary qualitative pilot study, 2a. quantitative automated content analysis, 2b. quantitative social networks analysis and 3. qualitative in-depth analysis of selected case studies.

1. Qualitative preliminary study

The qualitative preliminary study aims to provide the conceptual and operational foundations for the analysis of social media discourse and networking activity. This stage includes two parts:

a. We follow the methodological approach that is common across all content WPs (5-8) and is based on an extended automated content analysis (see Annex I). During this phase, we identify the semantic concepts that appear in the various discourses and in the different conflict cases under study and compile a large set of concepts that constitute INFOCORE's main content analytical tool, the dictionary (see Annex I for a detailed analysis of the shared methodological approach). For this purpose, a large number of texts is sampled, studied and annotated across the content-analytic WPs by native speakers of the respective languages, aiming to the collection of contextual elements as well as structural elements across the different languages and countries of the cases under study. This detailed procedure results to a long

list of words, terms and expressions across the recorded languages, which are then clustered into semantic concepts, involving levels of abstraction, instantiation and hierarchical ordering (Baden & Stalpouskaya, 2014). This process aspires to draw on the theoretical knowledge and construct a conceptual quiver that will include all important conceptual categories as well as broader semantic structures.

b. Besides the shared multi-language dictionary across the content-analytic WPs, WP5 analyzes a sample of social media content to trace and record related concepts that are used in social media narratives. This process aims to complement the shared INFOCORE's dictionary by adding social media related concepts that address WP5's specific research questions. More specifically, in this qualitative stage we identify a range of patterns that are important to be recorded. At the same time, we analyze and monitor reports and commentaries on the role, influence and impact of social media and networks in the selected conflicts that often mention important actors, follow the evolving debate and report on relevant trending topics.

Based on this analysis, we will filter a broad range of indicators that can be used to capture important interactions in the online social network, and detect specific contents of the debate beyond those captured by the shared dictionary developed for all content-analytic work packages (as described in Annex I). Accordingly, we augment the instrument for the subsequent automated stage by adding a range of indicators for social media specific expressions (e.g., acronyms, pictograms) and popular hashtags that are used in the various online debates.

Each conflict is studied within pre-defined time frames: 2006-2014 for Israel and Palestine, 2011-2014 for Syria and Macedonia, 2010-2014 for Kosovo and Burundi and 2012-2014 for DRC (see Annex I). Taking into account the amount of material we may collect, it is highly possible that the need for narrowing down the studied time range in shorter periods will arise. In this case, we will ensure that various time ranges will be selected that will cover different phases of conflict escalation and de-escalation as well as around specific events that are crucial for each conflict case. In addition to the keyword search, we aim to focus on social media-specific items that enhance the evolving debate and provide information about the activity on the studied social media profiles and accounts, while at the same time enhance our understanding of the structure and the functionality of the social network on the basis of an online ethnographic study.

2. Quantitative study

The next stage consists of a quantitative automated content analysis of the meanings constructed and expressed on social media and a quantitative social network analysis that will focus on all interactions formed and developed between the studied actors.

a. Quantitative automated content analysis

For the stage of the quantitative study, a large-scale automated content analysis is employed to measure the presence of all contents that were operationalized theoretically as well as identified in the studied annotated texts at the previous research phases (Baden & Stalpouskaya, 2014). The automated content

analysis is based on the general dictionary shared cross all content-analytic WPs and on the WP-specific dictionary, which captures social media-specific forms of expressing content. Both dictionaries are applied on the large social media content material that is collected from the available social media platforms identified in the respective conflict cases (see the next sub-chapter on sampling). The texts that are collected through consistent and broad keyword searches across the social media and networks profiles and accounts of the actors under study together with the large list of concepts that are compiled in the shared dictionary consist the research material to be coded into the Amsterdam Content Analysis Toolkit (AmCAT, van Atteveldt, 2008) that will be employed for INFOCORE's content analysis.

The analysis is based initially on a very low level of abstraction, representing the texts as semantic networks and at a later stage, higher order semantic structures and discourse dynamics in the data are identified through an analytic search for characteristic patterns, systematic developments and key moments and texts (Baden & Stalpouskaya, 2014). Patterns of information flow, the evolution of information and communication patterns, variances of polarized debate, the density of social media and networking activity of various actors are examined over time, different phases of the conflict and in variant conflict cases.

