RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS
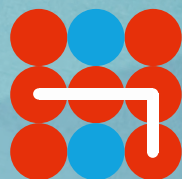
Strategic citizens: Civil society as a battlespace in the era of hybrid threats

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Hybrid CoE

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Civil society as a battlespace
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> *Civil society is a battlespace empowered by information flows, and one that military planners, government policymakers and politicians have to take seriously. This calls for a rethinking and updating of what we have historically understood as offline and online civil society. However, we can and should draw lessons from the rich history of civil society to look at the longer-term view of how to protect democracies from within and strengthen both institutions and individual citizens against targeted hybrid threats. –* writes Barbara J. Falk, Professor, Department of Defence Studies at the Canadian Forces College and the Royal Military College of Canada.

During the Cold War, as Buddhika B. Jayamaha and Jahara Matisek have argued, robust civil societies enhanced democracy, providing the West with both a soft and a hard power edge, and also enabling dissidents to "bore from within" when it came to communist societies. **With the advancements of social media, those aspects that constitute the battlespace have changed, highlighting the increasing importance of civil society as a battlespace in itself.** Thus, ironically, the same set of strategies and tactics that were effectively exploited by the internal and external opposition to communism are now being used by the primary loser of the Cold War – Russia – to fragment and destabilize older Western democracies and newer post-communist democracies. **At the strategic level, there is a paucity of understanding among Western analysts about the relative importance of civil society as the glue that holds stable societies together.** This lack of understanding has consequences for resilience- and deterrence-building policy. **It also highlights the increased need for civil-military cooperation, especially in the face of hybrid threats.**

The changing battlespace and its effects on resilience

Over the last four years, NATO and the EU have adopted a multi-layer policy of deterrence, response, and resilience against hybrid threats. Heine Sørensen and Dorthe Bach Nyemann have rightly criticized existing resilience approaches as both too long-term and aimed at vulnerabilities in social structures that are not easily amenable to protection or change, instead of taking into account the rapidly changing nature of today's security environment.

Resilience has all too often been conceived of as a "target hardening"[1] strategy rather than a larger social challenge. Countermeasures often include political and diplomatic warnings; whole of government coordination and policy consistency; technical competency; public-private partnerships; and the training and engagement of parties, candidates, staff, volunteers, and election officials to follow best practices. These are obviously important because cyber tools used by adversaries have targeted

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1 A term used by police officers, those working in security, and the military referring to the strengthening of the security of a building or installation in order to protect it in the event of attack or reduce the risk of theft. It is believed that a "strong, visible defence will deter or delay an attack".

websites, email, networks, personal devices, and social media accounts (either directly through hacking or via trolls, sockpuppets, and bots). **However, the issue is not only one of protection against a particular action like electoral interference, but also of addressing deeper challenges within democratic societies as well as global governance challenges of social media, necessary because the battlespace itself has fundamentally changed.**

This new landscape of conflict has been characterized by P.W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking in their book *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, where they discuss how the theatrics of socially mediated conflicts in cyberspace combine and conflate with kinetic effects in real time. Moreover, while the lines have blurred in terms of actual war and information war, any neat division between national and international, state-based and non-state-based, has also become indistinct. 'Like wars' are less about the traditional hacking of computer networks and more about the hacking of human minds. Open societies that make free expression and democracy possible also widen the opportunities for such conflict. **The more nonlinear and diffuse the distinction between actual war and information or social media war, the more confusing *and* participatory it gets, as citizens on all sides either wittingly or unwittingly become conscripts.** To borrow an analogy from *Game of Thrones*, when the adversary can turn your soldiers into their soldiers, as the White Walkers were able to do, there is no immediate possibility of victory as conventionally understood. Furthermore, any form of target hardening is made more difficult because human communities are the ultimate moving target.

Social media's effect on civil society

Social media acted dramatically as a 'force multiplier' in people-power-driven efforts at 'regime change from below' during the 2011 Arab Spring, and in changing the conversation regarding income inequality as a result of the 'Occupy' movement. Zeynep Tufekci discusses how the 'affordances' of social media technology allowed participants to bridge otherwise weak social ties through friends/ followership, organize extremely quickly, develop

impressive reactive capacity, and creatively circumvent traditional, blunt, state-based forms of censorship.

Coordination, communication and logistics challenges are surmounted by real-time updates and crowdsourcing: in effect, civil society has been empowered by social media. At the same time, **digitally organized dissent means that rapidly organized movements miss out on what Tufekci calls 'network internalities' – the processes of movement building over time**. Patient and slow collective decision-making through negotiation and trial and error result in better strategies and also deepen social trust among participants, resulting in more durable social movements, and the transfer of human capital and energy to existing, reformed, or new political institutions and governance structures. The very adhocracy of digital protest, while allowing for mass mobilization, tends to generate horizontalism and leaderlessness in civil society organizations and movements. **Such adhocracy allows powerful immediacy and response, as we have seen recently through the exponential support for Black Lives Matter protests in the United States, but also allows others to promote social division and up the ante with 'in real life' violence**.

Moreover, it is difficult to distinguish hoaxers from QAnon activists, who use the language of information warfare to propagate conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19, even absent any foreign interference. Ideological commitments to flat hierarchies and participatory decision-making, while laudable, too often translate into distrust of conventional politics and elites, not to mention 'tactical freeze' whereby movements cannot respond to rapidly changing conditions with new approaches because they cannot negotiate and adapt without leaders and strategic vision.

