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Diasporas as cyberwarriors: infopolitics, participatory warfare and the 2020 Karabakh war

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This is the information front, a real war. Cyberspace is the battlefield.
Arina, 25, Russia

This is a war for information as much as it is a war for actual land and with actual guns.
Erik, 18, US

As fighting broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh on 27 September 2020, a parallel and intensive war erupted on social media. Pro-Armenian and pro-Azerbaijani users shared information about the conflict, paid tribute to soldiers and casualties, amplified posts by public figures, targeted international media, and pushed out hashtags like #StopAzerbaijaniAggression or #StopArmenianOccupation. These actions sought to shape the narrative about the conflict, mobilize international public opinion and influence policy. On both sides, there was a considerable amount of suspicious and inauthentic activity such as bots, yet much of this social media war was led by real, authentic users.[1] The 2020 Karabakh war was fought not just on the physical battlefield, but also online—internationally and in different languages.

How do diasporas fight online information wars during armed conflicts in their homelands? I explore this question through interviews with 30 young diaspora Armenians in seven nations—ordinary, real users fighting online while living far from the physical battlefield. I examine their motivation for engaging in social media activism, their methods and strategies for promoting the Armenian narrative, their vision of their online opponents and the perceived outcomes of their efforts.

Besides exploring online diaspora mobilization in this particular conflict, this article contributes to the broader debates about how social media are changing modern warfare. Digital platforms enable remote war—when individuals or networks of civilians engage in online hostilities without being physically present

* Data collection for this study was supported, in part, by a grant from the USC Institute of Armenian Studies in partnership with the Armenian Communities Department of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

[1] Elise Thomas and Albert Zhang, *Snapshot of a shadow war: a preliminary analysis of Twitter activity linked to the Azerbaijan–Armenia conflict* (Barton, ACT: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2020).

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on the battlefield.[2] War has become participatory—empowering 'anyone with an internet connection' to wage war and shape narratives around it,[3] facilitating the interactivity and immediacy of conflict,[4] and entering domestic spaces and redrawing everyday life.[5] The role of *diasporas* as distinct from citizens in war-struck nations remains largely unexplored in participatory warfare literature. And yet diasporas often present a sizeable proportion of—or even outnumber—homeland populations, are politically and culturally well placed to translate events in their homeland for international audiences, and are empowered by social media in unprecedented ways to engage with, amplify, shape or dispute war narratives.

This article uses diaspora experiences to argue that online participatory warfare is *transnational* (involving global actors, targets and coordination across dispersed communities), *monologic* (disengaging, dehumanizing and drowning the online opponent and producing silences), *empowering* (the ability to act online can overrule the perceived low effectiveness of these actions), *retaliatory* (seen as necessary defence against the opponent's actions), involving *individual and networked tactics* (narrative strategies and online behaviours adapted to algorithms), and *culturally and politically transformative* (redrawing perceptions of host and home nations, politics and media, and generating disconnection).

I also argue that social media readjust diaspora roles in international relations. Post-conflict states have traditionally treated diasporas as assets for lobbying foreign governments, influencing public opinion and providing material assistance.[6] While these roles remain central to diaspora mobilization, social media highlight the importance of infopolitics[7]—the struggle over the management of information—which also becomes participatory and not confined to the boundaries or the power of the state. I argue that diasporas become a *decentralized actor in global conflict infopolitics*—mobilized by the homeland or self-mobilizing, amplifying homeland narratives or doubting them, fighting individually or organizing into networks to target algorithms. The tensions and reluctant but conscious choices diaspora members come to make in participatory war also demonstrate that this participation is more fragile, conditional and self-reflexive than studies of information warfare usually suggest.

Social media and participatory warfare

The emergence of Web 2.0 shifted multiple social and political domains towards *participatory culture*, characterized by low barriers to civic engagement, active

[2] Emily Crawford, *Identifying the enemy: civilian participation in armed conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[3] David Patrikarakos, *War in 140 characters* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

[4] Holger Pötzsch, 'The emergence of iWar: changing practices and perceptions of military engagement in a digital era', *New Media and Society* 17: 1, 2015, pp. 78–95.

[5] Gregory Asmolov, 'From sofa to frontline: the digital mediation and domestication of warfare', *Media, War and Conflict* 14: 3, 2021, pp. 342–65.

[6] Maria Koinova, 'Sending states and diaspora positionality in international relations', *International Political Sociology* 12: 2, 2018, pp. 190–210.

[7] Victoria Bernal, *Nation as network: diaspora, cyberspace and citizenship* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014), p. 9.

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involvement of publics traditionally regarded as information consumers in the creation and sharing of content, and increased user interconnectedness.[8] In situations of conflict or collective action, social media enable users to distribute information, organize and facilitate offline activism, and participate in protest.[9] Participation became not only broader but simpler and more accessible, enabling individuals who would not usually engage in political action to participate online with minimal effort and diversion from routine activities in what Bennett and Fielding aptly called 'five-minute' activism.[10] In warfare, participatory media brought about 'digital militarism'—the 'extension of militarized culture into social media domains', whereby citizens' everyday online practices become tools of wartime violence and the military, too, take to digital battlefields.[11] Banal acts of liking, sharing, posting selfies or using hashtags sustain and extend war through other means and crowdsource conflicts.[12] Just as soldiers fight the physical battle, 'citizen-soldiers' (who are, at the same time, 'consumers' of war and security as government and corporate products) are involved in participatory war.[13]

Participatory war is waged by individuals or communities with an internet connection, wherever they may be.[14] Pötzsch identifies several key dimensions in how information technologies reshape participation in warfare: interactivity (citizens become implicated in war in new ways), individuation (information about and perception of conflict become customized and personalized, not least through algorithms), immediacy and intimacy (the velocity of information is increased and the distance between soldiers and publics reduced).[15] In the new, participatory media ecology, these dimensions correspond to the second phase of mediatization, in which 'people, events and news media have become increasingly connected and interpreted through the technological compressions of time-space'.[16] Distance no longer prevents civilians from having an impact on hostilities; thus the categories of combatants and the civilian/military distinction are redrawn.[17]

8 Henry Jenkins, *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

9 Jennifer Earl, Katrina Kimport, Greg Prieto, Carly Rush and Kimberly Reynoso, 'Changing the world one webpage at a time: conceptualizing and explaining internet activism', *Mobilization* 15: 4, 2010, pp. 425–46.

10 Daniel Bennett and Pam Fielding, *The net effect: how cyberadvocacy is changing the political landscape* (Merrifield, VA: E-advocates Press, 1999).

11 Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca Stein, *Digital militarism: Israel's occupation in the social media age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), pp. 2–8; Michael Chertoff, Patrick Bury and Daniela Richterova, 'Bytes not waves: information communication technologies, global jihadism and counterterrorism', *International Affairs* 96: 5, 2020, pp. 1305–25.

