

# **War in the Digital Age: How Social Media Has Redefined UK Civilian Interaction with Modern-Day Warfare Discourse**

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## **Abstract:**

Social media has increasingly become a crucial medium through which information is received, interpreted and understood. The aim of this study is to explore the impact of social media on modern-day warfare discourse, understanding discourse to mean statements which produce and structure a particular order of reality. The study employs a qualitative methodology, specifically through semi-structured interviews. Data was collected from six respondents, which was then analysed through inductive thematic analysis. Three core themes materialised. Firstly, social media usage, which centres around ease and efficiency, has promoted a culture of ephemerality around war discourses. Secondly, users experience greater pressure of 'responsibility' around engagement with online warfare discourses. Thirdly, online users increasingly feel overwhelmed and hopeless.

These findings should be situated within a normative framework that highlights the importance of agency in democratic discourse. Social media should function as a democratic medium- one which enables individuals to feel like they can act in ways which feel meaningful and effective. However, the very structure of social media operates against this normative ideal. Social media privileges market driven logics such as speed and incessant novelty, in turn undermining agency. In principle, users are offered a plethora of potential pathways to action, such as donating, protesting and educating. However, this saturation of options leads to paralysis rather than empowerment. Options feel simultaneously urgent and inadequate, in turn creating a cycle of moral responsibility that lacks effective solution. This represents a profound failure. Social media is a medium with potential to democratise engagement with global wars and conflicts, yet instead it reproduces disempowerment and disengagement. As such, social media must be reimagined to foster conditions in which users feel they are agents of meaningful change.

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## **Literature review**

### **Introduction:**

This qualitative research asks how UK civilians, in the context of the rise of social media, interact with modern-day war discourse. This research will define social media as web-based platforms and applications, such as Instagram, Facebook, Google, TikTok, YouTube and X (previously Twitter)<sup>1</sup>. These can be characterised by user-generated content, networking, and the sharing of texts, images and videos<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, this research employs the Foucauldian definition of discourse, where discourse can be understood as ‘the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation’, meaning statements which produce and structure a particular order of reality<sup>3</sup>.

Through shaping cultural understandings and reinforcing ideological frameworks, discourse has historically mediated war. However, whilst discourse has always been a crucial tool in producing understandings of war, the digital age has introduced new dynamics. Younger generations increasingly use social media platforms as sources of information, where they can access news that circulates with far greater speed and scope.

Six interviewees were asked about their experience using social media to access war related news. Three themes emerged from this. Firstly, that for my participants, social media usage has promoted a culture of ephemerality around war discourses. Users are turning to social media for war related information that is rapid and efficiently transmitted, and this swift turnover means that information is quickly forgotten or dismissed as outdated. Secondly, that the concept of responsibility, and of sharing and gaining ‘awareness’ has become central to war discourses my participants were engaged in. Thirdly, that the abundance of distressing content available on social media has overwhelmed my participants and often left them with a sense of hopelessness.

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<sup>1</sup> Fuchs, Christian. *Social Media: A critical introduction*. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2014, pg. 35.

<sup>2</sup> IBID

<sup>3</sup> Lazar, Annita, and Michelle M. Lazar. “The Discourse of the New World Order: ‘Out Casting’ the Double Face of Threat.” *Discourse & Society* 15, no. 2–3 (May 2004): 223–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926504041018>, pg. 224.

Overall, these accounts suggest that, for my participants, social media largely reshaped their relationship with war discourse. A level of participation not previously accessible in the era dominated by newspapers, radio, and TV broadcast is now available to users. Social media invites users to contribute to building a particular order of reality. Through liking, sharing, and creating content, online users are invited to participate directly in war narratives. As such, the responsibility afforded to users feels much greater, as they begin to feel pressure to raise ‘awareness’, or, alternatively, feel guilt for not engaging.