WP5's research design deals with content on social media as contextual elements and the dynamics evolving on social networks as structural elements, both contributing to the formation of a social media public (and at the same time multiple private) sphere. The approach is to use the two most popular social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter, as the main 'sphere' where the online discourse and the dynamic interactions between the actors take place. All reactions and interactions that are contributed to both platforms are considered as external links and references that are incorporated in the online discourse and become part of it.

In doing so, WP employs a two-level approach: first, on the semantic analysis of the debate, we study how the content is created online and we regard all content created outside the social media realm as external references/sources that are contributed to the social media platforms. Second, we consider all external content (e.g. photographs and images through Flickr and Instagram, video material on Youtube or Vimeo, blog posts), when contributed, as becoming part of the Facebook and Twitter debate. Our decision to focus on these two popular platforms is based on the assumption that they incorporate major parts of the conflict debate, while at the same time, attract heavy networking activity between all involved actors. Acknowledging that these two platforms may not be relevant across all studied conflict cases and respective countries, we will address regional social media usage patterns through WP5's specific questions that are incorporated to the interview grids of the interview-based WPs (1-4). The reason is that some platforms that are becoming more relevant in specific conflicts, e.g. WhatsApp do not contain publicly available data and their importance may only be assessed through interviewing the actors who are using them (in this case, users/lay publics).

b. Quantitative social network analysis

While one part of the WP-specific dictionary for the automated analysis serves to detect social media-specific expressions of meaning, the other part of that dictionary records a range of information about the social interactions (communications, likes, follows etc.) among users participating in the very same debate analyzed for its content above. So further to the automated content analysis, WP5 will extend its scope by employing social network analysis to study the social relations between sets of actors and to identify the actors' personal networks as well the interrelations and interdependencies developed between them. By tracing the dynamic social structures developed on web 2.0 platforms, we gain a valuable insight into the types and patterns of relationships that emerge from individual connectivity and their impact on the network as a whole. Our aim is to identify clusters of involved and interconnected actors in the various conflict cases under study and examine the patterns of their connections as well as their role in a dynamic social network and in a specific conflict context. The value of the social network approach is the focus on relationships and the monitoring of social phenomena, such as group formation and cohesion, social roles, personal influence (Hansen et al, 2013).

This way we can approach relationships as the building blocks of the social world, while each cluster of relationships indicates connections between people and groups (ibid). By studying different networks, we can acquire an overview of the structure of the network and focus on emergent clusters, communities and key participants. Crucially, capturing both the semantic networks of meaning collaboratively presented on social media, and the social networks of communications underlying these constructions, we can connect the processes of meaning production and social interactions, linking the two main processes at the focus of INFOCORE's research.

3. Qualitative in-depth analysis

This last stage completes INFOCORE's content analytic strategy and incorporates findings from both the quantitative content and network analysis as well as from the findings of the other WPs. The manual in-depth analysis focuses on specific and purposively selected social media material as well as key moments and events in the different conflicts. The selection of the material during this last stage will be based on background knowledge and contextual information on the conflicts under study with the support and the insight of the respective conflict leaders. At the same time, it adds up to the comparability character of INFOCORE as one of the main strengths of the project. The key conceptual and semantic elements identified in the first stage of the research and monitored and coded during its second phase are further contextualized and interpreted. This triangulation of data completes the research circuit and forms a robust theoretical and empirical framework to explain and interpret the role and the impact of social media on violent conflicts.

In our attempt to study in depth the discourse of Facebook groups' members, on a basis of a multi-sited ethnography, we draw on some of Marcus's techniques. These are: a) Follow the people- here it can be paraphrased as follow the social media users b) Follow the metaphor- focuses on signs, symbols,

languages and discourses c) Follow the plot, story or allegory- here we emphasise stories, narratives and their links to social memory d) Follow the life or biography- focus on life histories and their juxtapositions of social contexts and e) Follow the conflict, which emphasises discourses on conflicts under investigation (Marcus, 1995: 106-10).

