

RESEARCH BRIEF

DIGITAL DISINFORMATION OPERATIONS IN ARMED CONFLICT

ABSTRACT

Digital disinformation operations (disinfo-ops) are increasingly weaponized in armed conflicts, distorting realities on the battlefield and beyond. While deception has long been an accepted military tactic, the scale, speed, and precision of modern disinformation campaigns raise urgent legal and humanitarian concerns. This Info-Brief examines how international humanitarian law and human rights law interact in addressing disinformation during armed conflict, exploring the impact on civilians, humanitarian actors, journalists, and human rights defenders. As social media platforms amplify manipulated information from all sides, the erosion of trust in humanitarian agencies and media outlets undermines relief efforts, safe passage, and access to life-saving information.

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INTRODUCTION

As part of the Geneva Academy series on digital disinformation operations, this info-brief explores the manipulation of information in war zones through the lens of international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL). While disinformation is a global phenomenon, its impact is particularly acute in conflict settings, where it can escalate violence, mislead civilians and disrupt humanitarian operations.

The first report in this series examined the fundamental mechanisms by which mis- and disinformation spread, highlighting algorithmic amplification, precision targeting, and the deployment of bots and troll networks. It also introduced the need to address the legal and ethical tensions between freedom of expression and efforts to counter disinformation by ensuring that synthetic activity is removed from online spaces to preserve the integrity of genuine human discourse. The second report addressed the evolving legal challenges posed by digital disinformation, including its implications for sovereignty, non-intervention, and self-determination.

While deception has long been accepted under IHL as a legitimate ruse of war, the rapid spread of digital disinformation – targeting both civilian populations and military forces – raises urgent legal and humanitarian concerns. As efforts to regulate disinfo-ops evolve, the second Info-Brief in this series highlights emerging EU legislation that facilitates privacy-preserving researcher access to platform data, providing critical insights into a problem for which policymakers and societies currently lack empirical understanding or benchmarks. In conflict settings, scientific study of disinformation can help assess its scale, patterns, and impact on affected communities struggling for survival, offering a foundation for more informed legal and policy responses.

INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

In armed conflict, the manipulation of information has long held strategic and operational significance. From the breaching of Troy with hidden soldiers inside the Trojan Horse, to Hannibal's feigned retreat at Lake Trasimene, and Operation Fortitude's large-scale deception on D-Day, tricks and traps have remained an accepted method in warfare. Consistent with this approach, international humanitarian law (IHL) has historically been permissive towards many forms of information manipulation, with propaganda being one of the most well-known.¹ This has often been deemed part of military strategy.² Article 37(2) of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions explicitly states: "Ruses of war are not prohibited".³ In conflict zones, such action is used to manipulate perceptions, control narratives, and destabilize adversaries – targeting both military and civilian populations. Manipulated information can be deployed to achieve tactical and psychological advantages, such as misleading enemy forces or discrediting opponents.

The use of artifice and subterfuge are permitted military tactics in IHL, provided they do not amount to perfidy. Acts of perfidy – such as feigning surrender or civilian status to launch an attack – are explicitly prohibited as they exploit protections afforded under IHL, undermining the integrity of these safeguards.⁴ Similarly, campaigns that incite war crimes or violence against civilians violate both the principles of distinction and proportionality that are fundamental tenets of IHL. Digital platforms have complicated enforcement by enabling harmful campaigns, such as deepfake videos or mass disinformation, that target civilian populations and at times exacerbate harm and sow panic.⁵

Operating in shared information spaces, the evolving use of disinformation to target civilians directly rather than combatants marks a significant and troubling shift in modern conflict. Civilians are particularly vulnerable during active hostilities, as false information about safety zones, evacuation routes, or humanitarian aid can lead to life-threatening decisions. The permissive stance of international humanitarian law toward disinformation, when framed as a "ruse of war," further complicates regulation and enforcement, leaving civilians and humanitarian efforts at significant risk. Digital technology has exponentially increased the scale and speed of these operations, enabling the rapid dissemination of manipulated information to a global audience, often with minimal accountability. This is a significant change that necessitates a reexamination

of their impact on civilians, humanitarian actors, and the broader information ecosystem.⁶

Non-state actors, including armed groups, terrorist organizations, and extremist movements, also exploit disinformation to advance their objectives in conflict settings. These groups use false or misleading narratives as propaganda tools to recruit members, radicalize populations, and sow fear or distrust among their adversaries. By leveraging social media and other digital platforms, non-state actors can disseminate content rapidly and anonymously, reaching global audiences without substantial resources. Unlike State actors, non-state groups often lack formal accountability mechanisms, making it difficult to trace and counter their activities effectively. This unchecked disinformation undermines social cohesion, escalates violence, and complicates humanitarian efforts in already fragile conflict zones.⁷