12 Kuntsman and Stein, *Digital militarism*. For crowdsourcing conflict, see Gregory Asmolov, 'The effects of participatory propaganda: from socialization to internalization of conflicts', *Journal of Design and Science*, no. 6, 2019, DOI: 10.21428/7808da6b.833c9940.

13 Mark Andrejevic, *iSpy: surveillance and power in the interactive era* (Kansas City: University Press of Kansas, 2007), discusses this as 'iWar'; later, 'participatory warfare' is introduced in Gregory Asmolov, 'Targeting civilians online: participatory warfare and changes in the nature of conflict', *Global Swarming Notes* (blog), 29 Dec. 2012, http://www.globswarm.com/2012/12/29/online-civilian-targets-expansion-range-of-conflicts/ (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 20 Jan. 2022.). See also Yevgeniy Golovchenko, Mareike Hartmann and Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'State, media and civil society in the information warfare over Ukraine: citizen curators and digital disinformation', *International Affairs* 94: 5, 2018, pp. 975–94.

14 Patrikarakos, *War in 140 characters*.

15 Pötzsch, 'The emergence of iWar'.

16 Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin, *War and media* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p. 18.

17 Crawford, *Identifying the enemy*, p. 150.

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Social media users promote their causes in a variety of forms, so that physical, spatially defined wars turn into global online battlefields.[18] Civilians, who traditionally presented 'collateral damage' in armed conflict, become 'primary targets' of information dissemination, monitoring, persuasion and the 'marketing' of constant readiness.[19] However, while many studies have focused on how participatory war is expansive—transcending the conflict zone through digital affordances—it is also intrusive, affecting spaces and practices traditionally regarded as civilian and associated with peace. Asmolov proposes regarding this trend as the 'domestication of warfare'[20]—a situation where war enters into and is practised from safe home environments and in everyday life. This shifts the boundaries between the external world and the interior private space, and reorientates digital users' resources towards an active role in conflict.

In contested environments, where conflict outcomes and foreign policy success increasingly depend on 'whose story wins',[21] participatory media magnify the narrative dimension of war. Social media dismantle conventional information hierarchies and challenge institutional power to shape or control discourses around conflict (for example, official government and military narratives are often challenged and disproved by online users). Online audiences privilege narratives that are perceived as 'sincere' and authentic—resulting in war becoming 'dramatized' through user-generated content.[22] Patrikarakos highlights the contrast between traditional information campaigns in wartime, which targeted the 'enemy population', and participatory narrative war on social media, which targets international public opinion and seeks third-party support with an emotive (and not necessarily factual or unbiased) message.[23] Social media and the capacity for remote participation in warfare empower not only conflict-affected communities, but also diasporas, who mobilize in new ways to become online narrators of conflict.

Digital diasporas and global conflict infopolitics

This article adopts the definition of diasporas as 'ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin—their homelands'.[24] Mavroudi describes diaspora identity not as a fixed self-understanding based on predetermined traits but as a process, being renegotiated around collective narratives of sameness

[18] William Merrin, *Digital war: a critical introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018); Constance Duncombe, 'Social media and the visibility of horrific violence', *International Affairs* 96: 3, 2020, pp. 609–29.
[19] Andrejevic, *iSpy*, p. 162.
[20] Asmolov, 'From sofa to frontline'.
[21] Joseph S. Nye, 'The future of soft power in US foreign policy', in Inderjeet Parmar and Michael Cox, eds, *Soft power and US foreign policy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 8; Helle Malmvig, 'Soundscapes of war: the audio-visual performance of war by Shi'a militias in Iraq and Syria', *International Affairs* 96: 3, 2020, pp. 649–66.
[22] Patrikarakos, *War in 140 characters*.
[23] Also see Helen Berents, 'Politics, policy-making and the presence of images of suffering children', *International Affairs* 96: 3, 2020, pp. 593–608.
[24] Gabriel Sheffer, *Modern diasporas in international politics* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 3.

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and the homeland.[25] The emergence of digital media added a new dimension to the diaspora–homeland relationship. The internet created *digital diasporas*—the 'additional, online communities' that enable geographically dispersed members to connect with one another and negotiate their identity.[26] Consequently, today's diasporic communities—and particularly the younger generations among them—are increasingly shaped by digital practices through which they can more freely debate and reinterpret their identity and collective norms.[27]

Social media prompt nations to lose their territorial character and become networks where diasporas negotiate a deterritorialized relationship with their homelands. Bernal argues that the traditional notions of state power, sovereignty or citizenship are too narrow to explain the bond between diasporas and homelands.[28] Diasporas mobilize around an identity or a cause that is not always specific to a territory or state.[29] Social media present 'an elastic political space',[30] which allows diasporas to participate in political debates in their homelands—regardless of distance, and outside the authority and control of the homeland states. Diasporas can use social media to question the official narratives, 'form shared understandings beyond the control of political authorities or the commercial censorship of mass media', and mobilize and act on the basis of these alternative perspectives.[31]

Diaspora mobilization in response to war in the homeland or narratives of threat to it typically focuses on material assistance (remittances, aid, funds to warring parties, investing in reconstruction) and political advocacy (lobbying, diplomacy, propaganda and protests to bring about international interventions and shape public opinion).[32] Diaspora efforts to influence the physical battlefield at a distance are limited—instead, they are directed primarily at establishing and sustaining legitimacy and support in the international arena.[33] Homelands engage with diasporas as resources for power, capital and influence with a positional rationale—that is, acknowledging that diasporas' power, ability to help and value as an asset vary in global contexts and are relative to the power of other diasporas in the transnational field.[34] For example, the large and long-established Armenian

[25] Elizabeth Mavroudi, 'Diaspora as process: (de)constructing boundaries', *Geography Compass* 1: 3, 2007, pp. 467–79.

[26] Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, *Digital diasporas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 12.

[27] Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, 'Digital diasporas' challenge to traditional power', *Review of International Studies* 38: 1, 2012, pp. 77–95.

[28] Bernal, *Nation as network*.

[29] Olga Boichak, 'Mobilizing diasporas: understanding transnational relief efforts in the age of social media', *Proceedings of the 52nd Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, 2019, pp. 2792–801; Maria Koinova, 'Autonomy and positionality in diaspora politics', *International Political Sociology* 6: 1, 2012, pp. 99–103.

[30] Bernal, *Nation as network*, p. 2.

[31] Bernal, *Nation as network*, p. 9.

[32] See Maria Koinova, 'Diaspora mobilisation for conflict and post-conflict reconstruction', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44: 8, 2018, pp. 1251–69; Yossi Shain and Aharon Barth, 'Diasporas and international relations theory', *International Organization* 57: 3, 2003, pp. 449–79; Hazel Smith and Paul Stares, eds, *Diasporas in conflict: peace-makers or peace-wreckers?* (Tokyo: UN University Press, 2007).

