Epistemological crises in violent contexts during the age of (dis)information

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Abstract

This essay discusses how disinformation and uncertainty result in epistemological crises in violent contexts. It examines the challenges of (dis)information in masking the knowledge of war and violence and disorienting actors working to end the conflict. The essay discusses three layers where (dis)information challenges both observers and participants, demonstrating the extent of the epistemological crises resulting from disinformation in violent settings. First, how conflict actors make choices, based on (dis)information, and the difficulties involved in identifying conflict actors. Second, how (inter)national actors impact information streams about conflict, especially in relation to (inter)national media, and how to trust in them, in turn, is affected. Third, how conducting research during an ongoing conflict is inherently fraught with challenges regarding (dis)information. This not only impacts how we can do research into any given topic, but also how our presence can be mobilized by conflict actors. What contributions can researchers make in collecting, analyzing, and translating 'information' on and in a conflict? In conclusion, the essay stresses the value and limitations of ethnographic approaches, combining different methods. We argue that we should deal with the constant presence and even overload of (dis)information head-on.

Introduction

During the last decade -aided by the election of Donald Trump- the world has become increasingly aware of the threat of “fake news”. In today’s ‘Information Age’, information and data are the key to power. Social media allows for real-time communication and information-sharing, while increased connectivity through mobile phones and internet form a wider base for globalization processes. These modern technologies have resulted in a proliferation of information in and on violent contexts. Of course, (dis)information has always played a role in the evolution of conflict. Already in Roman times there were fake news campaigns. The novelty today is the sheer speed and ease with which (dis)information can spread.

The rise of deepfakes, troll farms, Twitter bots and countless other digital tools leads to inevitable challenges for the production of academic knowledge. How can we understand this new (digital) world around us? This essay presents reflections on the role of (dis)information in violent conflict settings, and the epistemological challenges we are presented with. First off, a word on terminology: What is understood as (dis)information? We use the term here as a shorthand for all information that is generated about and within conflict settings: ‘true’, ‘untrue’ and everything in between. This includes deliberate misinformation, rumors but also convictions of interlocutors, which they consider to be ‘facts’. The brackets separating *dis* from information suggest that there might still be information that is deemed ‘true’ by all actors involved, as well as outside observers and researchers. But the way (dis)information is presented here as a singular word also represents the importance of one’s positionality in considering something true or false.

One of the definitions of research in Meriam-Webster refers to the ‘discovery and interpretation of facts’. As researchers, we often endeavor to find ‘a truth’, if not ‘*the* truth’. At the minimum, we go about studying a conflict and present our findings as accurately as possible. But the current scale of (dis)information goes far beyond our grasp. It is not something we can control or unravel. Our interlocutors may be completely convinced of story X, even if it is (partly) fabricated. Groups we study may engage in disinformation campaigns, and even consider our presence as a tool to reach their goals. Researchers must be acutely aware of the many dangers of reproducing disinformation. More than awareness, we need to highlight these ‘*unknowns*’: what were the pitfalls, what information was deemed unreliable, and why? What information was impossible to fully understand...? The goal here should not be to cross-examine every interlocutor and ‘triangulate’ all our findings. The positivist political

science criticism that researchers with an ethnographic focus should use more 'mixed methods' ignores the fact that (dis)information is omnipresent and inevitable. We shouldn't shy away from it but make it a central aspect of our methodology. Through careful and patient ethnography, it is still possible to do valuable research, but maybe it's time to recalibrate our expectations and end-goals.

If (dis)information is everywhere, what can we look at as researchers? One ready-made answer is looking at discourses and narratives. Yet -although this essay does argue from an epistemologically interpretative stance- it doesn't help to get lost in excessive subjectivism. How can we climb out of the post-modern rabbit hole and offer valuable/viable knowledge for the analysis of conflict? In the following, the essay presents three layers where (dis) information is present. The first is the conflict-actors themselves, those who 'are present'. The second layer is on the (inter)national actors that *seem* to have a greater distance from the conflict, but nonetheless, interact with it and influence it. Lastly, our own position as researchers who are often much more participant than observer in these dynamics.