Furthermore, The specific techniques provide us the opportunity to examine linguistic modes and discourses in detail and synthesize them with political and national identities' issues. As Marcus (1998) further explains:

> The development of multi-sited strategies for doing ethnography so as to discover and define more complex and surprising objects of study is literally one important way at present to expand the significance and power, while at the same time changing the form of ethnographic knowledge…viewed in this radical way, multi-sited research presents new challenges to both ways of writing ethnography and ways of pursuing fieldwork. In short, within a multi-sited research imaginary, tracing and describing the connections and relationships among sites previously thought incommensurate is ethnography's way of making arguments and providing its own contexts of significance (1998:14).

By employing the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) to Critical Discourse Studies, we illustrate the interdisciplinary nature of our research, which is important for the comprehension of the complexity of the objects under investigation (social media/networks). Thus, we follow the principle of *triangulation*, which implies taking a whole range of empirical observations, theories and methods into account, and enables researchers to minimize 'cherry-picking' due to its endeavour to work on the basis of a variety of genres, methods of analysis, theories and background information (Wodak, 2007; Wodak et al, 2009). Furthermore, we distinguish between 'discourse' and 'text' and claim that texts can be assigned to genres. A 'genre' could be characterized as 'a socially ratified way of using language in connection with a particular type of social activity' (Fairclough, 1995). As Wodak (2001) further explains:

> [T]he DHA attempts to integrate a large quantity of available knowledge about the historical sources and the background of the social and political fields in which discursive 'events' are embedded. Further, it analyses the historical dimension of discursive actions by exploring the ways in which particular genres of discourse are subject to diachronic change. Lastly, and most importantly, this is not only viewed as information. At this point we integrate social theories to be able to explain the so-called context (ibid.: 65).

The DHA thus links discursive practices, social variables, institutional frames and sociopolitical and historical contexts. As Reisigl and Wodak (2009: 90) note:

> [T]he DHA considers intertextual and interdiscursive relationships between utterances, texts, genres and discourses, as well as extra-linguistic social/sociological variables, the history of an organization or institution, and situational frames. While focusing on all these relationships, we explore how discourses, genres and texts change in relation to sociopolitical change.

In addition, the concepts of intertextuality, recontextualization and interdiscursivity are salient for comprehension of the DHA's theoretical framework: *Intertextuality* refers to the fact that all texts are linked to other texts, in both the past and the present. Such links can be established in different ways: through continued reference to a topic or main actors; through reference to the same events; or by the transfer of main arguments from one text into the next. The latter process is also labelled *recontextualization* and has an important role in our study, insofar as it can, for instance, be observed

when contrasting a political statement or an opinion article with the selective 'reporting' of them in various social media. *Interdiscursivity*, on the other hand, indicates that discourses are linked to each other in complex ways; they draw on each other, overlap or refer to each other.

The DHA distinguishes between three dimensions of analysis. These are: *the specific content or topics of specific discourses; discursive strategies; and the linguistic means* that are drawn upon to realize both topics and strategies (Wodak 2011: 38). Five types of discursive strategies are involved in *positive Self* and *negative Other* presentation, and these reveal the main elements that establish the discursive opposition between 'us' and 'them'. These strategies include: *referential or nomination strategies* which focus on membership categorization devices, such as biological, naturalizing and depersonalizing metaphors, metonymies, and synecdoches, in order to represent social actors, and especially in-groups and out-groups; *predicational strategies,* which connect the social actors with negative and stereotypical attributions; *argumentation strategies* through which positive and negative attributions are justified; *perspectivization, framing* or *discourse representation* which emphasises the way speakers express their involvement in discourse and position their point of view when reporting and discrimination utterances; *intensifying strategies and mitigation strategies* which either sharpen or downplay the emphasis of utterances (Reisigl & Wodak 2001: 44-84).

In our study, we intend to focus on these strategies and also, more specifically, on the argumentation schemes employed. Following the Aristotelian tradition, we approach *topos* (pl. *topoi*) as a rhetorical and dialectical scheme that offers the opportunity for a systematic in-depth analysis of different arguments and statements that represent the accepted knowledge – *endoxon* – and which are usually employed by orators or opponents to persuade their audience of the validity of their opinions (Boukala, 2014). *Topoi* are thus defined as parts of argumentation which belong to the obligatory, either explicit or inferable, premises. As such they justify the transition from the argument or arguments to the conclusion (Kienpointner 1997). Hence, a *topos* should be understood as a quasi 'elliptic' argument (an *enthymeme*), where the premise is followed by the conclusion without giving any explicit evidence, while taking the conclusion to confirm, and relate to, *endoxon* (see also Wodak & Boukala, 2015, Boukala 2013).

