

IN CONFLICT, A 'SETTINGS CHANGE' FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

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There are multiple challenges that go unaddressed | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

The [conflict between Russia and Ukraine](#) has brought multiple questions to the fore on the validity of international law. Fingers have been pointed at the accepted norms of state behaviour. Cyberspace is no alien to these questions, where *ad hoc* has brought multiple questions to the fore on the validity of international law. Fingers have been pointed at the accepted norms of state behaviour. Cyberspace is no alien to these questions, where *ad hoc* standard setting has been practised as a norm for decades now.

The challenges specific to the case now — the Ukraine conflict, where Russia is clearly the aggressor state — are not new either. Armed conflicts within and between states have played out in cyberspace for years. It is no surprise then to see the same dynamics play out on social media platforms. The increased attention is undoubtedly a function of the location of the conflict — Europe. The struggles of the Ukrainian population facing Russian aggression are by no means to be ignored, but the world outside Europe and North America has seen more than its share of conflicts, materialising and exacerbating the troubles of kinetic conflict through cyberspace. Social media platforms have gone by the mantra of “tech neutrality” to avoid taking decisions that may be considered political for too long.

The years that have passed have seen an active ignoring of the concerns around social media platforms during a conflict. It does not help that the harbingers of a free and open world did little to create norms for social media as a new dimension of conflicts. This worrying but unaddressed concern has been a looming threat since the world learned about its use by the Islamic State in the early 2010s, and continues to complicate our understanding of the limits of warfare. The lack of clear systems within social media companies that claim to connect the world is appalling. It is time that they should have learned from multiple instances, as recent as the Israeli use of force in Palestine.

In the context of conflict, social media platforms have multiple challenges that go unaddressed. Content moderation remains a core area of concern, where, essentially, information warfare can be operationalised and throttled. These corporations do not have the obligation to act responsibly as is expected of a state. Yet, their sheer magnitude and narrative-building abilities place a degree of undeniable onus on them. After years of facing and acknowledging these challenges, most social media giants are yet to create institutional capacity to deal with such situations. *Ad hoc* the context of conflict, social media platforms have multiple challenges that go unaddressed. Content moderation remains a core area of concern, where, essentially, information warfare can be operationalised and throttled. These corporations do not have the obligation to act responsibly as is expected of a state. Yet, their sheer magnitude and narrative-building abilities place a degree of undeniable onus on them. After years of facing and acknowledging these challenges, most social media giants are yet to create institutional capacity to deal with such situations. *Ad hoc* responses to many predictable scenarios do not create an image of responsible action from such corporations.

Additionally, they also act as a conduit for further amplification of content on other platforms. Major social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter also provide space for extremist views from fringe platforms, where the degree of direct relation to the user generating

such content is blurred. Even though these big platforms create special teams to handle such content, the magnitude overwhelms the teams that are sparingly staffed. It is also a concern that the mascots of the liberal world where such fringe social media platforms are registered do little to regulate them.

Misinformation and disinformation are thorny challenges to these platforms. Algorithmic solutions are widely put to use to address them. These include identification of content violative of their terms, reducing the visibility of content deemed inappropriate by the algorithm, and in the determination of instances reported to be violative of the terms by other users. More often than not in critical cases, these algorithmic solutions have misfired, harming the already resource-scarce party. This reiterates human ingenuity and sensitivity to context. It is an essential ingredient to thwarting nefarious activity on social media platforms that cannot be outsourced to technology.

Instances such as these are an opportunity for these corporations to demonstrate their commitment to the values they profess. They should not stop at the point of creating small-overworked teams with minimal understanding of the geographical and cultural dimensions of problems. The operational realities of these platforms require that the safety of users be prioritised to address pressing concerns, even at the cost of profits.

There was no unpredictability over conflicts in the information age spilling over to social media platforms. It did not even require pre-emption, since these have been recurrent events in the past decade. The international community and the liberal world order had to be proactive but failed to do so. We have missed the chance to have established a clear protocol on balancing the business interests of social media platforms and their intersection with global public life in critical situations. Though late, it would be valuable to have insights and clear frameworks to guide the behaviour of states and these corporations in cases of conflict, which will inevitably spill over to social media platforms in today's information age.

For India, there are many lessons. India's strategic position in the global order appears to be diminishing. The time is ripe to set that right and gain currency in the developing world order. The ruling party seems to be adept at using social media platforms to set a domestic narrative to its liking. However, India is yet to demonstrate any such aptitude before the international community. It will be useful to add that to the Indian agenda on all matters international.

The lack of coherent norms on state behaviour in cyberspace as well as the intersection of business, cyberspace, and state activity is an opportunity for India. Indian diplomats can initiate a new track of conversations here which can benefit the international community at large. India should ensure that it initiates these conversations through well-informed diplomats. Ultimately, this will contribute to maintaining a rule-based world order that can greatly benefit India.

Finally, it is necessary to reassess the domestic regulatory framework on social media platforms. Transparency and accountability need to be foundational to the regulation of social media platforms in the information age. The moral standing for initiating any change to the global order must stem from a domestic policy that reflects the protection of the interests of the people over that of the political masters. We must stray away from the trend of regulatory norms that are deeply infringing on the rights accorded in a democracy.

Uncertainties of conflict overwhelm people and institutions. The dangerous conflation of social media as the civilian public square and site of international conflict will not bode well. A protocol that outlines the norms of behaviour on social media during such situations can help in addressing the multitude of evolving factors. It is in our national interest and that of a rule-based global polity that social media platforms be dealt with more attention across spheres than with a

range of reactionary measures addressing immediate concerns alone.

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