HUMAN RIGHTS LAW IN ARMED CONFLICT

International human rights law and international humanitarian law are widely recognized as complementary legal regimes that apply concurrently during armed conflicts.⁸ While IHL is triggered by the onset of armed conflict and focuses primarily on the conduct of military operations and the protection of specific groups, it addresses freedom of expression and access to information only in a limited and inconsistent manner. Human rights law, on the other hand, applies continuously and provides clarity and safeguards in areas where IHL is silent or ambiguous. The two frameworks reinforce one another, with human rights law addressing a broader range of actors, including those involved in manipulating information, and restricting practices that may be permissible under IHL. At the same time, the laws of armed conflict afford stronger protection in certain situations. Together, these regimes enable a nuanced and comprehensive approach to addressing the complex challenges of protecting information and expression rights in the digital age.⁹

Under international human rights law, information of any kind cannot be prohibited unless it constitutes advocacy of hatred that incites hostility, violence, or discrimination.¹⁰ The falsity or manipulation of information alone is insufficient to justify restrictions on freedom of expression. Similarly, freedom of expression extends to propaganda, which can only be restricted under the strict conditions of legality, necessity and proportionality.¹¹ However, propaganda for war is explicitly prohibited under

international law when it incites aggression or breaches of peace, as defined by the UN Charter.¹² Articles 19 and 20 of the ICCPR work in tandem to balance the right to freedom of expression with the need to address harmful speech, with Article 19 safeguarding the right and Article 20 carving out narrow prohibitions for incitement to violence and war. Notably, General Comment No. 11 from the Human Rights Committee underscores the binding nature of Article 20(1) on States Parties, requiring them to prohibit propaganda for war.¹³ The interplay highlights the nuanced framework required to regulate expression without undermining fundamental freedoms, even as challenges persist in applying these standards consistently across different legal and cultural contexts.¹⁴

IMPACT ON CIVILIANS

Civilians in conflict zones are increasingly vulnerable to disinformation campaigns that distort situational awareness. This can have devastating consequences, particularly when it undermines individuals' ability to make informed and safe decisions. False information about the location of ongoing hostilities, troop movements, or the availability of safe areas and corridors can lead civilians into dangerous situations. Simultaneously, information blackouts and Internet shutdowns imposed by authorities exacerbate the problem, leaving civilians unable to communicate with family or access reliable updates on security and essential services.¹⁵ Vulnerable groups such as women, children, and LGBTIQ+ persons often face disproportionate impacts, as support systems for those at heightened risk often fail during conflict.¹⁶ Moreover, the psychological toll of disinformation, compounded by exposure to violence, can result in long-term mental health issues, while the constant amplification of anger and outrage fuels radicalization, extreme opinions, and even violence. Such tactics not only risk civilian lives but also undermine trust in humanitarian agencies, complicating relief efforts, jeopardizing the delivery of life-saving aid and safe passage.¹⁷

The ability to access diverse and reliable sources of information is not only a human right, but an indispensable need for those living in conflict-affected areas. In such contexts, it has been proposed by UN Special Rapporteur Irene Khan that access to accurate and reliable information should be considered a "survival right."¹⁸ It can mean the difference between life and death (guiding individuals to safety, medicine, food and water), can enable informed decisions and foster resilience amidst chaos, and can also

play a critical role in resolving conflicts, uncovering human rights violations, and pursuing justice and accountability.

HUMANITARIAN ACTORS, JOURNALISTS AND HR DEFENDERS

Humanitarian organizations and human rights defenders can be targets of disinformation, designed to discredit their work and obstruct their operations. Accusations of bias, criminality, or collaboration with combatants can lead to funding cuts, hinder access to conflict zones, and heighten security risks for aid workers, particularly women.¹⁹ These actions contravene the principle of neutrality that underpins humanitarian assistance under IHL.²⁰

International human rights law safeguards free, independent, and pluralistic journalism, while international humanitarian law extends protections to journalists as civilians, prohibiting their deliberate targeting – a war crime under its framework.²¹ Even when journalists disseminate propaganda that supports a war effort, this does not legally justify attacks against them or media facilities, unless they directly participate in hostilities or incite international crimes. However, the primary challenge to ensuring the safety of journalists lies not in legal gaps but in the persistent lack of political will and the failure of States and conflict parties to adhere to existing international legal obligations.²²

Human rights defenders also play a critical role in promoting accountability, justice, and the protection of fundamental rights. In many conflict-affected settings, they face systematic harassment, intimidation, and legal reprisals aimed at silencing their advocacy. Beyond legal harassment, human rights defenders are also vulnerable to surveillance, arbitrary detention, and violence.²³

CONCLUSION

Social media platforms play a dual role in modern conflicts, serving as both essential communication tools for civilians while simultaneously acting as vehicles for propaganda and disinformation. The amplification of sensational and polarizing content by synthetic forces exacerbates divisions, destabilizes democratic institutions, and increasingly targets civilian populations rather than military actors. The ease with which false or misleading narratives can be deployed and disseminated at scale creates new challenges for humanitarian protection, conflict resolution, and legal accountability.

As the boundaries between state and non-state actors blur, and the lines between legitimate information warfare and harmful disinformation become increasingly difficult to define, there is an urgent need to reassess the role of international humanitarian law in addressing digital disinformation operations. Traditional IHL protections regarding ruses of war must now be evaluated in light of the magnitude, speed, and impact of modern disinformation campaigns.