[33] Camilla Orjuela, 'Distant warriors, distant peace workers? Multiple diaspora roles in Sri Lanka's violent conflict', *Global Networks* 8: 4, 2008, pp. 436–52.

[34] Koinova, 'Sending states and diaspora positionality'; Alexandra Delano and Alan Gamlen, 'Comparing and theorizing state–diaspora relations', *Political Geography* 41: 1, 2014, pp. 43–53.

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diaspora in France would offer greater resources for policy influence than a smaller Armenian diaspora in Germany, which has a strong Turkish presence.

Social media and digital tools reconfigure diaspora mobilization in conflict. On the one hand, they enable grassroots activism that bypasses international brokers (such as non-profit organizations) and facilitates horizontal ties between diasporas and affected communities in the homeland.[35] Grassroots initiatives such as crowdfunding can benefit homeland communities directly, while serving as 'a new form of identity proclamation with regard to the users' positionality'.[36] On the other hand, digital diasporas extend hostilities, nationalist mobilization and polarization into the international arena.[37] Social media bring to the fore what Bernal terms *infopolitics*—the struggle over the production and contestation of narratives, and the politics of who is given voice, trusted or censored.[38] The internet offers diasporas far more than access to information about events in their homeland, enabling them to produce, circulate, evaluate and reshape narratives, influencing homeland politics and discourses.

Social media therefore facilitate a new form of diaspora mobilization: collective efforts to frame and contest war narratives for global online audiences. Diasporas become important players in what I define as *global conflict infopolitics*—a transnational competition for the production of knowledge about the conflict, where diasporas and other state and non-state actors disseminate information, narrate histories, challenge or silence opponents' voices, and seek not only to make international publics aware of the conflict, but to get them to trust, prioritize and censor some narratives rather than others. The capacity of digital diasporas to influence audiences is boosted by changing news consumption patterns, as publics increasingly rely on social media for news.[39] Online activists are more likely than conventional political organizations to reach diverse audiences, shifting the power over representation from institutions and intermediaries to the micro-politics of groups, issues and interests.[40]

Diasporas become online narrators of war in the homeland—aiming to persuade external audiences through rhetorical skill, strategic storytelling and 'cultural brokerage'.[41] The last of these includes managing information from the homeland and making it attractive to professional journalists, transmitting local homeland voices globally, and translating the meaning of events for foreign publics. I argue that social media render diasporas increasingly *decentralized* actors

[35] Boichak, 'Mobilizing diasporas'.

[36] Olga Boichak and Gregory Asmolov, 'Crowdfunding in remote conflicts: bounding the hyperconnected battlefields', *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, 2021, DOI: 10.5210/spir.v2021i0.12147.

[37] Orjuela, 'Distant warriors, distant peace workers'.

[38] Bernal, *Nation as network*.

[39] Elisa Shearer and Amy Mitchell, *News use across social media platforms in 2020*, Pew Research Centre, 12 Jan. 2021, https://www.journalism.org/2021/01/12/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-in-2020/.

[40] Payal Arora, 'Politics of algorithms, Indian citizenship, and the colonial legacy', in Aswin Punathambekar and Sriram Mohan, eds, *Global digital cultures* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019).

[41] Jaana Davidjants and Katrin Tiidenberg, 'Activist memory narration on social media: Armenian genocide on Instagram', *New Media and Society*, publ. online Jan. 2021, DOI:10.1177/1461444821989634; Kari Andén-Papadopoulos and Mervi Pantti, 'The media work of Syrian diaspora activists: brokering between the protest and mainstream media', *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 7, 2013, pp. 2185–206.

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in global conflict infopolitics, as their narratives may or may not agree with those promoted by their homeland states and are characterized by varying degrees of internal coordination. The 2020 Karabakh war demonstrates how diasporas assume this additional role of a non-state decentralized actor in online global conflict infopolitics.

The Armenian diaspora and the Karabakh wars

The enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh is the subject of a longstanding dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The communal violence of 1988–90 was followed by an all-out war in 1992–4 between Armenia and Azerbaijan as newly independent post-Soviet states. That first Karabakh war, which Armenia won, was accompanied by mass displacement and an estimated death toll of 25,000.[42] Karabakh became a de facto state (the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh), with a majority Armenian population and under Armenian control. International negotiations were characterized by little coherence or strategy, and made no progress towards conflict settlement.[43] There were multiple ceasefire violations before 2020, most notably the Four-Day War in April 2016.

The 2020 Karabakh war (from 27 September to 10 November) was an armed conflict between, on the one side, Azerbaijan, supported by Turkey, and on the other the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh backed by Armenian forces. It ended with a ceasefire agreement that triggered a major crisis within Armenia. Azerbaijan gained control over most of Nagorno-Karabakh, and Russian peacekeepers were deployed along the line of contact. The protracted nature of the dispute, the lack of progress over its settlement, and the low international strategic significance of the conflict meant that foreign media paid little attention to Karabakh, and global audiences had little knowledge of it. All this made the narrative dimension of the 2020 war particularly important, as Armenia, Azerbaijan and their respective diasporas sought to affirm their own visions of the conflict and its history, and mobilize international public opinion in their favour.

Armenia and Azerbaijan offer opposite narratives about the conflict. Azerbaijan defines it as an irredentist conflict, arguing that regaining control over Karabakh is foundational to contemporary Azerbaijani identity as without it, the independent Azerbaijani state remains incomplete.[44] From the Armenian perspective, Karabakh is Armenia's historical heartland, a key part of the symbolic homeland that included parts of the Ottoman empire with a long history of Armenian presence. For Armenians, the conflict is closely linked to the memories of the 1915 genocide, and Karabakh symbolizes the fight for survival and historical justice.[45] The Armenian diaspora was largely formed in the wake of mass deportations and

[42] Laurence Broers, 'From "frozen conflict" to enduring rivalry: reassessing the Nagorny Karabakh conflict', *Nationalities Papers* 43: 4, 2015, pp. 556–76.

[43] Dov Lynch, 'Separatist states and post-Soviet conflicts', *International Affairs* 78: 4, 2002, pp. 831–48.

[44] Broers, 'From "frozen conflict" to enduring rivalry'.

[45] Dmitry Chernobrov and Leila Wilmers, 'Diaspora identity and a new generation: Armenian diaspora youth on the genocide and the Karabakh war', *Nationalities Papers* 48: 5, 2020, pp. 915–30.

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the genocide—making these events and the need to regain lost homeland a key element of diasporic identity.[46]

This article explores how the Armenian diasporas mobilized and used social media to disseminate information about the 2020 Karabakh war. Today, there are approximately 7 million Armenians living abroad—a number at least twice the size of Armenia's own population.[47] Russia, the United States and France are home to the largest Armenian communities and a very strong and vocal Armenian lobby.[48] In the Karabakh war of the 1990s, the diaspora provided economic aid, smuggled in military supplies and lobbied foreign governments.[49] Since then, the Armenian and Azerbaijani diasporas have continued to influence the conflict and its outcomes.[50] The 2020 Karabakh war demonstrates that digital participatory media opened up new opportunities for mobilization across both larger and smaller diaspora communities, placing them at the centre of global conflict infopolitics.

