

## DIGITAL CONFLICTS

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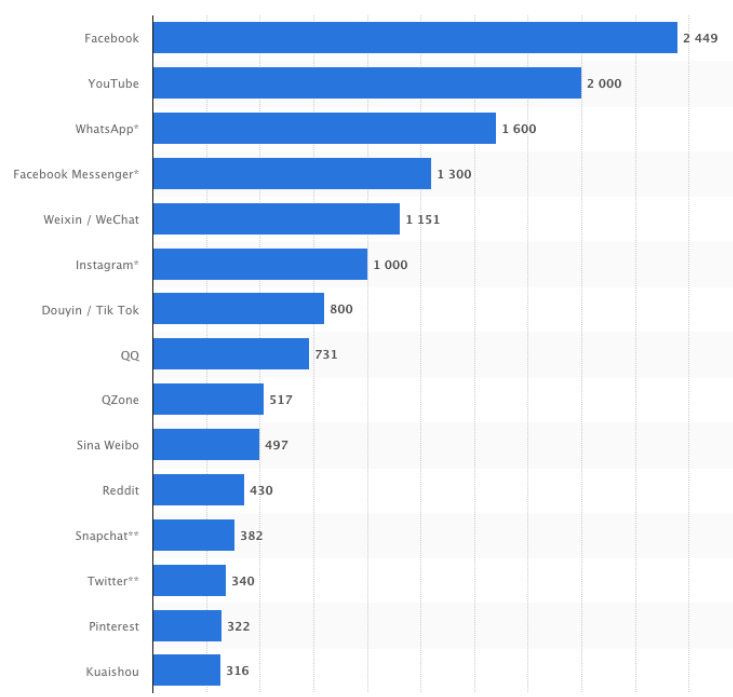
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### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Nowadays, everything is moving from the real world to the digital one. The role and influence of digital technologies on societal conflicts is an emerging topic with many ethical implications. Traditional language manipulation techniques and propaganda are overcome by new emerging digital tools, dividing and confronting citizens, cultures and societies. Social Media and digital technologies provide new tools either to create new digital conflicts or to foster the existing ones. Social Networks represent a new communication channel, allowing users to share text, pictures, videos; and to share opinion about the shared content (with voting systems, likes, followers, etc.), participating in any community as follower of followed (Trottier and Fuchs 2015). Within these Social Media, content recommendation systems suggest new content to users with sophisticated algorithms based on previous behaviour or interests and network interests (Tufekci 2015). Taking into consideration the number of users worldwide, the interest in the role in social conflicts that Social Media and other digital technologies has is justified, among many other economical and societal challenges. Currently, there are 2.440 million users in just one of the most important Social Networks: Facebook (Statista, 2020).

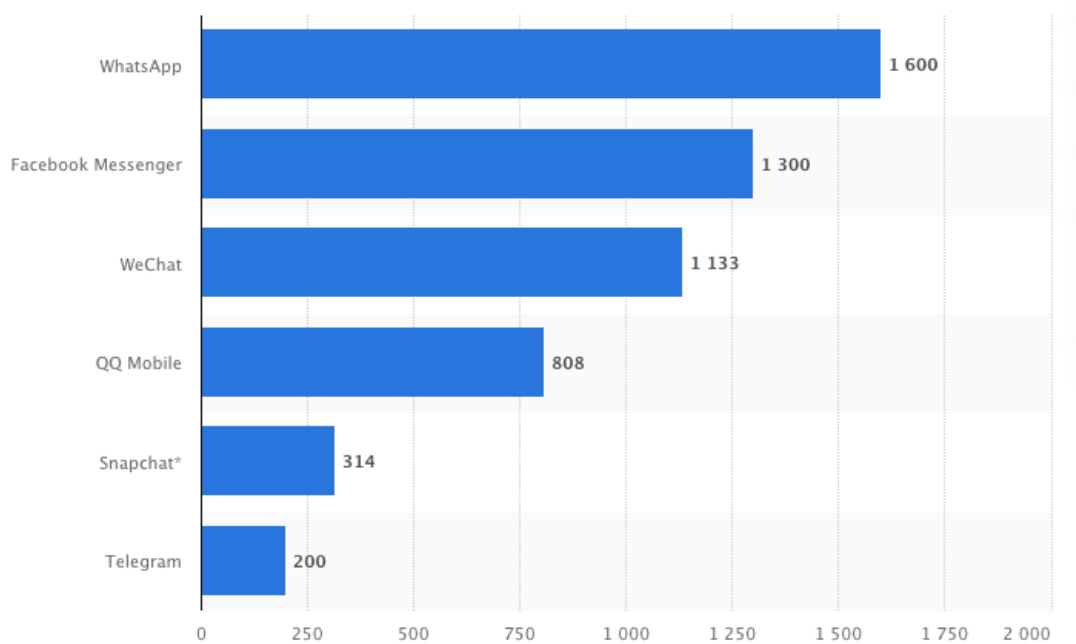
Figure 1. Most popular social networks worldwide as of January 2020, ranked by number of active users (in millions)