LAYER 1: conflict actors

Defining the 'local' actor

There are countless actors involved in any conflict, depending on where one draws the lines (or 'borders') of their research questions. At the minimum, this encompasses the conflicting parties: rebel groups, state institutions such as the military, vigilante groups… But the actual actors involved can be teased out in much greater detail. At times, we disentangle to the level of individual actors such as influential politicians, 'big men', or 'the local', all with their own stake in the conflict. But what about diaspora communities, news stations, social media sites…? When mapping out conflict actors, it's not always clear who they are, or what the different stakes are. For instance, there are often accusations of strings being pulled from 'behind the curtain', or the use of proxies. In our quest for a better understanding of intentions, goals, and trajectories, we need to stress the inevitability of (dis)information by a multitude of actors. It is imperative that we acknowledge the uncertainty. Can we ever claim to present the 'facts' when there is so much contingency and conjecture involved?

The difficulty starts with actors themselves. All actors constantly 'manage' information. In the first place they gather information about *others* (intelligence work, trying to 'understand' the conflict around them etc.). This inspired some to theorize that all conflict actors are constantly aware of relevant information and make choices based on that. Fortunately, the field has generally moved on from Rational Choice Theories, which are generally epistemologically positivist and ontologically individualist. Actors also actively 'manage' information about *themselves,* propagating a certain image, or rather, presenting multiple images of themselves to different audiences. Studying one type of self-representation only shows a piece of a larger puzzle. The critical discursive approach centers these processes (e.g., Foucault 1971). Multiple lines of research evolved out of this approach and demonstrate the various ways in which information is shaped, used, and interpreted. Discourses and narratives matter. But is this the only valuable line of research to overcome epistemological challenges of misinformation? When research tries to "get to the bottom of things" it all too often assumes that humans make conscious decisions, whereas in reality affect and emotions are crucial variables in decision-making, and in particular in the spread of (dis)information.

Beyond 'simple' communication

The unconscious side of (dis)information cannot be overestimated. Information is also impossible to control. Classical Communication Science theories already points towards the discrepancies between sender and receiver. Beyond that, information can quickly spread beyond the actor's control (e.g. see research on the effects of rumors and gossip). Of course, sometimes this can also be the conscious goal. The rise of 'fake news' shows how easily disinformation campaigns go viral. Fake news also points in the direction of another new evolution in the 'management' of information. New information technologies and social media applications such as blogs, TikToks or WhatsApp-forwarding form new avenues for information to spread. This spread is never linear or structured, as it follows the rhizomatic structure of the Internet itself. Different channels have different target audiences in terms of age, gender, class, etc. Thus, resulting in different types of (dis)information circulating among different groups with different amplification rates. A concrete example can be found in the skilled communication of Jihadists. Al-Qaida and IS have both published international magazines, in true 'glossy' style, tailored to potential recruits. Local branches, such as Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, publish statements when claiming an attack. Such statements often offer clear messages to Western governments as their primary audience. At the same time, local affiliates of these groups, the ones who actually perpetrate attacks, communicate through different channels. Jihadists in central Mali use WhatsApp to reach out to the local population and explain their actions.

Today's world is increasingly globalized and interconnected politically, economically, socially, technologically.... This has profound effects on conflict actors and where we can draw the lines. The following layer discusses international actors, but these actors are not that far away or detached. Lines are blurring between the 'local' conflict actors (such as a rebel group) and the wider nebula of corporations, individuals, institutions, and groups that can have an interest. Diasporic communities, for instance, can have a direct impact on conflict trajectories (see for instance Bernal, 2014). The policy of a private corporation like Facebook has a direct impact in Myanmar, India... Russian-based for-profit troll farms can influence the course of elections across the globe. There are endless examples of the fluidity. The ambiguity regarding who is a local conflict actor and the links these actors might have with others at a distance not only clouds our academic research, 'participants' in a conflict also act on inpartial information and uncertainty. For instance, Shesterinina's 'Mobilizing Uncertainty' (2021) shows that 'ordinary people' constantly navigate uncertainties.

LAYER 2: role of international actors

International actors in violent settings

International actors play key roles in influencing violence and shaping discourses in and on violent settings. The previous layer already emphasized the fluidity between local and international actors. But 'international actors' (or community) is itself a problematic container term as it fails to clearly delineate who is included and who is not, and why. It is often taken as a shorthand for 'the West' or 'Global North'. Whatever terminology we use, we must on the one hand be cognizant of the unequal global and regional power relations often expressed by these broad distinctions. On the other hand, we must expose where this division of the world is more ideological (e.g., 'Eurocentric', liberal settlement fetishization) rather than empirical. It is imperative that we critically engage with the terminology and recognize that within 'the West' or 'international community', disparate actors have unique interests, resulting in various discourses on violent contexts. Furthermore, how do we think about non-Western international involvement in conflict settings? What are thought processes resulting in some actors being *perceived* as local or foreign; or in the *impression* of the 'international community' as a unitary actor?