Method

The study involved 30 semi-structured interviews with diaspora Armenians in the United States, France, Russia, Britain, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands—therefore including both larger and smaller diasporas. The interviews took place between 30 September and 9 December 2020, capturing social media activities and reflections during or in the immediate aftermath of the Karabakh war (27 September–10 November).

The interviewees were aged 18–35, belonging to the generation that is highly active on social media. Age is an important factor in how audiences engage with information and politics online—for example, in the US context, older generations tend to be more exposed to disinformation and more active in sharing fake news.[51] While presenting a limitation, I decided to focus on diaspora youth for two reasons. First, this generation grew up after Armenia had gained independence and therefore in the presence of a homeland state; this distinguishes their memories and political attitudes from those of older generations.[52] Second, in this specific diaspora context, and by its members' own admission, its older genera-

[46] Razmik Panossian, 'Homeland–diaspora relations and identity differences', in Edmund Herzig and Marina Kurkchiyan, eds, *The Armenians: past and present in the making of national identity* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002).

[47] Office of the High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs, *Armenian diaspora communities*, 2021, http://diaspora.gov.am/en/diasporas#.

[48] John Newhouse, 'The influence of lobbies on US foreign policy', *Foreign Affairs* 88: 3, 2009, pp. 73–92.

[49] Kristin Cavoukian, 'Democratization and diaspora', in Laurence Broers and Anna Ohanyan, eds, *Armenia's velvet revolution* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2021), p. 207.

[50] Khachig Tölölyan, 'The Armenian diaspora and the Karabagh conflict since 1988', in Smith and Stares, eds, *Diasporas in conflict*, pp. 106–28.

[51] Andrew Guess, Jonathan Nagler and Joshua Tucker, 'Less than you think: prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on Facebook', *Science Advances* 5: 1, 2019, pp. 1–8; Frederik Hjorth and Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'Ideological asymmetry in the reach of pro-Russian digital disinformation to US audiences', *Journal of Communication* 69: 2, 2019, pp. 168–92.

[52] Leila Wilmers and Dmitry Chernobrov, 'Growing up with a long-awaited nation-state: personal struggles with the homeland among young diasporic Armenians', *Ethnicities* 20: 3, 2020, pp. 520–43.

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tions tend to mobilize in traditional ways (through physical protest), and there is a considerable gap between age groups in digital skills. An additional limitation is the focus on the Armenian diaspora only. This article seeks to explore in depth the lived experiences of cyberwarriors, and their own voices, within a specific cultural and political context, and avoids any evaluative comments on the conflict from the author, whose position is external to both parties to the dispute.

Interviewees were recruited through diasporic social media groups (such as Facebook 'Armenians in the UK' and 'Armenian Association of Moscow Youth') and existing diaspora contacts, combined with a snowball approach that enables data collection from within organic social networks.[53] Two-thirds of the participants (including some of the most active cyberwarriors) were female, providing insight into how participatory warfare could be shifting traditional gender roles in conflicts—particularly as Armenian communities tend to be conservative in relation to gender roles.[54] Interviews were analysed thematically to discover shared patterns of experience and dominant vs outlier practices.[55] Interviews were conducted in English and Russian, and the quoted passages presented here were translated into English by the author where necessary. Participant names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Why: the reasons diasporas become cyberwarriors

This study revealed several major reasons for engagement in online activism. The three most prominent were: (1) a widely shared view that information war is an important part of modern conflicts and essential to victory; (2) perceived bias or lack of news from international media, so that exposing inaccuracies and disseminating information appeared necessary to mobilize global publics; and (3) a sense of empowerment, whereby online activism presented a way to meaningfully help Armenia at a distance.

Interviewees widely described themselves as 'cyberwarriors',[56] participants in an 'information war' that is inherent to modern warfare:

> [Fighting online is] almost as important as fighting on the ground, you need to fight this war with dignity, be proper *cyberwarriors*, spread information … Men from the very top, in government, constantly impress[ed] upon us [in the diaspora] that the information war was crucial, even decisive, and so, many were fighting, spent lots of time and resources on this. (Artur, 30, Russia; emphasis added)

The Armenian government clearly drew on diasporas as a resource in conflict infopolitics. Yet for many in the diaspora, it was a personal decision to spread information online in the hope of correcting perceived misinformation, restoring

[53] Chaim Noy, 'Sampling knowledge: the hermeneutics of snowball sampling in qualitative research', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 11: 4, 2008, pp. 327–44.

[54] Ulrike Ziemer, 'Belonging and longing: Armenian youth and diasporic long-distance nationalism in contemporary Russia', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 10: 2, 2010, pp. 290–303.

[55] See Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3: 2, 2006, pp. 77–101.

[56] The title of the article refers directly to interviewees' self-descriptions.

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justice and helping the homeland. The need to participate was often described in *retaliatory* terms, where the opponents' active use of social media to promote their narrative necessitated a symmetrical response:

If you don't engage in the social media activities and the other side does engage, then you have a risk that the people that are not involved in the conflict will only get one side of the story. (Arsen, 27, Netherlands)

Viewed in defensive and retaliatory terms, the information war was described using some of the conventional terminology of war: balance of power, attack, domination and survival. However, the information war spilled far beyond the physical battlefield, targeting audiences and spaces external to the conflict, and inflicting new types of casualties. Attacks on celebrities (such as Cardi B and Elton John) who commented on the conflict came to symbolize the magnitude of the information war:

This war is so real that any celebrity who says something pro-Armenian gets bombed with hateful messages, by bots and real Azeris. And a day later they say, 'Sorry folks, we are not ready for this, we take our words back.' These are coordinated attacks, very real things, not just a couple of social media comments. (Arina, 25, Russia)

[After the incidents with celebrities] we realized we were weak on social media and the Azeri side is so strong. We are being silenced. It's even more than war to me because it's basically saying, 'You don't exist, you're not people, you don't have the right to say anything.' (Gohar, 34, France)

The Armenian diaspora relied on the support of high-visibility figures, amid the silence or perceived bias of international media. European and US news channels did not seem to devote enough attention to the war, as Armenia was 'insignificant to the grand scheme of what's going on' (Erik, 18, US), and the crisis was overshadowed by the pandemic and the 2020 US election:

We had 155,000 [Armenians] march in Los Angeles and we didn't hear anything about it [in the US media]. Their agenda right now is the election. The day that the protests happened, the day that there was so much going on in Karabakh, they covered Trump waving out of his car for 14 hours straight.[57] We were all going crazy here. (Karina, 35, US)

In nations with smaller Armenian communities, such as the Netherlands or Denmark, the diaspora's ability to protest and draw news media attention was even less than in the United States. When news about the war was reported, it was often seen as biased, further motivating the diaspora to share information online:

We had experience with big news channels—CNN, Euronews, BBC—telling the exact opposite of what's happening … They say one thing and people who actually live in [Armenia and Karabakh] say a completely different thing. So, we felt it's our responsibility to share what's going on. (Eva, 32, Denmark)

[57] Karina refers to Trump's widely criticized surprise drive past his supporters during his hospital treatment for COVID-19.

