In times of war, digital activism has power. Here's how to engage responsibly

October 24 2023, by Kelly Lewis

Credit: Kamaji Ogino from Pexels

As armed conflict continues to play out in the Israel–Gaza war, a separate battle is raging to control the narrative being presented to the world.

Eyewitness accounts, verified facts and culturally sensitive reporting are competing with misinformation, political propaganda and irresponsible journalism.

This information warfare has real-world consequences. Pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli protests organized through social media have drawn tens of thousands of people onto the streets, despite anti-protest measures adopted in some countries.

The horrific events of the war, along with responses from across the world, underscore the dangers of diplomatic inaction. It also raises questions about the role digital activism plays in shaping the power dynamics that govern war and politics.

Irresponsible messaging fans the flames

In the Israel-Gaza war, Hamas is spreading propaganda on platforms including Telegram and X, while Israel's broad propaganda efforts include paid ads showing images of brutal violence on X and YouTube.

Nor can traditional media be blindly considered a reliable source of facts. Conflict reporting often focuses on specific violent events while ignoring their context, and news outlets have also made misleading and unsubstantiated claims in their reporting.

At the same time, access for journalists and investigators is extremely limited and responsibility for events such as the deadly al-Ahli hospital blast is highly contested and requires more impartial verified evidence.

The real-world consequences

Violence has spread well beyond Gaza. In the occupied West Bank,

many Palestinians have been killed in attacks by [Israeli settlers and forces](#).

In the United States, [a six-year-old Palestinian-American boy was stabbed to death](#) and his mother wounded in an Islamophobic, anti-Palestinian attack.

In France, [a teacher was killed and three students wounded](#) in an Islamist attack at a school, and [the Louvre was evacuated after bomb threats](#). The country has enacted its highest state of security alert.

In the United Kingdom, Jewish schools have been closed in London and Jewish institutions across the country have reported a [400% spike in antisemitic incidents](#) since the war began. In Berlin, violence broke out as petrol bombs were [thrown at a synagogue](#) in an antisemitic attack.

What is 'digital activism'?

"Digital activism" can be thought of as any digitally enabled form of activism and political participation. For scholars, however, digital activism is a conceptual troublemaker that is considered [broad, ambiguous and contested](#). But its function is especially significant in times of conflict and war.

So, does digital activism actually lead to change? What are its implications, and limitations?

Digital activism as a productive force

The impacts of digital activism can be varied. In the Black Lives Matter movement, it was used to [articulate counternarratives](#) and [reframe major controversies](#) in ways that engendered social and political action.

In the Syrian refugee crisis, digital activism helped galvanize the public into [rapid action](link). It was also used to coordinate [disaster response and financial assistance](link) in the wake of the 2020 Beirut explosion.

Digital activism also helped [build collective networks of solidarity](link) and resistance in [social movements](link) such as the 2011 Egyptian uprising and Occupy Wall Street. In the Russia–Ukraine war, digital activism helped [shape participation](link) in conflict-related mobilization.

And in the context of Israel and Palestine, research has shown digital activism can influence the opinions of both international and domestic audiences, which in turn directly affects events on the ground and the [dynamics of conflict](link).

Citizens and public figures have taken to [social media platforms](link) to express outrage and solidarity, perform fact-checking, coordinate aid efforts and inject cultural and historical nuance into discussions.

Online accounts of events allow war to be studied using [digital forensics](link). They may also become evidence in open-source investigations into [human rights violations](link), such as those conducted by [Bellingcat](link) and [Forensic Architecture](link).

Activists have also used platforms to counter state repression of information, helping them maintain political autonomy and control [how they are represented](link). However, these platforms often also become [sites of control and censorship](link).

Digital activism as a weapon

While digital activism can serve productive purposes, it can also have unintended and disastrous consequences. Digital activists on mainstream social media platforms must navigate a highly complex online landscape.

The battle to [control the narrative of war](#) in these spaces has become almost as intense as the physical acts that define war.

Digital rights groups monitoring regional social media activity [say the censorship](#) of pro-Palestinian voices is at a level not seen since the May 2021 Israel-Palestine conflict. [Researchers say](#) the level of hate speech, mis- and disinformation on [social media](#) is at unprecedented levels. However, it can't be studied systematically because tools to assess the impact are not available for independent verification.

There's no shortage of posts using dehumanizing language and disinformation to delegitimise the suffering of Palestinians. And people who rush to publish content without verifying it can also end up doing harm.

How to engage responsibly

For those of us bearing witness to the events unfolding, there are ways we can act responsibly and humanely to maximize benefit and minimize harm.

1. Develop critical media literacy skills

Before you share something online, verify whether the information is substantiated. Seek out sources such as [Reuters Fact Check](#), [Fake Reporter](#) or [disinformation experts](#), and develop fact-checking skills through [tools](#) and [resources](#).

2. Build your cultural literacy

The history of the Israel–Palestine conflict is complex and storied. Digital [activism](#) based on ahistorical and culturally illiterate perspectives

is unhelpful.

Before you share a post, take responsibility to educate yourself and reflect on your biases and knowledge limitations. The roots of this conflict have to be understood within a specific cultural, colonial and imperial historic context which dates back to the signing of the [Balfour Declaration in 1917](#).

3. Foster tolerance

Pluralism and healthy debate are essential for democracy. We should find ways to have difficult but respectful conversations with people who have different views to us. It is important to have a media diet that exposes you to different perspectives. Without tolerance, we can't recognize and reinforce our collective humanity.

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