POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64076/ap261109.13

Alla Shapovalova
Kyiv National University of Technologies and Design, Kyiv, Ukraine
ORCID iD: 0000-0002-4920-5539

THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES ON THE DYNAMICS AND ESCALATION OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL CONFLICTS

Abstract. The theses examine how digital technologies affect the dynamics and escalation of contemporary political conflicts. Drawing on recent empirical studies and cases from 2023–2026 (the India–Pakistan crisis, the Israel–Iran war and the Russian-Ukrainian war), the paper identifies the key mechanisms of this influence: algorithmic amplification of polarization, the role of political elites in spreading disinformation, the scaling of propaganda through generative artificial intelligence, and LLM grooming. It is shown that the digital environment compresses the "event – reaction" cycle, blurs the line between peace and war and undermines trust in evidence. The paper argues that these effects are open to regulation and outlines possible countermeasures.
Keywords: digital technologies, political conflict, escalation, social media, disinformation, generative artificial intelligence, deepfakes, hybrid warfare.

Алла Шаповалова
Київський національний університет технологій та дизайну, Київ, Україна
ORCID iD: 0000-0002-4920-5539

ВПЛИВ ЦИФРОВИХ ТЕХНОЛОГІЙ НА ДИНАМІКУ ТА ЕСКАЛАЦІЮ СУЧАСНИХ ПОЛІТИЧНИХ КОНФЛІКТІВ

Анотація. У тезах розглянуто, як цифрові технології впливають на динаміку та ескалацію сучасних політичних конфліктів. На основі новітніх емпіричних досліджень і кейсів 2023–2026 рр. (індійсько-пакистанське загострення, ізраїльсько-іранська війна, російсько-українська війна) виокремлено ключові механізми цього впливу: алгоритмічне підсилення поляризації, роль політичних еліт у поширенні дезінформації, масштабування пропаганди за допомогою генеративного штучного інтелекту та "отруєння" мовних моделей. Показано, що цифрове середовище стискає цикл "подія – реакція", розмиває межу між миром і війною та підриває довіру до доказів. Обґрунтовано, що наслідки цього впливу піддаються регулюванню, і запропоновано напрями протидії.
Ключові слова: цифрові технології, політичний конфлікт, ескалація, соціальні медіа, дезінформація, генеративний штучний інтелект, діпфейки, гібридна війна.

Introduction. A decade ago, the scholarly debate centered on whether social networks foster democratization. The agenda has since changed. The key issue now is

what digital platforms do to conflicts that have already broken out, and why their effect so frequently pushes the sides towards confrontation instead of a settlement. Events of 2025 offered telling evidence. In May, when tensions between India and Pakistan flared, and in June, during the war between Israel and Iran, synthetic videos produced by artificial intelligence circulated online faster than fact-checkers could refute them. In Ukraine, the online side of the war is no longer exceptional: Telegram channels publish drone footage with almost no delay, while coordinated bot accounts feed internal quarrels and a sense of hopelessness.

These theses seek to establish the specific ways in which digital technologies shape the course and escalation of present-day political conflicts, with reference to the latest empirical research and to cases from 2023–2026.

Results. Our analysis takes as its point of departure the argument of Yu. Sedliar and O. Hutsol, who show that social media may speed up de-escalation just as easily as they can heighten the potential for conflict; in addition, they pull into the confrontation actors who are geographically distant from it, such as foreign publics, international bodies and diplomats [9, p. 111]. In our view, this is the crucial point. Platforms do not in themselves cause violence; what they alter is the setting in which adversaries form images of each other and take decisions. For this reason, instead of discussing the impact of social networks in the abstract, it makes more sense to single out particular features of the digital environment that can, in specific conditions, turn into catalysts of escalation.

