

Clicks and Clashes: Digital Conflict Explained through Media Theories

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Abstract

Today, the concept of conflict is no longer confined to physical boundaries but has extended into the virtual realm. Social media and the various online platforms have given rise to new forms of conflict, including hate speech, trolling, misinformation, narrative manipulation, and cyber warfare. This paper examines Agenda-Setting, Framing, Cultivation, Spiral of Silence, and Uses and Gratifications to analyse the impact of digital conflicts. It explores how digital platforms shape public opinion, fuel tensions, and redefine the nature of conflict in the algorithmic age. While analysing the role of digital media in both fuelling and mitigating conflict, the paper also highlights the importance of digital literacy and responsible media practices as essential tools for de-escalation and social resilience.

Keywords: Digital conflict, misinformation, hate speech, Agenda-Setting, Framing, Cultivation, Spiral of Silence, Uses and Gratifications

Introduction

The twenty-first century has transformed conflict from physical confrontation to multi-layered disputes in the virtual world, where words, photographs, and videos serve as tools of confrontation. The rise in internet connectivity, particularly through social media, has created a new frontier where battles are fought with words, images,

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and data rather than ammunition. Digital conflict either precedes or follows real-world violence and often amplifies or instigates it.

Common tactics include misinformation campaigns, online radicalisation, hate speech, doxxing, and harassment targeting individuals, groups, or communities. With approximately 7.21 billion smartphones and 94.2% of internet users globally (Exploding Topics, 2024), the massive information environment makes distinguishing truth from falsehood increasingly difficult, giving anyone space to frame narratives as they choose.

This paper examines digital conflict through Agenda-Setting, Framing, Cultivation, Spiral of Silence, and Uses and Gratifications theories, explaining the dynamics of digital discord and its causes, manifestations, and consequences.

Objectives

1. To conceptualise digital conflict in today's media landscape.
2. To identify key drivers such as virality, echo chambers, and algorithmic bias.
3. To apply media theories to understand digital conflict dynamics.
4. To examine how digital platforms shape public opinion and social tensions.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative case study approach to examine digital conflict across six geographically and contextually diverse cases. The research design integrates theoretical analysis with empirical case documentation to demonstrate how five established media theories-Agenda-Setting, Framing, Cultivation, Spiral of Silence, and Uses and Gratifications-operate in real-world digital conflict scenarios.

A qualitative approach was selected because it allows for in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena within their natural contexts, enabling the researcher to capture the nuanced ways in which digital platforms interact with human behaviour, social dynamics, and political structures (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The selected cases are:

Cases	Time period	Platform	Type of conflict	Region
January 6 Capitol Attack	2020-2021	Facebook, Twitter, Parler	Political violence	North America
Myanmar Rohingya Crisis	2016-2018	Facebook	Ethnic genocide	Southeast Asia
COVID-19 Infodemic	2020-2021	Twitter, Facebook, YouTube	Health misinformation	Global
Russia-Ukraine Conflict	2022-present	Multiple platforms	Interstate war/Information warfare	Europe
Israel-Gaza Conflict	2023-present	Instagram, X, Facebook	Armed conflict/Platform moderation	Middle East
India WhatsApp	2018-2020	WhatsApp	Violence/Mob violence/Disinformation	South Asia

Digital Conflict

Digital conflict is a socio-ecological dynamic interwoven into contemporary globalisation, representing a conceptual fusion of warfare, computing, and political science. It signifies struggle mediated by digital technologies where words, images, and data serve as tools of confrontation.

Main Drivers of Digital Conflict

a. Anonymity: Users can engage in aggressive activities without revealing identity, expressing opinions and threats they would not risk face-to-face. Zimbardo (1969) theorised that anonymity leads to de-individuation, where individuals lose personal identity and responsibility, increasing susceptibility to antisocial behaviour.

b. Virality: Posts, images, and videos circulate within seconds, often before verification, generating widespread engagement with unconfirmed information. Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) found false news spreads farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than true news, with false political stories reaching 1,500 people six times faster than true stories.

c. Echo chambers: Algorithm-driven platforms serve content confirming existing beliefs, confining users within informational chambers with little exposure to opposing viewpoints. Pariser (2011)

describes this as the "filter bubble," where personalisation algorithms isolate users from diverse perspectives.

d. Algorithmic bias: Sensational, emotionally charged, or conflict-driven content receives greater algorithmic priority, incentivising production and spread of inflammatory material.

e. Borderless communication: No geographic boundaries exist-content originating in one country instantly influences audiences worldwide.

Media Theories as Analytical Tools

Five media theories explain how information is produced, disseminated, and consumed, and how it influences individuals and society.