This research builds on Chouliaraki’s assertion that engagement with suffering is subjective and is driven by private emotionality<sup>4</sup>. Some online users actively engage with war related content, whilst others passively view content or scroll past. Thus, I suggest that for my participants, social media has structurally altered the terms of war discourse through promoting an ostensibly participatory discourse that in actuality relies on individual moral judgement, rather than on a universal morality where all online users feel compelled to participate. However, this research also complicates Chouliaraki’s findings, suggesting that social media amplifies choice paralysis and indifference more strongly than the possibility of cosmopolitan agency<sup>5</sup>. Social media provides an abundance of pathways for action, none of which felt effective for my participants. This research therefore expands on the existing body of literature by suggesting that though social media is a medium with potential to democratise engagement with global wars and conflicts, it instead reproduces disempowerment and disengagement.

#### The development of war documentation: connecting social media and war discourse

Beginning with the Vietnam war, Television began to provide daily and “constant” coverage<sup>6</sup>. Sontag argues that the rise of television coverage created a new “tele-intimacy with death and destruction”<sup>7</sup>. The emphasis of TV on dialogue and depth led to a greater demand and taste for “all experience in depth”<sup>8</sup>. Now, social media facilitates an instantaneous electric speed in which both actions and reactions can occur in an almost simultaneous fashion<sup>9</sup>. On the ground footage can be viewed and instantly reacted to through checking comment reactions, and as such opinions can be immediately formed<sup>10</sup>. McLuhan argues that this has created an “implosion” or “contraction” of the world where everyone is proximate and interconnected<sup>11</sup>. Social media comment sections allow for mass instant

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<sup>4</sup> Chouliaraki, Lilie. “Post-Humanitarianism: Humanitarian Communication beyond a Politics of Pity.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 13, no. 2 (March 2010): 107–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877909356720>, pg. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Chouliaraki, Lilie. “The Mediation of Suffering and the Vision of a Cosmopolitan Public.” *Television & New Media* 9, no. 5 (February 26, 2008): 371–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476408315496>, pg. 16.

<sup>6</sup> Sontag, Susan. “Regarding the Pain of Others.” *Diogenes* n° 201, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 127–39. <https://doi.org/10.3917/dio.201.0127>, pg. 52.

<sup>7</sup> IBID

<sup>8</sup> McLuhan, Marshall, and W. Terrence Gordon. *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. Berkeley, Calif: Gingko Press, 2015, pg. 299.

<sup>9</sup> IBID, pg. 6.

<sup>10</sup> IBID

<sup>11</sup> IBID

reactions, with volumes of content available on social media being far greater than that of Television or Newspaper media<sup>12</sup>.

Papacharissi expands this argument, explaining that we are not simply interconnected by technology<sup>13</sup>. Instead, whilst technologies network us, it is narratives that connect us to each other<sup>14</sup>. Papacharissi argues that narratives have the power to make us feel close to some, but distance us from others<sup>15</sup>. He expands that social media is a tool of affective attunement, meaning that through the recognition and response to another's expressed emotion on online platforms, deeper emotional bonds are fostered as this creates the feeling of being understood and validated<sup>16</sup>. The storytelling infrastructure of platforms like Facebook or Twitter invites observers to tune into events and imagine what it might feel like for those directly experiencing them<sup>17</sup>.

This capability is not new or specific to social media, as the 24/7 television news cycle and broadcast journalism allowed people to affectively tune into events physically removed from them<sup>18</sup>. However, social media allows masses to engage by endorsing or rejecting these narratives online, contributing to a collective emotional discourse. In a networked context, structures are not only shaped by face-to-face interactions but also by mediated communication, social media, and online communities<sup>19</sup>. Agger argues that this form of communication blurs boundaries- we learn, connect and are entertained in global, real-time ways<sup>20</sup>. Media penetrates the private world, Agger argues, in ways that change what it means to be a person, have boundaries, and to disclose our inner feelings<sup>21</sup>.

War stories, narratives and doctrines use language in the form stories and information to shift perceptions of war. As such, perceptions of war can be understood as discursively spread. Hodges argues that war relies on discursively constructed distinction of defined enemies<sup>22</sup>. War is upheld through the notion of an "in-group" who distance themselves from the humanity of an "out group"<sup>23</sup>. The construction of enemies has long existed through storytelling and mythology, and later through TV, radio broadcast, and newspaper<sup>24</sup>. This construction is now also conveyed through social media, adding new dynamics to war narrative building.

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<sup>12</sup> IBID

<sup>13</sup> Papacharissi, Zizi. "Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics." *Affective Publics*, December 3, 2014, 115–36. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199999736.003.0006>, pg. 25.