These actors are not only nation states, international institutions or INGOs, but also multinational corporations and other 'international' constellations. These all have various *distances and proximities* to the conflict depending on (in)visible stakes. The discourses and streams of information they create reverberate far beyond their impact on 'local' conflict setting, reaching international 'audiences' who are actors in their own right. Ranging from minor 'interference' to all-out participation, involvement 'from afar' can have profound effects, such as increasing polarization, xenophobia.... Their involvement hinders knowledge creation and research in violent settings, oftentimes prolonging rather than ending crises. Some international actors may exist solely for these purposes. Companies such as Cambridge Analytica, for example, offer social engineering tools to structure these disinformation campaigns with the aim to deliberately create or prolong crisis and conflict.

Working with (inter)national media houses

One of the central international actors 'managing' information about violent conflict are (inter)national media houses. With the advent of social media and digitization, we are now facing what Andrew Chadwick (2013) has designated 'hybrid media systems'. It is here where 'older' and 'newer' media logics collide, interlink and co-produce (dis)information. The interactions between these two logics provide vital insights for the role of media in conflict, effectively blurring or reorganizing the local/global binary.

Traditional print and television media have arguably lost their monopoly over news broadcasting. They now compete with (populist) pundits, commentators, and influencers who use simple and inexpensive digital media tools to influence narratives. The digitization of news media has rendered the distinction between national and international media houses feckless, at least when considering the new audiences that can be reached by supposedly small, 'local' media outlets.

Traditional international media houses have been called out repeatedly for maintaining opaque relationships to other international actors (e.g., governments, corporations, billionaires etc.), putting into question their ability to report independently. These ties and networks surely merit further research. This is even more true for 'new' media, where funding streams are often murky and interests or allegiances unknown. As a result, we are faced with a myriad of narratives from various media actors with disparate and in(visible) interests and networks, resulting in a (dis)information overload.

Apart from opaque ties to international actors, media houses have their own stakes in conflict settings. In today's capitalist world, most media houses are privately owned by people or corporations with their own political-economic agendas. After all, information is a commodity that is sold, which undoubtedly has an impact in the way information is produced. For instance, it's easy to see that both Fox News and Al Jazeera have a strong positionality when they publish news on the Israeli-Palestine conflict. The way they report reflects the 'mood' of their main audiences, their 'consumers'. Another example is the ever-shortening news-cycle. With CNN increasingly reporting in dramatic Breaking-News style to appeal to audiences.

Reporting is inevitably biased, not always for nefarious reasons but also due to implicit biases. Unlike academic research, this is rarely mentioned outright in reporting. Nationality, race, gender, age, ethnicity, and other identity markers require more attention. Not just of

those doing reporting, but also of those in boardrooms that decide media houses' policies. These positionalities and biases are not fixed, but rather fluid and shifting over time. Each media corporation thus has a unique composition of positionalities, networks, and interests. The way in which they produce (dis)information also depends on where their headquarters and correspondents are based, as this results in complex links and biases towards 'domestic' policies and interests. This also results in different stances from 'local' to 'international' media. Today, this results increasingly in a growing suspicion and erosion of trust towards both the (inter)national media and the international actors with which they have ties. Some have even claimed this is the era of post-truth politics.

Growing suspicion and erosion of trust

International actors not only produce narratives about conflict settings, they often actively intervene in local political and economic processes, from outright military interventions and Structural Adjustment Programs to more subtle (dis)information campaigns. 'Global North' interference often romanticizes and propagates governance models as one-size-fits-all solutions, sidelining indigenous governance systems. In doing so, their interference often leads to a further breakdown of security situations that in turn produces a growing suspicion and erosion of trust towards international actors by 'the local'. The fact that the 'international community' often intervenes with a supposed "neutrality" also leads to a hollowing out of such terms. Fukuyama's end of history has only led to increasing animosity towards (Western-led) meddling.

In sum, international actors, through discourses firmly rooted in their own interests, have a broad reach through opaque connections with media houses and other forms of 'new' media. As such, they contribute to the epistemological crises in violent settings. This has also created hurdles for the researcher who is engaged in studying these settings. How attenable is finding "the truth" when there are countless actors exerting influence over local settings. These challenges are further discussed below.