1. **Agenda-setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972):** Media may not tell people what to think, but influence what they think about. In digital settings, agenda-setting operates through trending algorithms, influencer posts, and selective coverage, shaping public attention by prioritising sensational topics and amplifying viral content.
2. **Framing Theory (Entman, 1993):** Framing is the selection of certain aspects of perceived reality and rendering them more salient (Entman, 1993, p. 52). The same event can be framed as a fight for justice, a security threat, or terrorism-depending on language and visuals. Framing occurs through hashtag narratives, selectively chosen images, and ideological orientations.
3. **Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976):** Long-term media exposure shapes perceptions, beliefs, and values. Heavy viewers come to see the world as more dangerous than it is-the 'mean world syndrome.' In digital contexts, prolonged exposure to conflict-related, emotionally charged content cultivates fear, mistrust, and extremist viewpoints. Algorithmic personalisation reinforces existing preferences, intensifying the cultivation effect.
4. **Spiral of Silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974):** Individuals remain silent when perceiving their views as minority opinions, fearing social isolation or retaliation. Two mechanisms drive this:

withholding opinions to avoid exclusion, and fear of ostracism, harassment, or ridicule. In digital spaces, this translates to self-censorship among moderate users who fear online harassment. Loudest voices dominate while nuanced or dissenting opinions are suppressed.

5. **Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974):** Individuals are active agents making deliberate media choices to satisfy psychological and social needs. Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas (1973) categorised needs as cognitive (knowledge), affective (emotional experience), personal integrative (identity affirmation), social integrative (social connection), and tension release (escapism). However, gratifications can become harmful when they draw users into echo chambers or radicalised communities-what begins as connection or information can become ideological reinforcement, explaining why users remain in conflict-prone digital environments despite toxicity.

Case Studies of Digital Conflicts

The following case studies illustrate how the media theories discussed earlier operate in real-world digital conflicts.

1. The January 6, 2021, Attack on the United States Capitol

On January 6, 2021, a mob stormed the U.S. Capitol to prevent certification of the 2020 election results, killing five people and injuring over 140 law enforcement officers. The event culminated weeks of coordinated online activity (U.S. House Select Committee, 2022). Trump and allies used Twitter and Facebook to spread the false 'Stop the Steal' narrative; an associated Facebook group gained over 3,60,000 members within 24 hours before removal in November 2020 (Facebook, 2020). The campaign migrated to Parler, which hosted explicit calls to gather at the Capitol; AWS removed the platform on January 9, 2021, after Apple and Google delisted it the day before (BBC News, 2021). Reddit's quarantined r/The Donald community relocated to thedonald.win, where Stanford Internet Observatory researchers found over 4,000 posts referencing the rally, some describing violent intent (Center for an Informed Public et al., 2021)

Agenda-setting explains the narrative's sustained dominance across platforms; Framing recast the rally as patriotic resistance rather than an assault on democracy. Cultivation shows how years of curated conspiratorial content primed extreme interpretations, reinforced by tribal political identity (Mason, 2018). Spiral of Silence suppressed moderate dissent; Uses and Gratifications explains participants' pursuit of identity and community.

2. Myanmar and the Rohingya Crisis (2016-2018)

The Rohingya genocide in Myanmar's Rakhine State, peaking between August and September 2017, was directly linked by a UN Fact-Finding Mission to Facebook. The 2018 report stated Facebook "has been a useful instrument for those seeking to spread hate speech" and "substantively contributed to the level of... conflict" (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2018).

Facebook was effectively the internet for most Myanmar users. Internet penetration jumped from under 1% in 2012 to over 25% by 2017, driven by cheap smartphones bundled with Facebook (Mozur, 2018). Extremist groups, government-aligned actors, and military accounts posted content depicting Rohingya as terrorists and demographic threats. Reuters identified 1,000 Facebook posts containing anti-Rohingya content-including direct incitement to murder-remaining on the platform for months or years (Lone & Slodkowski, 2018).

Facebook's internal review acknowledged inadequate Burmese-language moderators and insufficient fact-checking infrastructure (Facebook, 2018). In November 2021, Meta settled a lawsuit with Rohingya refugees who argued algorithms amplified hate speech (The Guardian, 2021).

Cultivation Theory explains how repeated dehumanising exposure cultivated social reality where mass violence became conceivable. Framing portrayed Rohingya as existential threats. Agenda-setting centred discourse on security over humanitarian protection. Spiral of Silence suppressed pro-Rohingya voices.

3. The COVID-19 Infodemic (2020-2021)

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus declared

the world faced an "infodemic"-an overwhelming volume of information complicating public health responses (World Health Organisation, 2020). Islam et al. (2020) examined over 2,300 news stories and posts in 25 languages, documenting the rapid spread of false coronavirus news.

Rumours suggested drinking bleach or colloidal silver cured Covid-19, prompting FDA warnings (Food and Drug Administration, 2020). Conspiracy theories linking 5G to virus transmission fuelled over 90 arson attacks on UK telecom infrastructure (BBC News, 2020). Anti-vaccine narratives claimed mRNA vaccines contained microchips or changed DNA (Centre for Countering Digital Hate, 2021). False origin stories labelling the virus as a bioweapon contributed to hate crimes against Asian communities (Stop AAPI Hate, 2021).

Twitter applied warning labels, Facebook partnered with over 80 fact-checking groups, and YouTube deleted over 850,000 Covid-19 misinformation videos by October 2020 (YouTube Official Blog, 2020). Uses and Gratifications explains individuals seeking alternative information when fearful. Cultivation Theory demonstrates how repeated exposure to conspiracy content builds mistrust in science (Depoux et al., 2020). Agenda-setting operates through algorithmically promoted trending content.

4. Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Digital and Information Warfare (2022-present)

Following Russia's February 24, 2022 invasion, a parallel online battle unfolded. Russian cyberattacks deployed WhisperGate and HermeticWiper malware targeting Ukrainian organisations. The Viasat KA-SAT satellite attack disrupted connections across Ukraine and Western Europe, affecting thousands of German wind turbines (Microsoft Digital Security Unit, 2022).

The EU's East StratCom Task Force tracked over 16,000 Russian disinformation cases from 2015 to 2023, spiking after the invasion (EU vs Disinfo, 2023). Russian narratives claimed Ukraine was never independent, alleged bioweapon development with U.S. assistance, and attempted to discredit war crime reports contradicted by satellite imagery.

Ukraine mobilised digitally, with President Zelensky posting videos from Kyiv and the Ministry of Digital Transformation organising a volunteer "IT Army" for cyber operations (Reuters, 2022). Meta identified and removed coordinated inauthentic behaviour linked to Russian and Belarusian actors (Meta Newsroom, 2022). Twitter applied warnings to Russian state media; Russia retaliated by blocking Facebook and Instagram.

This information war centres on Framing-Russia characterises its actions as a "special military operation" for "de-Nazification," while Ukraine and Western media portray unprovoked aggression.

5. The Israel-Gaza Conflict and Platform Moderation (2023-present)

Following Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack and Israel's military response, digital spaces became saturated with polarised debate, content removals, and information operations. In November 2023, Instagram's translation service mistranslated "Palestinian" as "terrorist" (Meta Newsroom, 2023). Human Rights Watch (2023) reported Instagram and Facebook removed or restricted posts showing Israeli strikes, Palestinian casualties, or expressions of solidarity, even without policy violations. Meta acknowledged overreach and committed to an independent audit.

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2023) documented coordinated networks manipulating trending topics-some linked to the Israeli government, others to pro-Hamas actors. Journalists faced harassment and unverified videos circulated widely.

X faced criticism for reducing moderation teams, removing safety labels, and reinstating conspiracy accounts (Centre for Countering Digital Hate, 2023). Both sides compete to frame narratives; algorithms prioritise emotionally charged content. Spiral of Silence manifests as journalists and academics report professional consequences for dissenting views.

6. WhatsApp, Misinformation, and Mob Violence in India (2018-2020)

Between 2018 and 2020, lynching across multiple Indian states-Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tripura, West Bengal, and Assam-were

preceded by viral WhatsApp misinformation. A viral audio message and video falsely claiming child abductions spread across WhatsApp groups in May-June 2018. At least 30 people were killed in mob attacks, according to IndiaSpend's #Lynching tracker (IndiaSpend, 2018).

WhatsApp's end-to-end encryption made tracing impossible. Unlike public platforms, there was no algorithmic moderation. WhatsApp limited forwarding to five chats in India (down from 250) in July 2018, extending globally in 2019 (WhatsApp, 2019), and launched public awareness campaigns. In 2021, India's Information Technology Rules required intermediaries to trace message originators upon government request—a provision WhatsApp challenged on privacy grounds (WhatsApp LLC v. Union of India, 2021). Fact-checking organisations AltNews (2018-2020) and Boom (2018-2020) documented fabricated videos circulating before violence.

Cultivation Theory explains how sustained dehumanising exposure cultivated fear-priming violence. Framing reframed neutral actors as threats. Uses and Gratifications explains sharing driven by affective and social-integrative needs without verification. Spiral of Silence suppressed voices calling for restraint.

Conclusion

Digital conflict is an alarming threat and challenge within countries and between nations, disrupting social life and democratic institutions. In recent years, online platforms have increasingly shaped human interaction, civic discourse, and politics, impacting socio-political life. Hence, understanding the concept of digital conflict is of paramount importance not just for researchers, policymakers, and the general public, but also for platform designers.

The five media theories examined in this study—Agenda-Setting, Framing, Cultivation, Spiral of Silence, and Uses and Gratifications—provide a comprehensive analytical framework for decoding the complex dynamics of how conflict arises, spreads, and intensifies in the digital environment. Each theory captures a distinct dimension: Agenda-Setting explains what we are directed to notice; Framing determines how we are taught to interpret events; Cultivation describes what prolonged exposure does to our perception of reality; Spiral of

Silence accounts for whose voices are heard; and Uses and Gratifications illuminates why we actively seek out and remain in environments that may harm us (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Katz et al., 1974).

The findings of this study indicate increased conflict but also the potential to promote peace, inclusion, and mutual understanding. A digitally literate society is the need of the hour, guided by ethical standards, supported by effective regulation, and equipped with critical tools to navigate an algorithmically curated information environment (Pariser, 2011). Research by Pennycook et al. (2021) suggests that interventions focusing on accuracy can significantly reduce the sharing of misinformation online, offering a pathway toward healthier digital discourse. With concerted effort, digital spaces can be transformed from platforms of division into platforms for progress. This paper provides a foundation for that transformation.

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