<sup>14</sup> IBID

<sup>15</sup> IBID

<sup>16</sup> IBID

<sup>17</sup> IBID

<sup>18</sup> Hodges, Adam. *Discourses of war and peace*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, pg. 15.

<sup>19</sup> Agger, Ben. *Oversharing: Presentations of self in the internet age*. New York: Routledge, 2016, pg. 2.

<sup>20</sup> IBID

<sup>21</sup> IBID

<sup>22</sup> Hodges, Adam. *Discourses of war and peace*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, pg. 7.

<sup>23</sup> IBID

<sup>24</sup> IBID

Social media conveys narratives which uphold the notion of social group differences. For instance, direct communication from armed forces and intelligence agencies can be held online<sup>25</sup>. More uniquely, social media can contribute to the construction of narratives through user-generated content from civilians and armies, as well as more generally through text, images, videos, and live streams platformed by Instagram, TikTok and Facebook<sup>26</sup>. Here, users can participate through commenting, sharing and creating war related content. Castells argues that this level of connectivity has made the internet and social media become “the network society”<sup>27</sup>. On social media, Castell argues that communication becomes “mass self-communication”, meaning that individuals can act as both producers and receivers of content<sup>28</sup>. This has become an influential force- through the creation of content, ordinary users can alter the course of public sympathies. Now, there are a plethora of non-government officials, military bloggers, and frontline combat units who shape the perception of millions<sup>29</sup>. For example, YouTube channels such as 'Update from Ukraine' which has approximately 905,000 subscribers and 692 million views total.

Further than public sympathies, social media has been used as a platform for social organisation and protest. The September 2025 Nepalese “Gen-Z” led protests were triggered by the banning of social media, organised through social media, and led to the political reconfiguration of Nepalese government through an online platform (discord)<sup>30</sup>. Here, there was real-time video sharing of clashes between officials and civilians, as well as live streaming protest scenes. Further, in the July 2024 Bangladesh “Quota Reform” protests, Facebook played a central role in the building of a collective identity. Unifying slogans, imagery, discourse and memes mocking political symbols were all shared on the online platform<sup>31</sup>. Clearly, this has altered the structure of a previously top-to-bottom dissemination of discourse, as now ordinary civilians can interact and build narratives online.

### The impact of social media on war discourse

Social media provides larger volumes of content to audiences than has been previously possible. Distressing images, videos and livestreams showing footage of war related atrocities are posted and shared in large quantities. Chouliaraki argues that this is because these humanitarian communications operate under a market logic of persuasion<sup>32</sup>. She states that

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<sup>25</sup> Spansvoll, Runar. “The Weaponisation of Social Media, Crowdfunding and Drones.” *The RUSI Journal* 169, no. 1–2 (February 23, 2024): 46–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2024.2350478>, pg. 58.

<sup>26</sup> Fuchs, Christian. *Social Media: A critical introduction*. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2014, pg. 70.

<sup>27</sup> IBID

<sup>28</sup> IBID

<sup>29</sup> Spansvoll, Runar. “The Weaponisation of Social Media, Crowdfunding and Drones.” *The RUSI Journal* 169, no. 1–2 (February 23, 2024): 46–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2024.2350478>, pg. 50.

<sup>30</sup> “How the Ruling Elite Created ‘A Perfect Storm’ That Led to the Downfall of 3 South Asian Governments | CBC News.” CBCnews, September 24, 2025. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/nepal-youth-protests-social-media-1.7642523>.

<sup>31</sup> IBID

<sup>32</sup> Chouliaraki, Lilie. “Post-Humanitarianism: Humanitarian Communication beyond a Politics of Pity.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 13, no. 2 (March 2010): 107–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877909356720>, pg. 17.

shock has become a commodity, a leading stimulus of consumption and a source of value for culture<sup>33</sup>. Here, the goal is to make suffering “loom larger by globalising it”<sup>34</sup>. However, whilst this may spur people to “care” more, it also simultaneously invites them to feel that misfortunes may be too vast, too irrevocable, and too epic to be changed by local intervention, in turn diminishing compassion<sup>35</sup>.