LAYER 3: Our presence as researchers

The epistemological crisis caused by the perceived surge in (dis)information poses challenges for research in violent conflict settings. Hence, it is not only conflict parties and relevant (inter)national actors that we need to focus on. As researchers in violent conflicts, we must find methodological solutions for navigating uncertainties, floods of (dis)information, conjectures, and contingencies.

In this layer, we focus on the role of 'embedded' conflict researchers as actors in their own right, caught up in the mist of uncertainty themselves, functioning as recipient, assessor, interpreter, translator, judge, and (potential) reproducer of rumors and (dis)information. While we argue that ethnography or 'embeddedness' is still the most reliable method to attempt to pierce the fog of (dis)information in times of conflict, we need to address the challenges ethnographic research in ongoing and past conflict settings.

Building relations of trust

Building trust and creating intimate relations between researcher and researched is the hallmark of ethnographic research. Based on our experience, it best protects against premeditated disinformation and crude lies, and offers a glimpse into the interlocutors' genuine feelings, thoughts, and interests. Yet, there are several caveats to consider when establishing and maintaining these relationships:

First, building trust to receive genuine information or disseminate one's information works both ways. Disparate actors may use this trust to intentionally spread false information or try to convince the researcher of their narrative. While it is often impossible to find or validate "the truth", the main task of the researcher is to dissect the intentionally false or "official" accounts from narratives that may very well be untrue or based on conjecture but which the interlocutor genuinely believes in.

Second, building a "proper" relation of trust to assess the genuineness of a narrative requires time. This means to meet time and again or sit through endless (in)formal interviews, which may often appear "repetitive" in their content—we've all been there. This repetitiveness allows us to unravel "official" or "collective" narratives and intimate individual nuances and variations, giving away personal thoughts and feelings.

Third, building a relationship of trust with opposing factions in a hostile environment is often difficult, if not impossible. While a researcher is concerned with the information's authenticity both in the sense of accuracy and genuineness, interlocutor may be worried about how shared (dis)information will be used, especially when the researcher's allegiances are unknown. Not seldom is the researcher forced to decide to either try to project a certain neutrality, often at the expense of being able to build deeper relations of trust, or to focus on one of the warring factions, risking being perceived as an *agent provocateur* by other actors.

Understanding Positionality in violent conflict

Much has been written about the importance to reflect on positionality and bias. In our discipline it's a central methodological consideration. Understanding positionality fundamentally determines the ability to build trust and make sense of relationships with (actors in) "the field". Wherever or whatever "the field" is, it determines relationships and thus how we consume and interpret (dis)information and rumors. We propose to understand positionality, much like identity, not as static and immutable, but dynamic, fluid, contingent, temporal and sometimes diffuse. Simple dichotomous categories such as insider/outsider, northerner/southerner, or local/proxy-local/non-local/foreigner may serve as expedient preliminary reflections, but do not grasp the complexity of the researcher's position in "the field" over *time.*

The way we immerse ourselves, build relations, persuade, communicate, behave, and act reproduces the researcher's positionality in the everyday. While a "local" researcher who is initially seen as an "insider" may be perceived at some point as a threat and treated like an "outsider" for their stake in the conflict, a "non-local" who is, in a first instance, understood to be an "outsider" may be trusted similar to an "insider" after having convincingly projected "neutrality". This generic example is only a placeholder for the many shades of grey in which these relationships and positionalities evolve. Hence, we propose that researchers need to continuously reflect on their changing positionality. Not simply in relation to an abstract notion of "the field" but also regarding specific relationships over time, in order to assess and interpret (dis)information. What we researchers *do* with this (dis)information, particularly in conflict settings, is another crucial question.

(Dis)information and responsible writing about violent conflict

A researcher's presence in "the field" inevitably alters dynamics and relationships or, put differently, co-constructs "the field". However, the researcher does not only become an actor by observing, interviewing, and building relations, but by writing about it. Narratives are crucial during violent conflict and controlling them is a form of power. While as researchers, we can be concerned with analyzing discourses rather than finding "small-" or " big-T-truths", we must still be wary about reproducing and valorizing (dis)information by publishing it under the label of academic research. Of course, there are methodological tools such as triangulation to better assess the validity of rumors and information. However, its applicability and reliability highly depend on the context and the researcher's rigor.