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Perceived inaccuracies and bias in the news were explained as the result of several factors: the complexity of reporting without in-depth knowledge of the region; the indifference of western audiences, many of whom would not have heard of Karabakh or would regard Turkey as a holiday destination; access restrictions in Azerbaijan, forcing international media to reproduce the government's narrative; and reporting standards that gave equal weight to both sides. As Arina explained,

> Everything gets reported as 'Armenians said this', 'Azeris said this'. Come on, there's evidence [of Azerbaijani military attacking civilians and deploying Syrian jihadis], not just from Armenian, but independent western reporters. A foreigner who reads this news wouldn't know what's true—both sides are simply accusing each other and denying everything. (Arina, 25, Russia)

Diaspora activism included a variety of forms—online and offline fundraising initiatives, protests, online petitions, mass emails to journalists and officials, boycotts of Turkish goods and Azerbaijani oil. However, the intensive sharing of information about the war on personal social media accounts was the activity in which all interviewees and most of their diaspora contacts engaged. For some, this involved taking time off work and creating social media accounts if they had none. It was also an opportunity to make a difference for those living in areas with a smaller diaspora presence or where physical protests were restricted because of COVID-19. Inability to give any other kind of help was a major motivation, while staying silent was seen as complicity:

> Raising awareness is the only thing we can do. Not because it's effective, but because we'll go crazy unless we do this. And when you are abroad, online is the only thing you can do. (Arina, 25, Russia)

> I am glued to my phone. I'm glad I graduated and haven't started working a nine to five … So, I could be a cyberwarrior right now, and I could be helping the community. It is the least we could do, compared to my brothers and sisters literally dying. The least we could do is put posts up or go and comment or like everything, at least win the cyberwar. (Seda, 23, US)

Seda, like many other interviewees, called this 'our generational war', because young diaspora Armenians had the social media skills and therefore the responsibility to act online, while 'the older generation was taking to the streets'. Empowered by social media, diaspora cyberwarriors fought the information war with a combination of individual, intuitive strategies and group-coordinated tactics.

How: methods, strategies and choices of diaspora cyberwarriors

Diaspora cyberwarriors' tactics varied considerably, ranging from individual sharing of information to coordinated campaigns, and from storytelling strategies to targeting algorithms. They also faced dilemmas around news credibility, their positionality as 'outsiders', and tensions between loyalty to homeland and loyalty to government.

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Sharing news on social media was often constrained by the relatively low number of followers/subscribers or by the large proportion of Armenians among them. Instead of mobilizing external publics, many felt they were talking to an already sympathetic audience. The choice of social media (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube) for information-sharing was guided by specific aims and the likelihood of reaching high-impact individuals or organizations. Diaspora cyberwarriors described Twitter as best for drawing the attention of professional journalists, while Instagram was better for visual, emotive stories. Tagging or engaging prominent figures extended their outreach:

> I tried to post things, but the only way I can reach people is to go and tweet under the comments of people like Thomas de Waal[58] or anyone prominent in the field, or someone media outlets would listen to … I've used my entire holiday for this, and I am not feeling like I can resume [my job] anytime soon. (Maria, 35, Netherlands)

To maximize the appeal of their messages, diaspora Armenians noted the importance of 'customizing each tweet' (Seda, 23, US) and 'appealing to people's instant attention spans' (Karina, 35, US). This involved a range of individual choices and strategies: making posts interactive and inviting questions; comparing events and casualties in Karabakh to the more familiar conflicts in Vietnam or Israel/Palestine; prioritizing infographics and facts to appear objective, or instead sharing emotional and shocking images; posting few but powerful messages to ensure they are noticed, or posting every hour to be high up on the followers' feeds. Despite the diversity of individual strategies, the aim was the same—to make non-Armenian audiences curious and aware of the war, and to mobilize international public opinion in support of Armenia.

At the same time, there is evidence to suggest emerging coordination of online actions and the use of *networked, collective tactics*. Diaspora cyberwarriors engaged in self-education about social media, learned and taught ways to report or ban abusive comments, and joined chat groups devoted to coordinating social media activities. Much of this emerging grassroots coordination focused on adapting online behaviours to algorithms:

> We created this Armenian Twitter Army on Telegram, we need to get the hashtags trending. If you go [to news websites], the top comments are Azerbaijani flags and stuff, because it has the most likes. So, now everyone is sharing certain posts, saying, 'Okay, everyone, go and like every single Armenian comment on these posts, so we can bump up and get rid of these Azerbaijani flags at the top.' We have *real people* on the internet, trying to drown out everyone with certain tactics, *to get the algorithm on our side*. If you go on Twitter and type #stop, I want #stopAzerbaijaniAggression, #stopTurkey. The first ones are #stopArmenianAggression, #stopArmenianLies. Why is theirs before [ours]? That's because *[Azerbaijani] bots* are doing it. So, our aim is to get on top, so when people on Twitter are looking at US news we've got #sanctionTurkey trending. We want people to be curious, we want it to be in front of their face. (Seda, 23, US; emphasis added)

[58] A prominent British journalist reporting on the Caucasus.

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We have a whole social media strategy. If BBC posts an article about the war, and you see 150 Azeri comments and only one Armenian, you write Armenian comments and like all other Armenian comments, so that some Englishman who has no idea where Karabakh is, does not see 150 comments like 'Armenians are killing babies', but that Azeris are bombing our churches and are the real aggressor. We should not engage [Azerbaijani comments] because even if we react with a laughing emoji, that will push those comments to the top. (Arina, 25, Russia)

In targeting social media algorithms, diaspora cyberwarriors demonstrate the growing sophistication and coordination of online information wars. Trending hashtags, likes, reposts and coordinated tactics become aims and metrics of participatory warfare, as they determine the visibility of political causes and groups. Algorithms are productive of culture and politics, as they make certain subject positions more real and available[59]—not unlike the power of other intermediaries and gatekeepers that selectively grant visibility and certify meaning.[60] Consequently, users and groups seek to become 'algorithmically recognizable' (strategically orientating themselves towards algorithms in the hope that their information will be selected and amplified),[61] and engage in 'algorithmic dances' by trying to 'game' the algorithm while not triggering its alarms.[62] The 2020 Karabakh war demonstrates how algorithms are now a major consideration in online conflict infopolitics and are targeted by diasporas to produce, amplify and contest narratives.