When shock is a commodity, it becomes amplified by modern media, leading it to become saturated<sup>36</sup>. Chouliaraki highlights that constant exposure to suffering can lead to emotional numbing. This phenomenon, which she refers to as “compassion fatigue”, occurs through continuous exposure to similar or repeated images of suffering<sup>37</sup>. This can create sentiments of indifference or powerlessness, as shock wears off. She further explains that this creates a culture of narcissistic sensibility which favours a culture of private emotionality and indulgent self-inspection<sup>38</sup>. Social media, which cannot be disconnected from market logics through platforming the commodification of suffering, aids in a habituation to horror<sup>39</sup>. Sontag expands on this phenomenon, though in the context of war photography, arguing that if individuals feel there is nothing, they can do to stop a war, they may become “less responsive to the horrors”<sup>40</sup>. Further, Chouliaraki proposes that some forms of “emergency news”- news which represents suffering in ways that generates pity and calls for action- may open up a space for cosmopolitan engagement<sup>41</sup>. Here, audiences can act in solidarity with distant others. However, this research complicates this assertion. Instead, I add to the existing body of literature by suggesting that the structural logics of social media as a medium, such as speed and the abundance of actionable pathways, undermine rather than enable cosmopolitan engagement.

## **Methodology:**

I recruited participants primarily online. Recruitment methods included a social media post and flyer, as well as word of mouth. The inclusion criteria were UK Citizens who were not engaging in military activity (i.e. in the army), as this research focuses on the impact of social

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<sup>33</sup> IBID

<sup>34</sup> Sontag, Susan. “Regarding the Pain of Others.” *Diogenes* n° 201, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 127–39. <https://doi.org/10.3917/dio.201.0127>, pg. 62.

<sup>35</sup> IBID

<sup>36</sup> Chouliaraki, Lilie. “Post-Humanitarianism: Humanitarian Communication beyond a Politics of Pity.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 13, no. 2 (March 2010): 107–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877909356720>, pg. 17.

<sup>37</sup> IBID

<sup>38</sup> IBID, pg. 20.

<sup>39</sup> Sontag, Susan. “Regarding the Pain of Others.” *Diogenes* n° 201, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 127–39. <https://doi.org/10.3917/dio.201.0127>, pg. 65.

<sup>40</sup> IBID

<sup>41</sup> Chouliaraki, Lilie. “The Mediation of Suffering and the Vision of a Cosmopolitan Public.” *Television & New Media* 9, no. 5 (February 26, 2008): 371–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476408315496>, pg. 20.

media on UK civilians. This study uses online semi-structured interviews. A consent form was sent to all participants and was read out at the beginning of each interview. The interview was structured around four main questions. The first question asked participants how they remain updated with war related news. Follow up questions included asking why participants access news on certain platforms, and what qualities about these platforms are important to them.

This was followed by a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of using social media to stay politically informed, particularly comparing this to professional news sources (i.e. newspapers or news channels), and a discussion of what it means to trust information. The second question asked participants to share their experience using online platforms they mentioned to engage with war related news. The third question asked participants to discuss a recent war related post or a clip that particularly grabbed their attention or evoked strong emotions. This also included a 'feed walk' where participants were asked to scroll on their social media and notice any posts/ clips related to war that caught their attention. Participants were then asked what they saw, how they would respond seeing such posts, and anything they might have done afterward. This was particularly helpful as it allowed for participants to reflect on the impact of social media posts in real-time. The fourth question asked participants to reflect on what type of war related content appears most commonly on their feeds. Participants were asked if they felt they had been exposed to distressing images and asked to reflect on the impact of such content.

Six interviews were conducted. Four participants were female, one was male, and one was non-binary. All were university educated. The average participant was in their 20s, with one participant in the 40s. The average length of interview was 35 minutes. These interviews were then transcribed using a transcription software and manually edited for accuracy. Transcripts were analysed using inductive thematic analysis, where topics that were verbally raised by participants were identified and coded. Codes were used to identify themes, from which three were selected to be further analysed. Participants were anonymised in all notetaking and pseudonyms are used when referring to participants.

## **Research findings**

Three core themes were discovered. Firstly, social media usage centres around ease efficiency, promoting a culture of ephemerality around war discourses. Secondly, users experience greater feelings of 'responsibility' around engagement with online warfare discourses. Thirdly, users increasingly feel overwhelmed and hopeless.