Topoi can be made explicit as conditional or causal paraphrases, such as "if x, then y" or "y, because x" (Reisigl & Wodak 2001: 69-80). Focusing on these conclusion rules and Aristotelian (rhetorical) *topoi,* Kienpointer (1997) distinguishes between various content-abstract, i.e. formal, argumentation schemes which occur frequently in argumentation, such as the *topos of definition*, the *topos of comparison* (*topos of similarity* vs *topos of difference*), the *topos of the part and the whole*, the *topos of authority*, the *topos of example* and the *topos of analogy*. For example, the *topos of authority* can be deconstructed as follows:

Conclusion Rule: If authority X says that A is true, A is true.

A: X says that A is true.

C: Thus, A is true.

A topos, indeed, is not only an argumentation scheme, but also a syllogism that leads the orator to a 'conclusion' that can always be rejected or defended. As Kienpointner (2001) notes: 'topoi are on the one

hand search formulas, that is, devices for finding relevant arguments within the set of possible arguments that are called *endoxa*, and on the other hand probative formulas which grant the plausibility of the step from the argument(s) to the conclusion' (p. 18).

As WP5 constitutes the platform where the social media and networking activity of all actors (politicians, journalists, NGOs and users) is taking place, the input of the interview-based WPs (1-4) is crucial to interpret and relate the findings from the previous quantitative research stage. For this purpose, WP5 contributes to the interview WPs with specific questions (see table 2 below) that will be included in the interview grids and models of WP1 (journalistic production), 2 (political media strategies) and 4 (NGOs, media and conflicts) and the surveys and focus groups of WP3 (media and publics).

Questions of WP5 for the WPs 1-4 concerning Social Media

WP1	**Journalistic Production**
Q:	1. When reporting on a conflict, to what extent do you use social media to a. do background research on your story? b. gain access to (alternative) sources? c. promote your story? d. get feedback from your audience? Can you refer to any outstanding cases/examples? 2. How have social media changed the way you plan and organize your work? In your opinion, what are the most profound changes that social media have introduced to your profession? 3. Have you experienced, as part of your work, cases of credible and accurate coverage through social media, especially when no other information channels were available? Can you recall specific examples? 4. Have you come across biased or even propaganda material that is distributed through social media especially during the escalation phase of a conflict? Can you name some cases? How did you deal with it?
WP2	**Political Media Strategies**
Q:	1. To what extent do you (or your staff) use social media to a. disseminate information concerning your political activity? b. establish connections and communicate with journalists? c. reach out to citizens? Can you refer to any outstanding cases/examples? 2. To what extent have social media changed the way you (and your staff) plan your communication strategy? Can you name any specific cases/examples? 3. To what extent does the direct communication you can establish through social media with citizens influence your communication practices/relations to journalists? Can you name specific examples? 4. Have you ever become aware of important information concerning an ongoing conflict through social media? Can you recall any specific examples? 5. Have you come across biased or even propaganda material that is distributed through social media especially during the escalation phase of a conflict? Can you name some cases? How did you deal with it?

WP3	**Media and Publics**
Q:	1. How much do you trust social media to stay informed about conflict developments in your country? 2. Where do you usually turn to when you need to be informed about conflict developments in your country through social media (profiles/pages of political actors, profiles of journalists, other users or specific groups on social media)? Can you name a few? 3. Do you participate actively on discussions on social media regarding the conflict situation in your country? What is your main activity on social media (disseminate information, post comments, follow specific accounts to stay informed, mobilize other people, communicate with political actors/journalists)? 4. Do you think that social media can offer an alternative view to different sides of a conflict in comparison to other media (newspapers, TV, radio)?
WP4	**NGOs, Media and Conflict**
Q:	1. When dealing with a conflict, to what extent does your organization use social media to a. disseminate information concerning your actions? b. establish connections and communicate with journalists? c. reach out to the public? d. raise awareness and support through campaigns? Can you refer to any outstanding cases/examples? 2. To what extent have social media changed the way your organization plans your communication strategy? Can you name any specific cases/examples? 3. Do you think that social media can be used as alternative channels for important information concerning an ongoing conflict? Can you name any specific cases/examples? 4. Have you ever used social media for peace building or conflict resolution actions? If so, have you engaged citizens to these actions through social media? What were the results?

