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Social Media Reporting and the Syrian Civil War

Summary

- The lack of traditional reporting and verifiable journalistic reports about the ongoing conflict in Syria has led to an increased dependence on social media as a source of news. But assessing the veracity of these reports has proven extremely difficult, creating consistent distortions of Syria's on-the-ground reality.
- The large amounts of social media data emerging from conflict zones like Syria and new data analysis tools have the potential to help overcome these distortions.
- Despite this enthusiasm, a number of conceptual and practical hurdles remain before these tools can create reliable predictive models of conflict dynamics.

Introduction

Syria's civil war has been a highly social-mediated conflict, with online videos and social media content documenting everything from early street protests to military offensives. In addition, journalists and international news media have had little to no access to Syria during the conflict. This lack of traditional reporting and verifiable journalistic reports has led to an increased dependence on social media as a source of news. But assessing the veracity of these reports has proven extremely difficult. Activists have used social media channels to expose the alleged war crimes of the Syrian regime, while the regime and sometimes even rival rebel factions have deployed them to make similar claims about opposition forces. This presents a range of new challenges to peace-builders, decision-makers, researchers, and other observers. Does the 'social mediated' picture of Syria largely match the realities on the ground, or is it systematically distorted in significant ways? How can we overcome these distortions?

The situation in Syria stands in contrast to other Arab Spring countries such as Egypt and Tunisia, where social media reports were easier to verify since they were embedded in existing social networks and intermediaries, mostly through civil society and citizen journalists. In comparison, Syria's relatively closed civic space has left little opportunity for external verification of reports. In addition, the few bloggers and citizen journalists who were operating in Syria, initially estimated at around a dozen, have left the country.

An emerging question here is whether social media's monopoly on reporting has created consistent distortions of Syria's on-the-ground reality. Islamist groups have been particularly vocal on these platforms, leading to an inflated assessment of their efficacy on the ground. An ongoing conversation on social media, and on the ground, has called for a peaceful transition and increased

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freedom of speech. The bloody social media reports have drowned out these peaceful voices, which many forget were the initial instigators of the movement to oust Assad. In addition, reputable online communities such as Global Voices (GV), who might be able to authenticate social media, have demonstrated their own biases. Since anti-Assad voices tend to dominate the GV community, pro-Assad bloggers have essentially been pushed out of the community. The extreme polarization of the conflict has allowed no 'middle ground' in reporting to emerge, even in online communities.

Despite these challenges, there has been an increased enthusiasm amongst traditional journalists to integrate social media reports into their work. Preliminary results from a survey of journalists indicate that around a quarter of them are using Youtube videos in most of their stories. While many journalists have viewed this as an opportunity, they have been unable (or unwilling) to connect directly with citizen journalists who are reporting events on social media to verify stories coming in from Syria. Journalists often face challenges on how to credibly integrate these reports into traditional reporting. There have been efforts to crowdsource the verification of social media reports through tools like Storyful and Checkdesk. For example, the Checkdesk tool, created by Meedan, allows a group of trusted journalists to conduct "collaborative verification" on a piece of social media reporting, creating a cumulative picture of how trustworthy it might be. Ultimately, journalists continue to depend on robust networks of people with whom they have developed relationships with over decades.

Data Analysis to the Rescue?

As places like Syria have shown us, the "fog of war" that once obscured our view of conflict zones is quickly giving way to rich information environments due to vast amounts of social media data. This information, combined with new data analysis tools coming out of the private sector, might help us gain 'ground truth' in places like Syria, as well for the larger task of preventing conflicts around the world. Indeed, there has been considerable academic research into these kinds of capabilities, ranging from analyzing tweets to identify right-wing extremist groups to using Youtube videos to map relationships between the different Syrian opposition groups, as well as social media data visualization tools and aggregation tools being developed in places like the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory. Such tools would enable users to sift through mountains of data for specific insights they are interested in tracking, often in real-time.

But much needs to be done before they can be used to create reliable predictive models of conflict dynamics – the so-called 'holy grail' of this field. A number of conceptual and practical hurdles need to be overcome in this area. Firstly, while much has been made of predictive analytics like Google's 'Flu Trends' (where global Web searches for cold medication were used to predict the spread of the flu virus), we should be skeptical of the notion that these kinds of techniques can help predict outbreaks of violent conflict. As one specialist said, "People's bodies are more predictable than their behavior." Many experts note the need for improved models of how ideas spread around the world, and consequently, how they influence human behavior such as violence.

Secondly, social media data that is currently being analyzed has serious limitations. This data breaks down into: (1) data that exists and is curated, (2) data that exists but is not curated, and (3) data that does not exist that needs to exist. Current analysis centers on the first type of data, but much needs to be done to close gaps around the second and third types before more comprehensive analysis can be conducted. Furthermore, much of today's social media data analysis does not take into account the inherent sampling deficiencies in social media data – after all, not all people have access to social media tools. Social media data cannot be representative of wider trends until these deficiencies are addressed.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief is based on an experts' meeting co-hosted by USIP's Center of Innovation for Science, Technology & Peace building as part of its ongoing Blogs & Bullets initiative. Held at Stanford University on April 17th, 2013, the workshop used the ongoing conflict in Syria as a focal point to discuss the increasingly prevalent distortions in social media reports emerging from conflict zones. The meeting examined how new data flows and analytical tools can be used to address these issues and other broader challenges in the peacebuilding field. The author, Anand Varghese, is a senior program specialist in USIP's Center of Innovation for Science, Technology & Peacebuilding.

Thirdly, quantitative data analysis needs to be contextualized using qualitative research. We need to understand how social media reports, Youtube videos and other data are intended to contribute to narratives – national, religious, and ethnic – that are specific to cultures and societies within which they operate. These narratives can complicate data analysis efforts, but they add nuance to our insights.

Finally, some in the private sector point out the practical limitations that plague social media data analysis efforts. For example, while private sector companies are often happy to provide datasets to researchers, most researchers do not have the data processing infrastructure necessary to derive value from them. The challenge is for researchers to use datasets that are big enough to be useful, but small enough to be processed. Further, very few protocols exist around the transfer of data from private sector companies to researchers. Researchers currently use largely ad hoc protocols, often relying on existing relationships with social media companies or working from within those companies to conduct their research. With growing concerns amongst users around the privacy of their data, social media companies are working to define these protocols. Importantly, these companies are displaying an eagerness to work with researchers and activists to help define these policies.

Conclusion

The international community has watched the Syrian conflict unfold via the lens of social media. Our dependence on this lens, combined with the conspicuous absence of traditional news media, only reinforces the need for new techniques and tools to help us verify information coming out of conflict zones. There have been considerable strides in using social media data to sift the proverbial wheat from the chaff in this regard, but we remain in early days. The need is clear for improved analytical models, datasets, and data analysis infrastructure to further this goal, till we can have truly precise and predictive data analysis tools.



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