### **'The ease of content'**

This theme investigates platform usage, focusing on why individuals use specific platforms to access information, and what information is made available. A major finding was that participants valued efficiency and immediacy from news sources, leading many to use social media as their primary source of information. This has promoted a culture of ephemerality around information through prioritising mass amounts of fast-paced and constantly updating pieces of news. In an age dominated by television, newspapers, and radio, war news was scarcer and more deliberately encountered. Reading a newspaper or watching the news

requires more active choice and temporal investment. Contrastingly, on Instagram or TikTok, war discourse is algorithmically interspersed with everyday content. Participant reflections suggest that this immediacy and abundance devalue war content, making information both overwhelming and forgettable. The consequences of this are twofold. Firstly, it suggests a structural shift towards greater information fatigue, as the design of social media incites rapid exposure, which overwhelms users. Secondly, in this environment civic temporality is diminished as users no longer linger on information in a way that can accumulate into sustained public concern.

When asked how they learn about war related news, Instagram and TikTok were frequently referenced due to their ease of access and rapid delivery of content. For example, Olivia and Sophia primarily use Instagram and TikTok, with broadcast news services being secondary sources that they receive notifications for or have subscriptions to. George also added that he primarily accesses news through Instagram. Ava referenced news sites like Sky News and the BBC, which she accesses online. She specified that if she wants to hear personal testimonies, she is most likely to use Instagram. Isabella shared that she prefers watching the 10 O'clock news on the BBC, but that she does "rarely" use Instagram. Aspen stated that they do not use TikTok at all, instead opting for blue sky, which they feel is more curated for their interests.

Participants repeatedly emphasised that they use these platforms due to the volume and speed of content dissemination. TikTok's shortform content and Instagram's rapid updates made them appealing for participants. Social media was also highlighted as providing access to a range of perspectives and individual stories that participants felt were missing from mainstream news outlets. Sophia noted that the speed of social media means teenagers hear about news before adults who solely use professional news sources. However, this immediacy has a cost in maintaining information verification. Participants acknowledged that the reliance on speed compromises accuracy. Particularly, Aspen, Olivia and Sophia raised concerns about how social media's urge to churn out endless content makes source verification difficult concluding that social media is able to engage in rapid information dissemination as it skips fact checking because there is no "waiting around" on social media.

Participants were also invited to open their social media feeds, scroll through and point out any content that stood out to them. Participants observed that war related content, especially about Gaza and Israel, appeared frequently. Upon scrolling five stories, Olivia noted a story asking, "does mutual aid even reach Gaza?". She quotes the post which says, "with the ongoing Israeli siege and starvation of Palestinians as tools of genocide, many people have been asking this question, some of concern". Three stories later, Olivia sees a reposted quote referring to Gazans as walking corpses. She reflects that this is "disconcerting" and creates a "juxtaposition" of posts on her feed, as the previous posts were about a friend's party. She adds that she often simply scrolls past these posts, finding scrolling stories to be a mindless activity, and that the volume of posts means she cannot read them all. Upon scrolling her Instagram feed, Isabella highlights a post that reads "more people in Gaza died of starvation in just over 11 days, than in the previous 21 months of conflict", going on to highlight the death toll. Isabella states that upon seeing these types of posts she would usually see it, read it, feel really awful, and then "carry on". Ava's third Instagram story was from the Financial Times, headlined "Trump and Putin will discuss economic cooperation at the upcoming summit". Reflecting on this, Ava states "it's just news. There isn't necessarily any way that I can help from that post, I didn't do anything. I just kind of scroll past it.". This highlights the ephemerality of online war discourse- participants linger less on information due to the quantity and nature of content on their social media feeds.

### 'Using my platform'

This theme explores the ways in which social media incorporates user voice, and how participants engage with war related posts online. Engagement behaviours varied, with some participants speaking of liking and sharing posts, and others speaking of viewing content that is shared by their peers and created by other internet users. A central finding was that users experience great feelings of 'responsibility' to produce "awareness"- which participants discussed as a way of informing themselves and others, signalling their political alignment. The consequences of these findings are significant- they illustrate that public visibility is socially consequential. This visibility fosters a sense of responsibility where demonstrating "awareness" is becomes central to practices of self-curation.