Source: Statista (2020a)

Another digital tool that is gaining importance are mobile messenger apps. Mobile messenger apps allow users to share and spread information in their digital networks very easily. Whatsapp is the leader app. Founded in 2009 by two Yahoo former employees, it was acquired by Facebook in 2014, paying \$19 Billion (Vigna, 2014). Nowadays, this mobile messenger app is the preferred app in more than 100 countries around the world (Sevitt, 2017), sharing the growing market with other apps such as Telegram, Line, WeChat or Telegram among others. Close messaging networks create communities with weak and strong ties among their members (Baulch, Matamoros-Fernández & Johns, 2020).

Figure 2. Most popular social networks worldwide as of January 2020, ranked by number of active users (in millions)



Source: Statista (2020b)

There are several factors that provoke the emergence of this new use of digital technologies, such as the reduction of the costs of communication, the increase of the speed of dissemination, the possibility of an easy creation of multiple kinds of digital content (text, images, photo, video) or the possibility of sharing of information easily (Zeitzoff, 2017).

In this emerging digital environment, battles are not only in the battlefield, but in the digital world through Social Networks or mobile messenger apps. These emerging digital media allow us to broadcast news or reliable information easily (Newman et al., 2019), but the feature also affords the possibility of spreading misinformation and spam (Sharma, 2018). This second feature is what is serving to several digital conflicts to foster “information disorder”, with the dissemination of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation in closed groups not subjected to any kind of platform moderation (Wardle and Derakshan, 2017). There are several cases in which technology has been used for the creation or development of social conflicts as we summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of social conflicts with digital dimension

Conflict	Use of technology	Reference
Arab Spring	Twitter and Facebook were used to promote the protest	Steinert-Threlkeld (2017)
ISIS	ISIS-affiliated groups have used Twitter, WhatsApp, and other network apps to promote their group's profile, recruit foreign followers, and plan attacks	Berger and Morgan (2015)
Gaza	Both Israel and Hamas militants use social media in general and tweeter particularly to justify their actions and denigrate the other side	Zeitsoff, Kelly and Lotan (2015)

Source: based on Zeitsoff (2017:12)

Another feature of digital communication technology is the pace at which information is spread. The rate of diffusion increases exponentially, it is possible to broadcast worldwide almost in real time. The concept of viral information arises, for instance, spreading a viral YouTube video to reach 100 million streams takes 5.9 days; and in average, in the first 24 hours the video defines its condition of viral (Stadista, 2020c).

The social media and mobile messages app can be used to democratize information or to create new conflicts that serve either a personal or a group interest. Technologies are increasingly used to manipulate information. For instance, doxing, as the process of searching public and private information of a person or organization in Internet with a malicious intent (McNealy, 2019). Another definition of doxing is *“the intentional public release onto the Internet of personal information about an individual by a third party, often with the intent to humiliate, threaten, intimidate, or punish the identified individual”* (Douglas, 2016:1). Another technique is fake news, as the intentional spread of low-quality news with an unethical, illegal or questionable goal (Shu, Sliva, Wang, Tang, & Liu; 2017). False information that is spread in Facebook, WhatsApp groups, Telegram groups, and many other widely used Social Networks are creating or fostering conflicts in both the digital and real word (Martineau, 2018). And the risk is even bigger when bots, as autonomous programs that interact with systems or users, spreads the information manipulating opinions (Shao, Ciampaglia, Varol, Flammini & Menczer, 2017).

Sometimes, organizations not only use social media to spread and recruit followers but to create as well specific mobile apps to organize conflict management. The Hong Kong protest, known as *“the water revolution”* is an excellent example of how social movements are using technologies to promote and manage real conflicts. Ting (2020:1) pointed out that *“through novel uses of social media and mobile technology, they acted in concert to confront riot police in wildcat actions. In effect, they exhibit a contemporary type of smart mob, as digitally savvy citizens engage with each other in largely ad hoc and networked forms of pop-up protest”*.

After analysing technologies and their use, we may put forward the following statements:

1. Mobile technology is the most used in social conflict. In most of the cases, social media, mobile messenger apps or mobile apps are used.
2. Technology is used during all the stages of conflict:
  - a. Conflict promotion.
  - b. Recruitment of conflict followers.
  - c. Organization and conflict management.

3. Social media and mobile messenger apps are used in all stages, and specific mobile apps are used when conflict reach an important number of followers to manage and organize protest.

All of them are problems in the new smart society. Any conflict born or fostered in the digital world, can move to a violent one in real life (Gohdes, 2018). Digital technologies represent a double-edge sword: democratizing information or manipulating and confronting citizens and societies.

**KEYWORDS:** digital conflicts, fake news, bots, doxing.

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