At the same time, solutions must extend beyond legal frameworks. Ways to curb synthetic forces that have the capacity to distort individualized information spaces in ways never before known – nor currently understood – should be considered in armed conflict.²⁴ Moreover, greater transparency from digital platforms regarding content amplification and moderation is critical, as is structured access to platform data for independent researchers. Insights from the Info-Brief on EU Data Access underscore the importance of data availability for understanding and mitigating disinfo-ops in conflict settings.

END NOTES

- 1 P Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era* (3rd edn, Manchester University Press 2003).
- 2 E Katz, 'Liar's War: Protecting Civilians from Disinformation During Armed Conflict' (2021) 103(914) *International Review of the Red Cross* 651, 663–664.
- 3 Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I) (adopted 8 June 1977, entered into force 7 December 1978) 1125 UNTS 3, art 37(2).
- 4 *ibid*, art 37.
- 5 I Khan, Report of the Special Rapporteur on Disinformation and Freedom of Opinion and Expression during Armed Conflicts (10 August 2022) UN Doc A/77/288, para 74–93.
- 6 Katz, 'Liar's War' (n 2); Henning Lahmann, 'Protecting the Global Information Space in Times of Armed Conflict' (2021) 102 *International Review of the Red Cross* 1227.
- 7 Katz, 'Liar's War' (n 2) 667: "Private citizens and other non-State actors, whether acting in the service of the conflict actors or in their individual capacities, also have a prominent role, and in some cases have been shown to be the primary drivers of disinformation in conflict. In several contemporary armed conflicts, the combatants have deputized "electronic armies", "troll farms" or "web brigades" to spew disinformation."
- 8 UN Human Rights Committee, 'General Comment No 31: The Nature of the General Legal Obligation Imposed on States Parties to the Covenant' (26 May 2004) UN Doc CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.13, para. 11.
- 9 K Fortin, 'The Relationship Between International Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law: Taking Stock at the End of 2022' (2022) 40(4) *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights* 343–353.
- 10 United Nations General Assembly, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR) (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 23 March 1976) 999 UNTS 171, art 20(2).
- 11 UN Human Rights Committee (HRC), General comment No 34, Article 19, Freedoms of opinion and expression, CCPR/C/GC/34 (12 September 2011) para 22. See also, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, OAS Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, and ACHPR Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information, Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and "Fake News", *Disinformation and Propaganda* (3 March 2017) FOM.GAL/3/17 <<https://www.osce.org/fom/302796>> accessed Dec 2024.
- 12 Charter of the United Nations (adopted 26 June 1945, entered into force 24 October 1945) 1 UNTS XVI, arts 1(1), 2(4), and 39.
- 13 HRC, 'General Comment No 11: Prohibition of Propaganda for War and Inciting National, Racial or Religious Hatred (Art. 20)' (29 July 1983).
- 14 A Richter, 'The Relationship Between Freedom of Expression and the Ban on Propaganda for War' (2014) *European Yearbook on Human Rights* 489–503.
- 15 See eg, OHCHR and Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), 'Joint Investigation into Alleged Violations of International Human Rights, Humanitarian and Refugee Law Committed in the Tigray Region of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia' (2021): "The internet and phone shutdowns restricted access to information also for civilians. The lack of information during the conflict prevented civilians from communicating with each other about safety considerations, access to medical facilities, and sources of food and shelter thereby causing considerable harm and distress to the civilian population".
- 16 See also, I Khan, Report of the Special Rapporteur on Gendered Disinformation and the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression (7 August 2023) UN Doc A/78/288.
- 17 The conflict in Ukraine is an example: Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), 'When Words Become Weapons: The Unprecedented Risks to Civilians from the Spread of Disinformation in Ukraine' (October 2023) <<https://civiliansinconflict.org/publications/research/when-words-become-weapons-the-unprecedented-risks-to-civilians-from-the-spread-of-disinformation-in-ukraine/>> accessed Dec 2024.
- 18 Khan, *Disinformation during Armed Conflict* (n 5) para 5.
- 19 Khan, *Gendered Disinformation* (n 16).
- 20 CIVIC, 'When Words Become Weapons' (n 17). International Committee of the Red Cross, 'Ukraine: Addressing misinformation about ICRC's activities' (26 March 2022) <<https://www.icrc.org/en/document/ukraine-addressing-misinformation-about-icrcs-activities>> accessed Dec 2024.
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- 22 Khan, *Disinformation during Armed Conflict* (n 5) paras 47–49, 61–66. See also, I Khan, Report of the Special Rapporteur on Reinforcing Media Freedom and the Safety of Journalists in the Digital Age (20 April 2022) UN Doc A/HRC/50/29.
- 23 *ibid*, para 61–66.
- 24 For a proposal to curb automated and synthetic activity, preserve privacy and promote human interaction, see S Hallensleben, *Trust in the European Digital Space in the Age of Automated Bots and Fakes* (European Observatory of ICT Standardisation, January 2022) <<https://www.standict.eu/news/trusted-information-digital-space>> accessed Dec 2024.

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