Table 2: Input to interview WPs (1-4)

Sampling strategy

As social media are studied as the virtual sphere where diverse content emerges and various actors (politicians, journalists, NGOs, users) interact, our sampling strategy proves a complex and demanding task. To deal with these complexities and challenges, we will follow a mixed approach in our sampling, consisting of an actor-based and a spaces-based approach.

Regarding the first approach, we will identify and compile, in close cooperation with the interview work package leaders as well as the conflict leaders, detailed lists of prominent and highly involved actors (see table 3) on social media in order to track their activity and explore their deployed narrative as well as their networking patterns and linkages. Tentative lists for the respective case studies are provided in Annex II and are constantly updated and revised until the next stage of the data selection and collection. The sampling process of the actor-based approach is informed by (see below for the applied selection criteria):

a. the selection of specific journalists, political actors and NGOs representatives to be interviewed in the framework of WP1, 2 and 4 respectively as well as of users/members of lay publics

participating in the survey and focus groups of WP3. In selected cases, we will monitor the social media activity of actors that highlight social media as important in their interviews. Social media monitoring may also be applied in case some of the selected actors refuse to be interviewed but we decide to monitor and record their activity online.

b. the suggestions of the conflict leaders for political actors, journalists, NGOs representatives/experts, activists, users who demonstrate heavy social media activity and are therefore important to be studied.
c. WP5's research and expertize for identifying actors who shape and lead social media discourse and are recorded in reports and news stories as relevant for the conflict cases under study.

Following the second approach, we aim to track and monitor popular 'spaces' (see table 3) where the social media narrative is taking place, e.g. Facebook groups and pages, Twitter group accounts and hashtags threads. Regarding the studied timeline, WP5 will follow a more focused and constrained timeframe, due to the massive datasets that will emerge if we collect all available data on the social media platforms for the range of eight years (2006-2014). Evaluating the suggested timeline of INFOCORE's conflict cases, we will focus on selected events and on different conflict phases (escalation/de-escalation of conflict). Tentative lists of possible 'spaces' are also provided in Annex II based on the different conflict cases and they are as well constantly revised and evaluated until the next stage of social media material collection.

The hashtags can be used in monitoring and leading the debate. Through the selection of leading hashtags and trending topics, the grouping of similarly tagged messages is possible, while facilitating an electronic search to return all messages that contain it. Hashtags allow us to treat the social media as a complex and collective platform as not separate, single platforms that are closed systems in their own end. The selection of hashtags allows us to follow the formed social media narrative, while at the same time stand as triggers of the debate. However, it is essential that hashtag analysis is accompanied by an in-depth study of the political and cultural context around the specific narrative, taking into consideration emerging selection biases. At the same time, hashtags are often manipulated as in the case of Syria, where various spam accounts targeting #Syria were created and flooded the hashtag with frequent tweets about irrelevant topics, such as photography, old Syrian sport scores, Syrian comedy shows (Global Voices, 2011). Also, several pro-regime accounts have been set up to counter the prevailing pro-revolution narrative (York, 2011) and even verbally assault and threaten anyone tweeting in favour of the ongoing protests or criticizing the regime.

It is important to add that the used software allows us to easily capture all used hashtags. At the quantitative stage we can determine whether additional interesting hashtags exist, or whether a specific one identified as relevant becomes problematic and then adjust for it. Our proposed approach is one of two-step sampling: first, we use hashtags to identify interesting profiles and then we use these profiles to identify additional hashtags of interest.

In addition, from the qualitative stage, we develop automatable strategies for obtaining interpretable and meaningful samples and collect the relevant metadata through social media and network profiles and usernames of the involved actors, as well as identify the way the social media debate is constructed (e.g. follows, likes, replies, mentions, retweets).