Participants were invited firstly to share the ways in which they engage with war-related posts. Ava says that typically when viewing posts she clicks into captions, swipes through the posts, likes content that she agrees with, and occasionally reposts content, particularly if there is an action associated with it such as signing a petition. She argues that it takes "like two seconds" to like or share post, raising awareness through exemplifying information. While she recognised that this could potentially be a "superficial" form of activism, she views it as a small but meaningful way to feel informed and involved, especially when she lacks the time to protest and donate. Aspen states that they engage by sharing analysis articles that they find particularly important, and Isabella reflects that social media allows her to engage with the more humanitarian side of conflict where she can access personal and individual stories.

However, other participants like Olivia value the passive nature of social media. She appreciates that on social media news can appear on her feed without her consciously needing to type news sources into Google. She said that she does not frequently like or share posts. Likewise, Isabella admits that she does not tend to like war related content, finding it emotionally taxing, as well as being worried that liking content will send her down a "rabbit hole" and give her an "unbalanced feed". When asked if she ever scrolls past content, Sophia shared that she realised she was skipping over certain content because she was worried it challenge her pro-Israel perspective. Identifying as Jewish and having many Jewish friends at university, she was avoiding posts to stay in line with the opinions of her mother and friends. She says that she then noticed that, prompting her to reconsider how she engages with challenging content as she felt that was not the kind of person she wanted to be. Sophia felt a 'responsibility' to make herself more 'aware', highlighting the significance of responsibility for my participants accessing war related news online.

Many participants also argued that liking war-related posts on social media was a means to "show where they stand". Isabelle admitted that she felt social media is more performative than informative, where users engage for likes and visibility rather than truth. Olivia reflected that liking posts is often less about supporting a cause, and more about signalling her support to her online network. Sophia echoed this, mentioning that she likes content that resonates strongly with her, because people can see what she has she has liked and want people to know she agrees with it. George acknowledged a "selfish" level to his engagement, explaining that there is a minor performative aspect in that he knows that Instagram will show what he's liked to other people. He admits that there is a part of him that wants people to know that he's also aware of and cares about global issues. He states that he thinks it is not just about "pushing out" content, but also about the fact that people will see he's engaged

with this and know it's important to him. This highlights that public visibility is socially consequential, leading my participants to feel responsible for a self-curation of their online political image.

### 'What can I do?'

This theme addresses the emotional impact of constant exposure to war-related content on social media users. Participants described feeling overwhelmed, powerless and hopeless when confronted with an abundance of graphic and distressing footage online.

When asked about how frequently she sees distressing content, Olivia replied that she thinks it is difficult to go at least a day without seeing some sort of visceral image of conflict or war. She highlighted that the accessibility of photography and the nature of digital platforms mean that there's a constant influx of horrific content. She recalled one particularly striking image that she "really remembered"- this being a Gazan boy in a medical tent who was "very emaciated and looked almost like not human". Initially, she thought this to be fake as it "looked so not real". Realising its authenticity made it all the more shocking to her. It struck her because it "looked so insane" that she wasn't sure if it was "edited or something".

There was consensus amongst participants that raw, on the ground footage evoked the strongest emotional reactions. Participants all gave different examples of footage that had particularly struck them, highlighting the abundance of content available online. Isabella remembered seeing a TikTok video where a schoolgirl in Gaza documented her daily life to raise awareness, saying that she "very clearly remembered" it- the girl woke up, didn't have breakfast, sat in her room studying, and then had to go to a bomb shelter. Ava also described an image of a boy in Palestine who was starving, looked "really, really skinny" and unwell. George also added that the most distressing post he had seen was one reposted by his Jordanian Palestinian friend of a child whose head had been blown off. Aspen said that they had seen footage of settlers that had gone in and removed people from their homes or destroyed their property, reflecting that this sat very badly with their morals. Olivia added that these visceral images impact her greatly as she feels as if she is invading a person's privacy in a time of distress and pain.