The first such feature is the way platforms are built. E. Harris, S. Rathje, C. Robertson and J. Van Bavel developed the SPIR framework, according to which growing polarization and hostility between groups result from the interplay of four elements: what users choose to consume, how platforms are designed, what behavior is rewarded, and the offline social setting [3]. The mechanism is easy to follow. People tend to seek out those who share their views anyway; recommendation algorithms amplify this habit, since emotionally charged posts directed against opponents keep users engaged for longer, and reactions and reposts reward the most aggressive messages. According to the authors, social media do not create divisions but rather speed them up, making existing rifts deeper and pushing them into offline behavior [3]. Consequently, in societies split along identity lines platforms widen the gap, whereas in more cohesive ones their impact is noticeably weaker.

Another important factor is the conduct of elites. Convincing evidence of a connection between social networks and political violence comes from the work of L. Hunter and G. Biglaiser, who examined data on as many as 157 countries for the period 2000–2019. Their analysis shows that more frequent and more intense civil conflicts are associated with greater time spent online, wider social media penetration and particular patterns of elite activity on platforms [5]. Of special interest is the mediation

analysis: when elites use networks to mobilize people for street actions, when officials circulate falsehoods and when party figures spread disinformation, polarization rises, and it is polarization that makes conflict more probable [5]. The 2025 confrontation between India and Pakistan illustrates this mechanism well. Bellingcat researchers showed that a manipulated clip, in which a Pakistani military spokesman allegedly acknowledged that two fighter aircraft had been lost, was reposted on X close to 700,000 times and was picked up by several major Indian news outlets, a number of which subsequently removed their stories without explanation [2]. Once a fabrication is endorsed by respected media and public figures, it moves from the margins to the mainstream and begins to shape what the public expects by way of "retaliation".

The Ukrainian case demonstrates how cyberspace becomes a battlefield in its own right. As Yu. Kyrychenko, T. Serhiienko and V. Slastin point out, it is precisely social networks and online platforms that now serve as the principal vehicles for false narratives aimed at distorting reality, fomenting domestic conflict and eroding confidence in public institutions [7, p. 90]. The authors also show how the focus of Russia's information attacks has evolved over time: from the "civil war" myth of 2014–2015 through interference in elections and anti-Western messaging to large-scale disinformation about the war since 2022 [7, p. 93].

H. Hrebnov highlights a worrying contradiction. From the standpoint of media security, Telegram, YouTube and Facebook pose the greatest risks; nevertheless, after the full-scale invasion began, more and more Ukrainians have come to rely on social networks as their primary source of news [4]. Put simply, people gather in exactly the places where they are most exposed.

Now that the full-scale war has entered its fourth year, these operations focus less on overt propaganda and more on the internal cleavages of Ukrainian society. Rather than persuading audiences that the aggressor is in the right, anonymous channels and networks of bots pick issues that are emotionally sensitive in any case: mobilization, high-profile corruption cases, fairness in society, potential terms of a peace deal, and attitudes towards internally displaced persons or Ukrainians living abroad. Genuine problems are inflated, and ordinary public debate is artificially transformed into a quarrel among compatriots. Short-video platforms such as TikTok are of particular concern, because their algorithms tailor the feed so closely that a person may see only a single, frequently distorted, account of events for weeks. Young people, who rarely consult traditional media, are especially exposed to this risk. We believe that such "internal" escalation, which undermines trust within society, is today at least as dangerous as traditional external propaganda, because it weakens the country's capacity for mobilization.

Generative artificial intelligence changes the situation qualitatively. Studying DC Weekly, a website connected with a Russian influence operation, M. Wack, C. Ehrett,

D. Linvill and P. Warren established that once the site began producing its content with large language models (according to the authors, from September 2023), the number of articles it published each day more than doubled, while its thematic scope became much broader [10]. Even more worrying is the result of their survey experiment with US participants: the AI-assisted articles turned out to be no less persuasive than human-written ones [10]. Thus, AI allows propaganda to be produced at scale with no loss of effectiveness, and information warfare becomes far cheaper. The Israel–Iran war of June 2025 shows the visual side of the same problem: social networks were filled with convincing clips purporting to show a ruined Ben Gurion Airport and destroyed planes, and fact-checkers identified conflict videos carrying the watermark of Google's Veo tool [1]. The fakes are only part of the threat. Once people realize that any footage may be synthetic, they start to question authentic evidence too, which makes it harder to document war crimes and erodes confidence in negotiations.