Social media material is collected through a keyword-based search founded on INFOCORE's shared dictionary. Where possible and considered as necessary, we can expand the scope of the selected keywords by collecting also material (e.g. replies/retweets/mentions) that is linked to the original content (e.g. tweets) that contains the requested keywords, even if this material doesn't contain the keyword itself. This way can analyze sequences of tweets that will provide us with enhanced material for the context-based analysis.

Classification of actors & 'spaces'	
Actors	**'Spaces'**
Politicians	Facebook pages
Political actors	Facebook groups
Political groups	Events' pages
Professional journalists	Comments/Replies
NGO representatives	Likes
Researchers/experts	Twitter group accounts
Bloggers	Hashtag threads
Activists	Replies/Mentions
Single users/members of public	Retweets

Table 3: Possible types of actors and 'spaces'

Our sampling strategy takes into account the following criteria:

a. *Conflict specifications:* Social media are not a central tool of information, communication and organization of actors in the various conflict cases in a unified way, so we need to distinguish a conflict-specific sample in each case. For example, while social media have played an important role in the conflict inside Syria, there is a very low social media penetration in Burundi and DRC.

b. *Diversity:* Our selection aims to provide a diverse sample within each and across all conflict cases, taking into consideration the following criteria: type of actors, language, level of social media engagement, influence, political orientation, group affiliation. Though this sample does not claim to be representative, it captures a broad range of content and activity, may allow generalizations and transfers beyond our specific conflict cases.

c. *Accessibility & availability of material:* Each social media platform is characterized by specific features that allow easy/feasible or difficult/not possible access to material. While the majority of the activity on Twitter is public and visible, many Facebook users choose to keep their profiles private, making their content not available. For this reason, the study of hashtags, which were introduced by Twitter and later

adopted also by Facebook, becomes even more important and powerful for examining information and communication flows as well as network structures.

Regarding the sampling approach for our qualitative analysis, the collection of the data will be based on two different groups- conflicts and social media actors. The selection criteria regarding specific events that took place during the conflicts we intend to examine are:

1.The events' international media coverage

2. Their Escalation/de-escalation

3. References to these events by social media users and finally

4. The transformations that the events cause in the sociopolitical status quo.

For selecting the social media actors, we take into consideration:

1. Their institutional role (journalists, politicians, NGOs, users/public)

2. Their level of social media engagement

3. The language they use to communicate their message and

4. The availability of material (public vs private content).

Our multi-sited social media ethnography[2] is based on the study of Facebook groups that are relevant to specific conflicts that are examined in INFOCORE and expected to take places in different phases.

Phase 1 involves getting acquainted with the community/group as a visitor.

Phase 2: systematic participant observation that is focused on interaction with the discussants.

Phase 3 involves tracing several text trajectories and emphasise the discursive construction of the dichotomy between 'Us' and 'Them'.

Following INFOCORE's general hypotheses, we do not reduce our study to this classic distinction, quite the contrary we aim to illustrate whether and how this dichotomy is evolved by social media users in times of crisis and clarify if it is linked to hate speech and discriminatory discourses via the combination of ethnography and the Discourse Historical Approach (see below). Another important aspect of the ethnographic research is related to ethical considerations. Although the online ethnographic studies have raised debates about the limits of the ethnographer in the study of such a community, the American Anthropological Association have not introduced a guide on the study of virtual communities yet. Following the ethical limits of the classic anthropological research we decided to use open identities as researchers and members of the groups and be aware of the actors' anonymization.

Research limitations

While WP5 focuses on the innovative field of social media, their dynamic character and rapidly changing nature, poses certain constraints and limitations to our research that need to be addressed, especially in matters of content availability and access, volume of social media content over the examined timeframe, level of importance of social media in different conflicts. More specifically, we need to acknowledge the

[2] The ethnographic observation is not expected to take place in the study of every conflict that is examined by WP5. Participating in a such a community (facebook group) is difficult, but doing it systematically for a focused period enables insights that could contribute to an in depth comprehension of social media function.

technical challenges regarding the data retrieved from the studied social media platforms, which need to be checked for consistency when scraped. Limited access to data due to privacy restrictions of the users may also pose limitations in the material we can retrieve. Although our main focus is on the public (and visible) debate, we acknowledge that there are cases when the important and decisive information, communication and networking activity takes place on closed discussion groups to which we cannot obtain access. More importantly, social media's use may appear limited or even trivial in specific conflicts, as we have already found out in the cases of Burundi and DRC. In this case, we aim to examine these conflict cases deeper and to a greater temporal dimension to overcome the limited material that may be available. At the same time, the vast and complex social media material in other cases, as for example in Syria and Israel/Palestine, will balance the possible heterogeneity of the available data.

Ethical Considerations

Although WP5 will collect public only available data, there are certain ethical considerations that need to be addressed since the nature of digital information contains at some point data leading to specific individuals. Serious consideration of principles regarding the collection of social media material is necessary, even if the association between individuals and research data is not apparent at the first level.

It may also be the case that, in specific conflict contexts, the rights of individuals may need to outweigh the interests of our research. The vulnerability of the conflict cases under study increases our obligation as researchers to protect the various online communities and the involved individuals.

Anonymity will be applied across all collected data and all studied actors will be assigned a code. Anonymisation of data should be extremely robust so that no datasets can be cross-referenced nor reveal any identifiers (even if names are hidden) that could link direct quotes/posts to specific individuals. Only the principle researcher will have in her possession the original list of names that corresponds to the assigned codes. No names will be used in any reports, working papers or articles that will be produced as outputs of the study. The original data will be stored on the LMU server, which meets all EU standards for data protection. Since ethical issues may arise during different steps of the research process, related decisions may need to be addressed during planning, research implementation, results analysis and dissemination.

According to INFOCORE's Data Management Plan, the data will be processed and managed in a secure non-networked environment. Researchers working with sensitive data will make sure their computers are not connected to any other network device. In addition, documents with personal information or metadata that contain direct identifiers of respondents and/or their institutions will be kept separately from data files used for analysis. Sensitive data will generally not be stored in or saved to network devices or applications, such as Dropbox or iCloud. INFOCORE Consortium will make sure that all information that allows identifying respondents and/or their institutions will be removed from the data that is made publicly available. Once deposited, the data will undergo procedures to protect the confidentiality of individuals whose personal information may be part of archived data. These include: (1)

rigorous review to assess disclosure risk, (2) modifying data if necessary to protect confidentiality, (3) limiting access to datasets in which risk of disclosure remains high, and (4) consultation with data producers to manage disclosure risk.

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(IN)FORMING CONFLICT PREVENTION, RESPONSE AND RESOLUTION:

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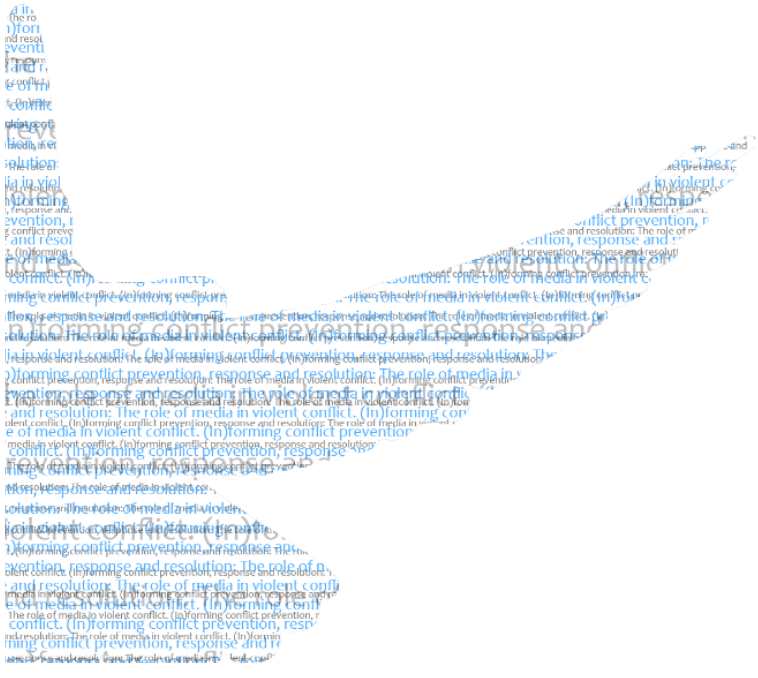
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