Social media platforms and algorithms produce echo chambers where like-minded individuals extol the virtues of their similar viewpoints. We are active co-creators in building our own filter bubbles through homophily – the love of what we already like, and confirmation bias – our collective hard-wired tendency as human beings to interpret the world around us consistent with already-held beliefs. While Tufekci's work positively illustrates how social media can build community, break down

pluralistic ignorance, enable and force multiply dissent, Singer and Brooking emphasize that these same platforms constitute a giant unreality machine allowing for the super-propulsion of fake news, and conspiracy theories completely unmoored from factual evidence. COVID-19 is but the latest example. Pankaj Mishra and Peter Pomer-antsev both suggest anger is particularly effective in building and sustaining online audiences and offline violence: promoting extreme positions fuels fury in others. These echo chambers and the anger they produce are both cost-effective channels that allow external actors to interfere online, over-polarizing beliefs and steering conversations that both undermine state and social legitimacy within their targets and support their own strategic interests simultaneously.

Yet long before the internet and the advent of social media, the organization and activism of inde-pendent civil society movements have been critical and necessary for battling authoritarian govern-ments and democratization processes. Civil society consists of the many manifestations of organized social life that are voluntary, independent of state and governance structures, bound by shared val-ues, and protected by law. It is an intermediary sphere between the state, the market, and family or kinship relationships. Larry Diamond traced devel-opments in intellectual and policy circles back to the intellectuals and activists in Solidarity in Poland in their efforts to independently self-organize society against the party-state; similar arguments were advanced regarding the efforts of Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia and the democratic opposition in Hungary. **But today, civil society is a battlespace *inside* democratic systems, whereas previously civil society activism was about weakening authoritarian systems and consolidating and deepening democratic health.**

Strengthening social trust and the fabric of democracy

Robert Putnam has elaborated how civil society has historically allowed for the building of two kinds of social capital – bonding capital (based on social connections with like-minded people) and bridging capital (based on social connections with people

who are not like you). Both kinds of capital are fused in civil society and serve to strengthen social trust and the fabric of democracy. Thus, while inde-pendent civil society was discussed in the context of undermining communist states, it was also seen as necessary for consolidating new – and strength-ening existing – democratic polities. **Civil society is the laboratory in which individuals become citizens**, and develop the necessary attributes for living in a democracy: tolerance of and engagement with other viewpoints through free and fair expression; moderation and a willingness to problem-solve and negotiate difference in the interests of workable compromises; as well as allowing for new channels and voices in the political process in terms of previously marginalized voices or groups, or on the basis of newly articulated demands or interests, especially in the interest of greater justice, fairness, or equality. Civil society encourages cross-cutting cleavages, providing fertile training ground for social and political leaders. **An independent civil society is a bulwark against excessive state power and a check on creeping authoritarianism**. Unfortunately, as John Keane has pointed out, civil society inevitably contains within itself *uncivil* society – in that the very liberal freedom and openness on which it is premised allows for the flourishing of groups that are antithetical to democracy and liberal norms.

Writing in the 1990s, at a time when the inter-net and the world wide web were experiencing exponential growth but *before* the advent of social media, Putnam warned that decreased social capital lowers popular confidence in government and the media, and encourages voter apathy and disengagement from traditional politics, enhancing greater participation in direct action and protest but with fewer tangible results. More time is spent on screens – for work or leisure – than with community groups or in collective action. Recently, Putnam has written how COVID-19 has exacerbated the centrifugal forces of the internet, pulling us into greater isolation surrounded by only the closest of friends and family in our bubbles, while what democracies need most are the centripetal forces of social and collective action and the devel-opment of weak social ties that often must occur in physical space.

Weaponization o civil society

At first, social media seemed to provide avenues for participation and community that would grow and intensify social capital but, as we have seen, algorithms have seriously tipped the balance in favour of bonding capital rather than bridging capital. As so much of social media growth has happened in a legal vacuum, while allowing for new opportunities for state surveillance, authoritarian control, and the fracturing of epistemological certainty, social trust and shared values have been undermined. Beyond the virtual world of cyberspace, civil society itself has been weaponized. Indeed, as civil society moved online, it became easier for adversarial actors to exploit openness to foment social division and polarization. Finally, online activity, while enhancing networking through the building of weak social ties, diminishes stronger interpersonal ties built on social trust gained through personal face-to-face contact and actual rather than virtual friendship.

A more fulsome resilience strategy cannot turn back the clock. **Civil society is a battlespace empowered by information flows, one that military planners, government policymakers and politicians have to take seriously**. This calls for a rethinking and updating of what we have historically under-stood as offline and online civil society. If anything, the global pandemic has raised the stakes, given the increased fusion of the online working-from-home world with the real world and the dissolution of the private/public distinction. **However, we can and should draw lessons from the rich history of civil society**

to look at the longer-term view of how to protect democracies from within and strengthen both institutions and individual citizens against targeted hybrid threats.

As we are all part of civil society, as Singer and Brooking discuss in their conclusion to *LikeWar*, we are all protagonists, and the division between citizen and soldier has been eroded. This has downstream consequences for our current and future understanding of civil-military relations in democracies. **If social media forced us post-9/11 to think about the 'strategic corporal', we now have to think about the 'strategic citizen'.** Finally, we need to make significant investments in areas that heretofore have looked very unlike traditional security expenditures and do so in a whole-of-government and even whole-of-society manner.

Civil-military cooperation key to resilience against hybrid threats

Focusing on civil society, electoral reform and education is hardly a traditional strength or even within the constitutional remit of militaries in democratic societies. Although traditional military strategic thinking emphasizes morality and the will to win as necessary for the civil-military effort, wars cannot be won by military force alone. Therefore, **civil-military cooperation in resilience-building is more crucial than ever, given that civil society has become a weaponized battlespace** in today's 'like wars' as well as a part of the hybrid threat landscape.

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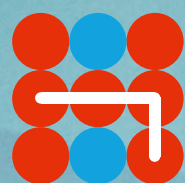
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