Another major dilemma for diaspora cyberwarriors concerned the accuracy of information and the credibility of sources. While many trusted or wanted to trust Armenian sources more than others—and certainly more than Azerbaijani news, which interviewees saw as censored, biased or outright fake—diaspora Armenians often stressed that information had to come from independent sources to convince international audiences. This meant sharing news from western journalists (even if western media seemed biased), or from Armenian journalists working for foreign media. Live or visual stories were especially valuable, although interviewees admitted that videos could be faked. The preference for visual content suggests the interviewees' intuitive understanding that it can trigger emotion and identification and be perceived as more authentic than words alone.[63] Diversifying and providing sources was widely seen as the right strategy in winning over foreign audiences amid competing narratives:

I'm just hoping that someone from the outside, who is not familiar with this whole thing, walks into the thread and reads the comments. And then sees my comment, which makes sense, where I provide actual authentic evidence, links, and sources. I just hope that would contribute to fighting fake news. (Maria, 35, Netherlands)

[59] Taina Bucher, *If ... then: algorithmic power and politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
[60] Tarleton Gillespie, 'Algorithmically recognizable: Santorum's Google problem, and Google's Santorum problem', *Information, Communication and Society* 20: 1, 2017, pp. 63–80.
[61] Gillespie, 'Algorithmically recognizable', p. 64.
[62] Sangeet Kumar, 'The algorithmic dance: YouTube's Adpocalypse and the gatekeeping of cultural content on digital platforms', *Internet Policy Review* 8: 2, 2019, DOI: 10.14763/2019.2.1417.
[63] Helene Joffe, 'The power of visual material', *Diogenes* 55: 1, 2008, pp. 84–93.

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At the same time, ambivalent attitudes to the Armenian government's narrative among diaspora youth presented a tension between being loyal to the cause and being critical of the government. As cyberwarriors, they amplified and reposted information they could not fully verify from a distance. Competing narratives and their own political views prompted diaspora youth to question the official reports:

In the first war [in Karabakh], there was no social media. Now everyone is posting something, and we don't know what's true. We see videos that could be real or maybe they aren't. It's impossible to tell unless you are actually there to see it … I would only post things from something that looked like a good source. I don't know, maybe everything I posted was fake news? (Gohar, 34, France)

It is very hard when you are being patriotic to not listen to the good propaganda, 'We secured these lands, we have fewer casualties than they do.' You celebrate it because it is your hope … There are two completely different stories being told, and who is to say that ours isn't a lie either? You don't know what sources are real any more. (Karina, 35, US)

Critical attitudes to Armenian news sources—particularly Ministry of Defence (MoD) reports—increased as the conflict continued; and still, official information was widely amplified by diaspora members. For many, this presented a difficult choice between trust in Nikol Pashinyan's government (his coming to power in the 2018 revolution was celebrated as the triumph of democracy), switching to foreign and possibly biased news, and not truly knowing from a distance:

Armenia will probably have some propaganda … But if we start speaking up against Armenia, that's going to give bad rap to our [government]. We want to avoid that, even though I know it's kind of wrong … If the MoD of Armenia says we have killed a thousand Azeris, we have to say [that]. We can't question it, we're outsiders, but it's weird—I know Nikol isn't a dictator, but obviously we don't really want to speak badly of Armenia. We want people to understand that Artsakh [Karabakh] is our land. And if we start questioning what our people are giving out as news, it's going to make our news channels look biased. (Hasmik, 21, UK)

Loss of trust in official Armenian sources was particularly evident in the interviews after the controversial ceasefire. Artur, who devoted considerable effort to spreading information online throughout the conflict, summarized the position closely shared by others:

Everything ended up being fake from our side. We were told, 'We've taken this area, we are winning, we've won!' and then suddenly it appears the enemy has taken [the key city of] Shusha, and a capitulation has been signed. (Artur, 30, Russia)

On the one hand, these examples highlight how diaspora cyberwarriors came to play a central role in 'participatory propaganda',[64] where social interaction becomes the mechanism by which narratives proliferate and are selectively amplified. On the other, they reveal a rare qualitative insight into how ordinary diaspora members become aware of and critically reflect on their contribution to propaganda as driven by choice, not only by manipulation. This reluctant choice of priori-

[64] Asmolov, 'The effects of participatory propaganda'.

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ties between cause/country and government/state highlights a tension related to participation. In other conflicts, such as that between Russia and Ukraine, online diasporic mobilization has also caused individual notions of identity and collective political interests to collide.[65] Hasmik's, Artur's and Karina's decisions to amplify the government's narrative for the sake of the cause came at the cost of damaging their relationship with the homeland as a state. This reveals a rupture between diasporas theorized as proxies or assets on which homeland states draw (almost unconditionally), and diasporas as decentralized independent actors in global conflict infopolitics, whose online mobilization is conditioned by both collective and individual dilemmas and choices, and who can—to some degree—attempt to hold the homeland state accountable.

Against whom: perceptions of the opponent

If we look at the online comments on any major international news about the 2020 Karabakh war, the top comments would almost certainly be either Armenian or Azerbaijani. Yet they barely engage with each other—most are *monologic* in their support for one side and rejection of the other, include calls to stop war or fight until victory, or simply display online symbols of patriotism—a waving national flag or an emoji. Interviewees, too, confirmed that fighting the social media battle was not about engaging with the opponent, but about improving the visibility of their own side's narrative to third parties relative to the visibility of the other side. Engaging the opponent in an argument was described as pointless and—considering social media algorithms—harmful, as a response could push the opponent's original comment up. Diaspora cyberwarriors targeted international audiences and did not seek to establish dialogue between Armenian and Azerbaijani communities, instead dehumanizing their online opponents.

The opponents—social media users posting messages in support of Azerbaijan—were described either as bots promoting hate, attacking pro-Armenian users and targeting algorithms, or (less frequently) as real but brainwashed people. Most interviewees did not engage with them, and the few who did regretted it:

All these accounts, like, pardon my language, 'F*** Armenia, kill Armenians'—they were all just fake accounts with fake people following them. (Lusine, 27, UK)

I mostly report [them] as fake. Twice, I tried to have a conversation, 'Listen, talk to us. You only hear about Armenia from your government. You don't hear our opinion', but it was no use at all. They just repeat the same things they have learned. And I stopped. (Eva, 32, Denmark)

It's like talking to a wall, an army of bots. (Maria, 35, Netherlands)

We are professionals in social media now. [Responding] is going to move it up. I am giving them no responses. (Karina, 35, US)

[65] Olga Boichak and Priya Kumar, 'Mapping the national web: spaces, cultures and borders of diasporic mobilization in the digital age', *Global Networks*, 2021, DOI: 10.1111/glob.12342.