Reflecting on this, participants described feeling overwhelmed, hopeless, and helpless. Olivia stated that she felt "sort of powerless" because there is not much she can do from behind a screen. Ava echoed this sentiment, explaining that though she believes herself to be good at detaching and consulting multiple sources, the sheer volume of distressing news often leaves her feeling overwhelmed. She found herself asking "what can I do?", a question Isabella also asked herself when considering the effectiveness of donating money. While she has donated before, she expressed doubts that this could lead to tangible change, believing that without power or influence it is difficult to stop conflict. She concluded that this adds to her feeling of hopelessness, as she thinks to herself "what is this actually going to do?".

The overwhelming amount of content has also led to avoidance behaviours in participants. For instance, participants report "scrolling past" to avoid content. Isabella felt that she scrolls past because sometimes content is actively hard to watch and makes her think that things "going on in the world are so horrible". She adds that this is not something she wants to see on her feed so just scrolls past it. More generally, participants spoke of disengaging as a way

to avoid content. Olivia suggested that she disengages because the amounts of content on her feed at some point become “desensitising”, with horrific images blurring into one. Sophia states that she always scrolls past as whilst she knows bad things are happening, she’s not “someone that is going to donate to save a Palestinian”.

## **Discussion**

The interview process highlighted the impact of online war reporting on war discourses. Feelings of ‘responsibility’ to engage in war discourses have been exacerbated by social media. Furthermore, the prioritisation of ease and efficiency on social media has meant information is fleeting, creating a sense of ephemerality around war discourses. This may also reinforce feelings of hopelessness, as information feels endless and overwhelming. When assessed through a normative framework that highlights the importance of agency in democratic discourse, this is particularly significant. Saturation of options leads to paralysis rather than empowerment. This represents a profound failure, as social media should function as a democratic medium that enables individuals to feel like they can act in ways which feel meaningful and effective.

Throughout the interviews, the notion of responsibility increasingly seemed central to participants. Platforms encourage users to create, share, like and discuss content, and this may implicitly compel users feel a responsibility to engage in online discourse. As Castells notes, here communication becomes “mass self-communication” where users can both produce and receive content<sup>42</sup>. This does not necessarily mean that users are by-large engaging more. However, it does mean that when they do not engage, or scroll past, they feel greater feelings of guilt and shame. Central to social media is the idea that all users have a ‘platform’, and as such users feel a greater sense of obligation to use their platforms to ‘raise awareness’. This obligation of course is dependent on external social pressures, but more crucially is built into the operation of online platforms. Like Agger highlights, social media blurs boundaries between users and content<sup>43</sup>.

This obligation often manifested for interviewees into a negation of supposed responsibility, where feelings of futility and questions of “what can I do?” arose. Interestingly, these sentiments of helplessness were centred around the idea that there are actions one could take through social media (e.g. using platform to raise awareness), but that these actions themselves feel futile. This could perhaps another way to negate the perceived responsibility users feel online, through absolving responsibility by claiming that action is pointless. However, these could also be pragmatic reflections on the limits of digital action. It is also notable that social media platforms encourage responsibility of user to user. Users centre other users, something which was clear to see through participants discussion of why they use social media for war related news. Participants turn to social media to receive personal testimony and to hear from victims of war who can share their stories online first hand, rather than their stories being retold by journalists. Yet, participants cannot act in ways which feel meaningful and effective, exemplifying the failure of social media to function as a democratic medium.

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<sup>42</sup> Fuchs, Christian. *Social Media: A critical introduction*. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2014, pg.

<sup>43</sup> IBID

Overarchingly, participants described themselves feeling “overwhelmed” by war related content. Participants discussed seeing huge amounts of content, much of it consisting of images and videos of human suffering. As such, it is clear that social media discourses have promoted a sense of ephemerality, as content is constantly updating and refreshing, leaving users less time to dwell on particular instances of suffering. In the discussion of distressing content, participants all gave different examples of content that they felt had impacted them, further signifying the high volume of war related content available online. Participants seemed to be describing themselves as “overwhelmed” to communicate a certain type of internal conflict they felt when seeing so much fleeting content that is distressing by nature. Many participants noted that they tend to scroll past content that they find disturbing. As Chouliaraki explains, users become emotionally numb due to constant exposure to suffering<sup>44</sup>. Exposure to high volumes of distressing content left participants with an internal conflict- whether to scroll past content or to force themselves to engage for the sake of “awareness”. Feelings of being “overwhelmed” for some manifested in the urge for action, and for others manifested in tendencies of avoidance. Participants who admitted to often scrolling were aware and mentioned that they know that “bad things are happening”, but precisely for this reason felt they must avoid this content. As Sontag explains, if individuals feel there is nothing, they can do to stop a war, they may become “less responsive to the horrors”<sup>45</sup>. Social media relies on individual moral judgement that means some users will subject themselves to great amounts of distressing content, whilst some scroll past. This illustrates that social media cannot act as an effective democratic medium that enables individuals to feel like they can act.

