

Truth and reconciliation: New study finds people less likely to acknowledge war crimes on social media

March 20 2024



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Social media could prove to be as much a barrier to post-conflict reconciliation as it is a way of helping communities move forward, new

research has claimed.

A study has found that there are clear differences between how people discuss the legacy of war in face-to-face situations compared to those interactions on platforms such as Facebook and X.

Fear of being stereotyped and judged by foreign nationals or a concern of being viewed as a 'bad ambassador' by compatriots, can lead to people becoming defensive and closed-off about issues such as war crimes committed by their own ethnic group.

The study, which examined attitudes to the Yugoslav war, and in particular the killing of 8,000 men and boys by the Bosnian Serb army at Srebrenica, could have important lessons with regard to the work of human rights activists who use [social media](#) to raise awareness of genocide and other atrocities.

"Acknowledgment of ingroup responsibility for war crimes is often deemed crucial for communities to move forward, as well as prevention of similar atrocities in the future," says Dr. Sanja Vico, Lecturer in Communications and Digital Media at the University of Exeter and author of the study. "Therefore, it is important to understand what encourages and what inhibits that acknowledgment."

"Social media is one of the ways in which [human rights activists](#) tackle the denial of war crimes and mobilize [public support](#). Discussions via these platforms can also help to reach out to those who are not necessarily interested in politics or the issues of post-conflict justice. But social media are not neutral spaces; the visibility that social media enable can also discourage people from participating in discussions or admitting matters considered to be national weaknesses."

In exploring the differences between face-to-face communication and

social media, Dr. Vico contrasted conversations held in-person and online in relation to the #sedamhiljada initiative. This was launched on Twitter in 2015 to pay tribute to the victims of the Srebrenica genocide and sought to mobilize a public performance in the main square in the capital, Belgrade.

Dr. Vico held six focus groups in the Serbian city, with participants drawn equally from men and women aged 20-70 and from a diversity of backgrounds and political positionings. She also examined around 600 posts and messages from Facebook and X, taken over a four-month period following the launch of #sedamhiljada in April 2015.

"What can be observed in social media interactions is either outright denial or a strong need to justify one's support of the initiative," says Dr. Vico.

"In both cases, there is a closure of debate, leaving little or no room for negotiation. Interactions on social media, especially on Twitter, abounded in personal attacks and intolerance. By contrast, participants in focus groups showed a greater degree of self-criticism and self-reflection with regards to Serbia's conduct in the war and were more willing to acknowledge wrongdoing."

Dr. Vico, who is based in Exeter's Department of Communications, Drama, and Film, says that several factors might influence online behavior, including people reacting to a negative threat of being stereotyped and a person's sense of 'cultural intimacy.' People would often mention how a binary system was created of good and evil along ethnic lines.

"This study has shown there is a profound interconnectedness between individuals and [nation-states](#), regardless of the strength of an individual's national identity," she adds. "Individuals may unwittingly share the

destiny of their country when they sense that they will be viewed in light of their nation's image. As a result, they may feel compelled to defend that national image publicly—on social media—even if intimately, they may be critical of their nation's conduct."

The findings are [published](#) in the *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*.

More information: Sanja Vico, Social Media, Stereotypes, and the Acknowledgement of War Crimes, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/17502977.2024.2316747](https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2024.2316747)

Provided by University of Exeter

Citation: Truth and reconciliation: New study finds people less likely to acknowledge war crimes on social media (2024, March 20) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-03-truth-reconciliation-people-acknowledge-war.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.