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These quotes suggest various reasons for not engaging with the other side, from regarding opponents as bots to the avoidance of hateful messages, and from the perceived futility of arguing against propaganda to the anticipated impact of algorithms. Interestingly, Eva's quote about conversations with 'fake' opponents and some of the other interviews suggest that diaspora cyberwarriors used the 'bot' label more widely than just to indicate automated accounts. Active 'cyber-warriors' on the other side were sometimes described as 'bots' too—reproducing their government's narrative without thinking, like machines and not people. The term 'bot' also seemed to convey a moral evaluation: 'bots' were blamed for trending pro-Azerbaijani hashtags, but it was 'real people' promoting hashtags on the Armenian side. Dehumanization of the opponent, together with algorithmic considerations, contributed to the monologic nature of the cyberwarriors' actions.

Azerbaijan's political and media system also shaped interviewees' perception of its narrative as propaganda. For example, Alin (21, UK) and Aram (32, US) admitted 'automatically writing off' news from the other side because Azerbaijan and Turkey did not have free media and restricted foreign media access into the war zone. For some, this view helped explain resistance to the Armenian narrative on the part of Azerbaijani users:

> People in Azerbaijan are still people, but they are not fully informed. They are led by a dictator, who doesn't let [international journalists] into the country (Erik, 18, US)

> I wouldn't want people to judge me as an American based on [Trump], so I don't want to bash the people of Azerbaijan or Turkey just because they have dictators. (Aram, 32, US)

Finally, threats and hate speech were another major reason for not engaging with the opponent; several interviewees reported being targeted online:

> I got death threats, 'We have your address. The Turks are coming to your house.' ... I changed my last name to non-Armenian on some of my accounts, [and since then] I haven't been getting those messages as much even if I'm posting about Armenia. So, it does feel like people are targeted just for their names as well ... But even for our non-Armenian friends, there is this fear of speaking out, they don't want to become targets (Lia, 23, US)

Whether the silence of non-Armenian audiences was caused by indifference or fear would later become a major dilemma in how diaspora cyberwarriors evaluated the effect of their efforts.

To what effect: perceived outcomes of diaspora cyberwar

The physical 2020 Karabakh war had a clear outcome in the ceasefire agreement, the deployment of Russian peacekeepers and the transfer of the larger part of Karabakh to Azerbaijan. The outcome of the online information war, intensively waged by the diaspora and especially its younger generation, is less clear. Considerations of effectiveness were not the primary motivation for engaging in this war:

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for many, this was the only escape from inaction. And yet, as diaspora cyberwarriors reflected on their efforts, they reported a mix of outcomes—from some success to complete disillusionment about the power of public opinion, host-nation politics and online friendships.

Explicit success was most visible in diaspora fundraising, especially crowdfunding. Posting news about the war on social media encouraged non-Armenian friends to donate money and boosted the visibility of key fundraisers. Combinations of online and offline activism—from protests to online petitions, pressures on media to amend stories, and lobbying—were also seen as productive. Success stories boosted morale in Armenian diasporas elsewhere, highlighting the transnational nature of participatory warfare. For example, Arina in Russia praised Canadian Armenians for persuading their government to stop supplying parts for Turkish-made war drones used by Azerbaijan. However, most interviewees were hesitant about the outcome of their efforts—although not to the point of weakening the consensus that their actions formed a necessary part of modern warfare.

Apathy and silence on the part of followers were the most common reason for disillusionment. Diaspora Armenians often spoke of few non-Armenians liking and sharing their posts, or reported a drop in followers as people unsubscribed from their accounts after they had started posting intensively about the war. Sometimes this was compensated for by non-Armenians expressing support in private messages. Several explanations for this lack of response were suggested: the indifference of audiences unfamiliar with the region; fear of speaking out and becoming a target of hate speech; successful lobbying and information campaigns led by Azerbaijan and Turkey; and audiences becoming accustomed to stories of suffering because of other conflicts and the pandemic. However, many interviewees believed that the effect of their social media activities was less immediate and harder to track:

> There is a cumulative effect here. It is hard to say when you have finally appealed to people's sense of humanity or injustice and they just go—'Damn it, I'd better repost this as I can't bear it anymore'. (Milena, 25, Russia)

> Once in a while, you get that crying emoji, you know. The stories I post were quite shocking and sad, and I was expecting a bit more reaction. But social media, that's the way it is though. You don't react to everything. I see a lot of things on social media I don't react to. The most important thing is that people see it. (Gohar, 34, France)

Not everyone saw the silence and inaction of others—particularly friends—as justifiable. Three interviewees described upsetting experiences of confronting and unfollowing friends who refused to repost information about the war. Most of the other interviewees described unfriending as 'over the top' but knew of multiple such cases in the diaspora. Studies of disconnection in conflict often point to users' active behaviours (posting offensive or disagreeable posts) as the main reasons for others unfriending them;[66] yet interviews with the Armenian diaspora demon-

[66] Nicholas A. John and Shira Dvir-Gvirsman, 'I don't like you anymore: Facebook unfriending by Israelis during the Israel–Gaza conflict of 2014', *Journal of Communication* 65: 6, 2015, pp. 953–74.

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strate that perceived inaction and silence of friends can trigger disconnection too. Hopes for higher audience engagement left many participants critical of the meaning of online friendships amid what they described as 'selective activism'.[67]

However, it was the *realpolitik*, geopolitics, the 'grand chess game of major world powers' (Arsen, 27, Netherlands) that were identified as the biggest obstacles to the success of an online information war. Social media activism was important—not least because the opponent was seen to invest heavily in it—and yet information war alone could not overturn outcomes on the physical battlefield. The physical war itself was regarded as something that could have been stopped or prevented, had there been sufficient will from Russia and the United States as major powers capable of putting pressure on Turkey. Social media activism presented an attempt to stimulate that will, rather than affect the physical battlefield directly:

> [Our social media war] is a drop in an ocean … We were constantly waiting for some international reaction and then understood that, apart from the interested parties, for everyone else this is just some small distant war. How would public opinion change things? Would the opinions of common Russians dictate Putin's decisions? (Artur, 30, Russia)

> In the end, it's the world powers that decide what will happen to the smaller countries. Online activities from people in other countries won't really change a lot. But I'm hoping that I'm not right. (Arsen, 27, Netherlands)

Interviewees' experiences of the online information war often transformed their view of host governments, identity and justice. The inaction of governments in Europe and the United States was explained as indifference or prioritization of economic ties with Turkey over moral duty. Diasporas have 'hybrid identities' (shaped by both host and home-nation culture and politics, yet not fully aligned with either),[68] and war in the homeland exhibited these contradictions in full:

> I feel like an absolute traitor of all traitors right now living in [the US] that is in NATO with Turkey. It makes me sick that my tax dollars—and I pay a lot in taxes—are being sent to give Azerbaijan weapons. It makes me want to not pay my taxes … I think it is a conflict of interest living here. (Karina, 35, US)

> I always thought, 'We're living in diaspora, we're protected.' Now, I don't even feel our human rights will be defended. As someone who teaches law, it's very hard for me because I don't even believe in it anymore. (Gohar, 34, France)

Defeat made this transformation of political attitudes even more acute. As Azerbaijan's forces moved deeper into Karabakh, interviewees acknowledged Armenia's military weakness, especially given Turkey's open support for Azerbaijan. External intervention, an outcry of international public opinion and pressure for sanctions on Turkey were the desired outcomes of diaspora cyberwarriors' actions. Nor did the online information war end with the physical war: diaspora cyberwarriors continued to promote their narrative of the conflict, raise

[67] US-based interviewees contrasted their friends' support for Black Lives Matter and racial equality campaigns with the same friends' indifference to Karabakh and the Armenian genocide.