Lastly, it was notable that in the online war discourse some suffering receives greater attention. In terms of war related news, participants spoke of receiving news regarding Russia-Ukraine as well as Israel-Gaza. When the conversation shifted to distressing content, participants solely spoke of Gaza. Participants highlighted that Gaza content, particularly footage of starvation and bodily mutilation were most frequent on their feeds. This could also suggest that social media prioritises particular forms of suffering. As Chouliaraki argues, humanitarian communications operate under a market logic of persuasion where shock has become a commodity, and as such is overrepresented<sup>46</sup>. There is a danger to this- it may mean that other more every-day forms of suffering go unnoticed or underreported, as they are not as profitable of a commodity.

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative study aims to explore the impact of social media on modern-day warfare discourse. Particularly, how UK civilians interact with modern day war discourse on social

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<sup>44</sup> Chouliaraki, Lilie. “Post-Humanitarianism: Humanitarian Communication beyond a Politics of Pity.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 13, no. 2 (March 2010): 107–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877909356720>, pg. 20.

<sup>45</sup> Sontag, Susan. “Regarding the Pain of Others.” *Diogenes* n° 201, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 127–39. <https://doi.org/10.3917/dio.201.0127>, pg. 65.

<sup>46</sup> Chouliaraki, Lilie. “The Mediation of Suffering and the Vision of a Cosmopolitan Public.” *Television & New Media* 9, no. 5 (February 26, 2008): 371–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476408315496>, pg. 20.

media. This study draws from six semi-structured interviews, revealing that social media has had profound implications on the ways in which individuals engage with and respond emotionally to war-related content. Three key themes materialised: a greater culture of ephemerality around war discourses, increased feelings of ‘responsibility’ around engagement with online warfare discourses, and the emotional toll of distressing content which leaves users overwhelmed and hopeless.

The emphasis placed by social media on immediacy and volume cultivates a fleeting relationship with information- war stories, footage, and commentary come and go in the endlessness scroll. However, despite this transience, users feel a greater sense of responsibility- an intensified emotional and moral pressure to engage. Social media, unlike traditional media, which offered curated and limited representations of war, encourages participation. For my participants, online participation, whilst ostensibly seeming universal, relied on individual moral judgement. As participants navigated the choice between active engagement and passive avoidance, responses were seen to be shaped less by collective or universal moral frameworks and instead more influenced by social pressures shaped by positionality, and personal emotional thresholds.

Furthermore, this study highlights that for my participants, social media privileges emotional shock over balanced representation. Whilst this is not exclusive to social media, online platforms can disseminate high volumes of information under market-driven logics. These humanitarian communications commodify suffering and render certain forms of suffering invisible. This suggests that social media users are not simply passive recipients of war discourse, but instead actors whose engagement patterns contribute to shaping visibility and perceived legitimacy of global suffering.

Ultimately, this study suggests that accessibility comes at a cost. While social media platforms can offer unprecedented access to war narratives and allow for greater participation in discourse, the burden of moral engagement is shifted onto individuals, fostering emotional fatigue as well as promoting a fragmented and uneven attention to global conflict. This raises important questions about how we relate to, understand, and act upon suffering in an era of complete and constant connectivity. These findings should be situated within a normative framework that highlights the importance of agency in democratic discourse. In doing so, this research complicates Chouliaraki’s findings, expanding on the existing body of literature by suggesting that social media amplifies choice paralysis and indifference more strongly than the possibility of cosmopolitan agency. Social media provides an abundance of pathways for action, none of which felt effective for my participants. As such, social media must be reimagined to foster conditions in which users feel they are agents of meaningful change.

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