



UPDATE ON THE INFORMATION DOMAIN

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SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS ROLE IN INFORMING AND INFLUENCING THE PUBLIC DURING PERIODS OF TENSION

INTRODUCTION

1. In recent years, social media platforms have become the go-to source for the latest information and opinions on significant events and public announcements, which hitherto were dominated by government sources and major news outlets.
2. According to *CNN*, the increasing adoption of social media as a source of reliable news has changed not just how the public view political crisis or war, but also how media content is produced. For instance, real-time, civilian-filmed scenes could be shared on social media platforms and consumed by users as authentic information about key political events. Likewise Vox has reported that social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and TikTok have increasingly become places for content and debates on political crises that users are expected to engage with, rather than private spaces where one could post personal content.
3. Many malicious actors have exploited these social media platforms to fabricate, exaggerate and distort information on current issues in order to advance their narrow and illicit objectives.

PERCEIVING INFORMATION FROM SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

4. During periods of tension, when multiple events are unfolding rapidly at the same time, social media platforms assume a pivotal role to inform and influence audiences all over the world. In the ongoing Ukraine-Russia conflict, *PBS* reported that numerous posts, images and videos about the conflict have emerged on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok and Telegram. With the deluge of information – and disinformation – on such issues, it is increasingly difficult for users to assess, filter and obtain an unbiased and accurate picture of the conflict.

Re-purposed Content Masquerading as Current Events

5. There has been a trend of old media being circulated out of its original context to mislead viewers and advance specific agendas. The Stanford Internet Observatory cited a 20-second clip that showed paratroopers filming themselves while parachuting over fields, which garnered more than 20 million views within a day and were interpreted by users as recent. The clip turned out to be from 2015. Separately, according to *AP*, a short clip from a video game passing off as an actual happening in the Russia-Ukraine conflict managed to garner millions of views. In another example, *FirstCoastNews* reported a video of a man moving inside a body bag during a news update, which was interpreted by many users to be related to the ongoing conflict in Europe. However, the video was actually taken from an unrelated event – a climate change protest in Vienna.

6. With the mish-mash of both factual and false information being circulated together on these platforms, coupled with the emotionally-charged nature of such content, there is a risk that people may be misled, riled up or prompted into action. Others will become desensitised or grow more cynical about what they see on social media, and may end up dismissing information or developments that would directly impact them.

Real-Time, First-Person Reporting

7. Fortunately, social media content could be an enabler, if used responsibly. For instance, it could help to drive humanitarian aid internationally.

8. For instance, *The Guardian* reported that several influencers have changed their Instagram content to show footages of missile attacks and the current circumstances of civilians involved in the conflict. Such posts make the war feel more personable and relatable to audiences around the world, invoking their compassion and willingness to donate to humanitarian efforts, or even spurring them to engage in collective action within their home countries.

Using Humour to Communicate and Educate

9. According to *Vox*, content creators on social media have utilised memes to portray the Russia-Ukraine situation in humorous ways. One example would be the use of humorous political cartoons to dramatise the conflict. While those spreading such memes have been criticised for making light of the situation, there are those who thought the use of humour could bring comfort and cheer up those who are in distress.

10. Others have expressed optimism that the use of humour could get more people, especially youths, involved in politics and stay informed about the crisis. For instance, as reported by *Reuters*, there are users who share information and emphasised the seriousness of the crisis through popular social platforms such as TikTok. Such videos have garnered over hundred thousands of views, allowing many to stay informed about the crisis.

ASSESSMENT

11. In this digital age, wars are no longer confined to physical spaces. Information about ongoing conflicts are now pushed directly to the smartphones of people worldwide, creating risks and opportunities for malign and benign actors respectively.

12. With the advances in digital technologies and the growing popularity of social media around the world, the impetus to control, use and manipulate information in both peacetime and war have increased. Social media platforms such as Twitter have responded by tweaking their algorithms and hiring staff to spot misleading and amplified content.

13. According to *Politico*, governments from different countries such as Ukraine, Poland, Estonia, and Latvia have sent an open letter to Twitter, Meta and Google demanding for a clampdown on disinformation on their platforms. Even so, anyone who consumes information from social media platforms has to be ultimately responsible for determining the accuracy of the content and the reliability of its source.

CONTACT DETAILS

For any queries and/or clarifications, please contact ACICE at ACICE@defence.gov.sg

Prepared by:

ADMM Cybersecurity and Information Centre of Excellence

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