[68] Brinkerhoff, *Digital diasporas*.

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funds for Karabakh refugees and war victims, and contribute intensively to debates exploding within Armenia about the future of its government.

Conclusion

The 2020 Karabakh war was waged on social media as well as on the physical battlefield. Young people in the Armenian diaspora became cyberwarriors—disseminating information, boosting pro-Armenian presence on news websites, appealing to international audiences, and competing against the opponent's version of events. These actions were a crucial addition to the activities traditionally associated with diasporas in international politics, such as material assistance and lobbying. The 2020 Karabakh war shows diasporas as an important actor in online *global conflict infopolitics*—defined here as the struggle over the production of knowledge and memory about conflict, and the transnational competition over whose voices and narratives are heard, amplified, trusted or silenced. This article has not attempted to measure this contribution, but has focused on diaspora cyberwarriors' own perception of outcomes as key factors in their motivation and participation. Armenian and Azerbaijani diasporas undeniably played a major role in narrating the war to global online audiences, particularly in the context of limited international media coverage. Armenian cyberwarriors' evaluation of their immediate impact was largely shaped by military defeat, although narrative and physical wars often achieve diverging outcomes.[69] I argue that digital diasporas are a *decentralized* actor in global conflict infopolitics, not just an asset mobilized by homeland states. They can magnify, doubt or challenge the homeland's narrative, and their participation is shaped by individual and collective dilemmas, self-reflective choices and motivations.

This case of digital diaspora mobilization during armed conflict in the homeland leads me to suggest several broader conclusions about participatory warfare.

First, the actors and targets of participatory warfare become increasingly *transnational*. Armenian diaspora activities exceeded national-level lobbying efforts or physical protests, and targeted global online audiences. Transnational mobilization and coordination enabled Russian Armenians to battle for the opinion of *New York Times* readers in online comments; US Armenians to create an international Twitter Army; Dutch Armenians to target British journalists and media. Foreign/domestic and civilian/military distinctions, traditionally central to the study of media, war and influence, are becoming overshadowed by the online/offline categories of both audiences and actors—a trend also observed in public diplomacy and strategic communication.[70]

Second, diasporic social media activism takes primarily *monologic* forms, seeking to increase visibility to third-party audiences rather than meaningfully challenge

[69] See Patrikarakos, *War in 140 characters*.

[70] Dmitry Chernobrov, 'Strategic humour: public diplomacy and comic framing of foreign policy issues', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations,* publ. online June 2021, DOI: 10.1177/13691481211023958; Joanna Szostek, 'News media repertoires and strategic narrative reception', *New Media and Society* 20: 1, 2018, pp. 68–87.

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the opponent. Considerations to do with algorithms, and real and perceived bot activities, further discourage dialogue. Consequently, participatory warfare increases mobilization within communities already sympathetic to the cause and stimulates dehumanization of the opponent. Third-party audiences may all but disappear from online discussions dominated by conflict parties each trying to drown the other's voice through a combination of tactics. This may not always be a strictly two-sided contest: conflicts that directly affect third parties (such as the downing of MH17 over Ukraine), and protracted and media-saturated crises (such as that of Israel/Palestine) may produce stronger international presence in online discourses; however, they too display largely monologic participation by the respective diasporas. While diasporic participatory warfare seeks visibility and aims to interact with third-party audiences, it may instead produce silences and disengagement through hate speech and hostile environments.

Third, diaspora cyberwarriors widely regarded social media as *empowering* them to act remotely, even if the effectiveness of their actions was uncertain. They did it because they could not bear *not* doing it. Participatory warfare, in the form of online information wars, was also represented as *retaliatory*, against an opponent who appeared to be investing heavily in similar tactics. Importantly, *participatory war may not end with the physical war*. Its time-frames are not as clear as those of the physical armed conflict. Diaspora cyberwarriors took to social media when the fighting began; however, many continued their online battle well after the ceasefire, seeing their war as not over yet. Certain parallels can be drawn here to some of the 'new war' arguments,[71] which consider traditional war paradigms as often failing to capture the diverse methods, forms, goals, actors and time-lines of contemporary violence. Peacebuilding initiatives should consider the online dimension of modern conflict and its infopolitics—particularly the dehumanization, enmity and silences that can be produced and sustained long after a physical war has ended.

Fourth, interviews revealed the emergence of both *individual* and *networked tactics*. Various strategies were adopted to increase the reach, resonance and credibility of shared information. Adapting online behaviours to algorithms involved coordinated efforts to selectively amplify narratives. State efforts to promote content online with the help of diasporas began to emerge in a number of recent conflicts, such as the 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon.[72] Online coordination during the 2020 Karabakh war was partly encouraged by state and diaspora institutions, but largely relied on grassroots activism. The adjustment of online behaviours to algorithms demonstrates the changing aims of participatory war and infopolitics, where new metrics, activities and agents come to determine the success and visibility of information campaigns.

Finally, this study demonstrates that participatory warfare is *politically and culturally transformative*. Interviewees were changed by their experiences—achieving

[71] See Mary Kaldor, 'In defence of new wars', *Stability* 2: 1, 2013, DOI: 10.5334/sta.at.

[72] See Noam L. Latar, Gregory Asmolov and Alex Gekker, *State cyber advocacy*, working paper, 2010, http://asperfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/STATE-CYBER-ADVOCACY.pdf.

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some success, but also reporting disconnection and disillusionment with truth, rights, politics, news and public opinion in a world of *realpolitik*. For diaspora cyberwarriors, the effects of the Karabakh war were not confined to a distant territory but extended into their everyday contexts and circles. Some aspects of this transformation, such as politically motivated unfriending, can be observed in other recent conflicts too (Israel/Gaza and Russia/Ukraine), particularly among the more active or ideologically extreme users.[73] The breadth and fluidity of these transformations, and the tensions in diasporic mobilization and self-identification that result from them, further point to the limitations of treating diasporas as simply state-mobilized resources and proxies, or as single and homogeneous entities during war.

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[73] John and Dvir-Gvirsman, 'I don't like you anymore'; Gregory Asmolov, 'The disconnective power of disinformation campaigns', *Journal of International Affairs* 71: 1.5, 2018, pp. 69–76.