As responsible and ethical researchers, we must resist the temptation to proclaim rumors or certain discourses as truths, despite increasing pressure from precarious work contracts at universities and (inter)national actors' demand for "factual knowledge" to forward their interests. As mentioned above, in today's 'post-truth' era, the perception of (inter)national media has changed dramatically, and its image as a reliable source of information, particularly in contentious political environments, has suffered. This makes critical analysis ever more important. An embedded, transparent, (self-)critical, ethically oriented, independent (as much as possible), and reflexive researcher—although somewhat idealized—remains key to seeing through the muddle of (dis)information in contexts of violent conflict and enables the researcher to produce reliable, responsible, and comprehensible but nuanced and contextual knowledge.

Conclusion

In 1758, at the height of the Seven Years' War, English writer Samuel Johnson wrote "Among the calamities of war may be jointly numbered the diminution of the love of truth, by the falsehoods which interest dictates and credulity encourages". More recent iterations such as "the first casualty of War is Truth" echo louder than ever since the war in Ukraine. Indeed, the issue of (dis)information has always been part of violent conflict. What has changed, is the number of actors involved in its dissemination and the complex web of interests as well as potency of technological tools to effectively target specific audiences.

While previous generations of researchers working on violent conflict often had to deal with scarce information, we are now faced with navigating a (dis)information overload. This overburdening of people participating in communication processes with partly irrelevant (dis)information, resulting in sensory overload may severely diminish any perception and the ability to pinpoint exactly where certain information originates. One of the authors experienced such 'overload' with regards to recent human rights abuses in Mali. As the Malian government, armed groups, French authorities, and several other international actors bicker over the identity of victims and perpetrators, it becomes difficult for outside researchers to make heads or tails of the situation, let alone do justice to the victims.

Ontologically, claims to truth are a core point of contention between interpretivist and qualified neopositivist ethnographers. While neopositivists are still in search of small-t truths (as opposed to universal big-T-truths), in which a claim is true based on its correspondence to an objective reality (although subjective or contextual), interpretivists hold that there cannot be any discoverable pristine reality separate from the researcher (knowledge is coproduced and intersubjective). Epistemologically, interpretivists are thus reluctant to assert testimonies truth-value, but instead associate them with prevalent social discourses, while neopositivists consider the production of cumulative knowledge a possibility to generate more abstract/decontextualized knowledge by "peeling the onion skin" to get closer to an objective reality/small-t-truth (Schatz 2009).

Researchers in conflict settings must carefully navigate this tension. On the one hand, we must acknowledge that death, destruction, and scars are very visible objective realities of violent conflict. On the other hand, interpretations of who is responsible both directly and indirectly and what (micro-)mechanisms were at play are often contentious, diffuse, and

subjective (e.g. Brass, 1997). As conflict researchers we must be committed to go beyond conjecture, understand the disparate interests, comprehend the discourses in the contexts and see-through premediated misinformation. Yet, we need to recognize that many supposed truths remain (inter)subjective. Endless ruminations about positionality and post-modern subjectivity should not paralyze. Nor should they be limited to the theoretical sections of academic papers. Thoroughly engaging with these ever-changing issues means that we must be open to the possibility of concluding with several 'truths' or competing narratives.

A persisting blind spot in conflict studies is how knowledge, (dis)information, or discourses are (re)produced and consumed in the digital age by disparate actors, how power relations affect both the generation of knowledge and dissemination of (dis)information and in turn (re)structure them. Our focus should not go to "the truth" but to the information people act on as if it was true. Several questions merit further attention, even in 'localized' conflict settings; How do (inter)national actors generate, consume, and employ information? What processes cause certain interlocutors to tend to believe certain narratives over other and what are the processes linked to this (sub)conscious selection of narratives? What is the role of (inter)national media houses in knowledge production on conflict? But also, how do conflict parties produce, assess, and disseminate knowledge and (dis)information about themselves and others?

We are convinced that these questions are still best answered through ethnographic methods, that are best placed to investigate (inter)subjective truths through the building of long-lasting relations. The answer to concerns about (dis)information is not found in 'triangulation' and other strictly positivist approaches, but in the appreciation of the fluidity of the field. This does not negate the value of connecting with other fields or methods, on the contrary, this should be encouraged. Insights from Communication sciences might be incredibly valuable. Nevertheless, these mixed-method approaches should always maintain the core features of ethnography, or risk misaligning ontological and epistemological core principles (as warned by Schatz, 2009). In the end, it is always valuable to remember that we researchers are just humans doing what we can, even if it is just understanding in detail one piece of the puzzle.

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