

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

## Introduction

This qualitative research asks **how UK civilians**, in the context of the rise of social media, **interact with modern-day war discourse**. **Discourse**, defined by Foucault as 'the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation', **can be understood as statements which produce and structure a particular order of reality**. Younger generations increasingly use social media as sources of information, where they can access news that circulates with far greater speed and scope. 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. **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**.

## Methodology

- Qualitative methodology
- Data collected through **six semi-structured interviews** which were analysed through **inductive thematic analysis**.
- Participants: UK civilians not partaking in military action (4 female, 1 male, 1 non-binary; mostly 20s, all university-educated).
- Participants were asked about **how they remain updated about war related news**, and about the reasons why certain online platforms appeal to them.
- Performed a **"feed walk"** in real time where participants were asked to scroll on their social media and discuss any posts/clips related to war that caught their attention.

## Conclusion

- Social media provides unprecedented access and participation, but this **accessibility comes at a cost**.
- The **burden of moral engagement** has been **shifted onto individuals, fostering emotional fatigue** as well as promoting a **fragmented and uneven attention to global conflict**.
- 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.
- For my participants, **social media undermines rather than enables agency, amplifying indifference more than cosmopolitan solidarity**.
- Normative implication: **Platforms must be reimagined to democratise engagement with global wars and conflicts**. They must be reimagined to support conditions where users feel like **agents of meaningful change**.

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## Findings

Three core themes materialised:

1. Social media usage centres around **ease and efficiency**, and this has **promoted a culture of ephemerality** around war discourses.
2. Users experience greater pressure of 'responsibility' around engagement with online warfare discourses.
3. Online users increasingly feel overwhelmed and hopeless.

Theme 1: key findings

- Platforms used by participants to access information: **Instagram, TikTok, BBC Online, BlueSky**.
- Participants **valued speed and efficiency** in receiving war related news.
- Participants discussed that **content is rapid, fragmented, and quickly forgotten**.
- This has promoted a **culture of ephemerality around war discourses** as this swift turnover means that **information is quickly forgotten** or dismissed as outdated.
- Consequences:
  - **Information fatigue**: participants explained that they **often scroll past** content as they see an abundance of it.
  - **Diminished civic temporality**: participants **spent less time spent lingering**, reflecting, or sustaining concern.

*"It's just news. There isn't necessarily any way that I can help... I just kind of scroll past it."* (Ava)

Theme 2: key findings

- Feelings of **'responsibility'** to engage in war discourses have been **exacerbated** by social media.
- Engagement with online war related news meant **participants experienced great feelings of 'responsibility' to produce "awareness"**- which participants discussed as a way of informing themselves and others, signalling their political alignment.
- This created **internal conflict and tension** in participants:
  - Participants reflected that this responsibility both **fosters solidarity** and exacerbates **performative self-curation**.
  - Public visibility makes **non-engagement socially consequential**.
- This perceived 'responsibility' also led to **avoidance strategies** like skipping posts to manage emotions or avoid conflict with community identity.

*"Part of me wants people to know that I'm aware and care about global issues."* (George)

Theme 3: key findings

- Exposure to **distressing content** was **constant** (e.g. graphic images, personal testimonies).
- Participants felt **powerless, hopeless, and overwhelmed**.
- **Pathways to action** such as donations or reposts were described by participants as **futile**, leading to disengagement.
- Emotional overload also led to avoidance strategies like scrolling past, as well as desensitisation and emotional withdrawal.

*"What is this actually going to do?"* (Isabella)