A further development that Ukrainian political science has barely addressed so far is LLM grooming, sometimes described as the "poisoning" of language models. This tactic consists in flooding the web with propaganda materials whose main audience is not human readers but AI systems that learn from such data or retrieve it when answering queries. NewsGuard reported in March 2025, with reference to the American Sunlight Project, that the Pravda network, which has ties to Russia, put out roughly 3.6 million articles in 2024, and that ten popular chatbots reproduced its false claims in over a third of their responses [8]. As a growing number of users ask chatbots to explain current events, the contest over how a conflict is interpreted is shifting to an arena that ordinary users can hardly see.

Combined, these trends affect both the intensity of conflicts and their underlying dynamics. The most visible change is the compression of time. A cycle that once lasted weeks – an incident, its online reflection (which may be inaccurate), algorithmic amplification, the reaction of elites, public calls for "decisive steps" and a retaliatory incident – may now unfold within hours. Decision-makers have less time for deliberation and face mounting pressure. The boundary between peace and war is also becoming less distinct: in the initial phase of a conflict, information operations typically conceal their real goals [9, p. 109], and as a result escalation in the online sphere frequently comes before open hostilities. Lastly, digital conflicts hardly ever end: stored archives, screenshots and algorithms that resurface old posts keep reviving past grievances.

The highly visual character of today's wars also requires attention. Recordings from drones, body-worn and CCTV cameras that the warring sides upload to Telegram, YouTube or TikTok almost instantly have made the fighting an unending flow of content. At home, these videos serve to mobilize: they demonstrate achievements, keep up morale and support fundraising for equipment. Yet there is a reverse side. Regular exposure to violence makes people gradually less sensitive to it, while images of enemy

casualties packaged as entertainment encourage the dehumanization of the adversary. In addition, such a clip is easy to strip of context, re-cut or combine with synthetic footage, at which point it turns into disinformation. Under these conditions, the distinction between recording the war and propagandizing it becomes fragile.

Technology companies' own policies also matter considerably. In January 2025, Meta declared that it would discontinue its third-party fact-checking program in the United States and adopt a Community Notes system resembling the one on X [6]. Advocates of the move present it as a defense of free expression, whereas opponents see it as transferring the burden of verification to ordinary users. This is particularly problematic in conflict settings, because a community note is displayed only after users holding different opinions agree on it – and such agreement is exactly what polarized audiences tend to lack. Consequently, content moderation policies set by private firms effectively influence how political conflicts develop, even though these firms are not participants in the conflicts and carry no political accountability for them.

Differences between political regimes create a further asymmetry. Democracies cannot impose blanket censorship without harming their own institutions, which leaves them more exposed to external influence campaigns. Authoritarian regimes, on the other hand, keep their own information space under strict control while exporting disinformation to other countries. Xinjiang in 2009 is a revealing case: after online posts incited further clashes between Uyghurs and Han Chinese, the authorities limited internet access in the region for ten months [9, p. 112]. For the aggressor, the result is that escalating a conflict online costs little, and it is difficult to hold anyone responsible.

Nevertheless, digital instruments can also serve to de-escalate conflict. The Ukrainian case shows that fact-checking initiatives such as StopFake and VoxCheck, legal restrictions on propaganda outlets, cybersecurity measures and media literacy education produce results when applied together [7, p. 93]. The SPIR framework likewise allows countermeasures to be aimed at particular sources of polarization, including incentives, platform design and offline context [3]. We believe, however, that these tools are not enough in the face of new threats. They should be complemented by transparency obligations for the algorithms of major platforms, compulsory labeling of AI-generated content, oversight of the data sources used to train language models and genuine political responsibility of officials and party leaders who spread disinformation. Otherwise, technical responses will continue to lag behind.

Conclusions. The analysis suggests that digital technologies do not generate contemporary political conflicts, yet they shape their trajectory in significant ways: they speed up the "event – reaction" cycle, intensify polarization, make information operations cheaper and weaken confidence in evidence. Generative AI and LLM grooming raise the stakes further, as influence is now directed not only at people but

also at the tools to which people delegate the search for information. Since the outcome depends to a large extent on elite behavior and societal resilience, it can be managed through regulation. Further research could usefully focus on empirical analysis of how AI-generated content contributes to escalation, especially in the Russian-Ukrainian war.

REFERENCES

1. Atkinson K. Social media bombarded by fake AI videos of Israel-Iran conflict. *AAP FactCheck*. 2025. 20 June. URL: https://www.aap.com.au/factcheck/social-media-bombarded-by-fake-ai-videos-of-israel-iran-conflict/ (accessed: 05.11.2026).

2. Chaudhuri P., Higgins E. India-Pakistan conflict: how a deepfake video made it mainstream. *Bellingcat*. 2025. 9 May. URL: https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2025/05/09/india-pakistan-conflict-how-a-deepfake-video-made-it-mainstream/ (accessed: 05.11.2026).

3. Harris E., Rathje S., Robertson C. E., Van Bavel J. J. The SPIR framework of social media and polarization: exploring the role of selection, platform design, incentives, and real-world context. *International Journal of Communication*. 2023. Vol. 17. P. 5316–5335. URL: https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/19014 (accessed: 25.10.2026).

4. Hrebnov H. Informatsiinyi aspekt hibrydnoi viiny rosii proty Ukrainy [Information aspect of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine]. *Ukrainskyi informatsiinyi prostir*. 2023. No. 1 (11). P. 107–118. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31866/2616-7948.1(11).2023.279598 [in Ukrainian].

5. Hunter L. Y., Biglaiser G. The effects of social media, elites, and political polarization on civil conflict. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. 2025. Vol. 48, No. 10. P. 1127–1164. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2163461

6. Kaplan J. More speech and fewer mistakes. *Meta Newsroom*. 2025. 7 January. URL: https://about.fb.com/news/2025/01/meta-more-speech-fewer-mistakes (accessed: 05.11.2026).

7. Kyrychenko Yu. V., Serhiienko T. I., Slastin V. O. Informatsiini viiny yak instrument hibrydnoi ahresii: ukrainskyi dosvid [Information wars as a tool of hybrid aggression: the Ukrainian experience]. *Visnyk NTUU "KPI". Politolohiia. Sotsiolohiia. Pravo*. 2025. Issue 1 (65). P. 89–95. DOI: https://doi.org/10.20535/2308-5053.2025.1(65).332563 [in Ukrainian].

8. Sadeghi M., Blachez I. A well-funded Moscow-based global "news" network has infected Western artificial intelligence tools worldwide with Russian propaganda. *NewsGuard Reality Check*. 2025. 6 March. URL: https://www.newsguardrealitycheck.com/p/a-well-funded-moscow-based-global (accessed: 05.11.2026).

9. Sedliar Yu., Hutsol O. Sotsialni media v konteksti suchasnykh konfliktiv [Social media in the context of modern conflicts]. *Intehrovani komunikatsii*. 2025. No. 1 (19). P. 107–116. DOI: https://doi.org/10.28925/2524-2652.2025.114 [in Ukrainian].

10. Wack M., Ehrett C., Linvill D., Warren P. Generative propaganda: evidence of AI's impact from a state-backed disinformation campaign. *PNAS Nexus*. 2025. Vol. 4, No. 4. Article pgaf083. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgaf083