

FROM MOUNTAINS TO SOCIAL MEDIA VALLEYS: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF INFORMATION WARFARE THROUGH TELEGRAM DATA IN THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH WAR

*Manéh Rostomyan, Simon Fraser University,
Canada*

Abstract

The emergence of information warfare (IW) has brought about a revolution in the realm of military affairs. Existing research has already demonstrated how successfully weaponized information can be effectively used against an adversary with the most impressive military gear like never seen before. Yet, with the ever-evolving field of information and communication technologies, the scientific community still lacks a comprehensive understanding about IW, especially in the field of social media/instant messaging (SM/IM) information dissemination platforms. The aim of this research project is to further the knowledge about IW as executed through SM/IM media, specifically in the context of the long-standing Nagorno-Karabakh war. Using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the present study examined over 8000 individual news posts in two influential Telegram channels pertaining to the conflict. The resulting main themes were *Historical, Political and Economic factors, Emotional Provocation* and *The Blame Game*, all consistent with patterns observed in both traditional and contemporary media. The impact of the said themes on the behavioural and belief outcomes of the consumers, as well as the subsequent course of the conflict remain a subject for future studies.

Literature Review

The emergence of cyber and information warfare (IW) is considered a significant turning point in the history of warfare technologies, following the invention of gunpowder in the 9th century, the industrial revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries, and the advent of nuclear weapons in the 20th century. IW, which involves the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to influence the beliefs, behaviours, or opinions of individuals or groups, can take several forms (Farwell, 2020). These include disinformation, which involves the intentional spread of false or misleading information; misinformation, which refers to the unintentional sharing of false or inaccurate information; and malinformation, which entails the purposeful dissemination of partially true or exaggerated information to deceive and cause harm (Goldstein et al., 2013). Of note, IW should not be confused with a closely related concept known as Psychological Operations (Psyops), as the latter are a subset of IW focusing on influencing the perceptions and behaviors of target audiences through various methods. IW can incorporate Psyops as part of the larger, multifaceted approach that includes a wide range of tactics with a focus on gaining an advantage in the information domain (Vejvodova, 2019; Farwell, 2020).

Several studies have indicated that both long- and short-term IW campaigns can and have been successful at causing various behavioural or belief outcomes, including voting behaviour and overall political attitude shifts (Bond et al., 2012; Bail et al., 2019; Della Vigna et al., 2014; Neyazi, 2019); xenophobia or prejudice desensitization (Soral et al., 2017); militancy and radicalization (Müller & Schwarz, 2018; Czymara, 2019); individual and group aggression and violence, including genocide (Yanagizawa-Drott, 2014) and more during “peacetime” as well as active hostilities and conflicts (Vejvodova, 2019). Alarmingly, unlike other warfare technologies, IW can be easily utilized by governments, various independent organizations, or individuals alike to achieve political, military, or economic advantage, via various ICT media (Robinson et al., 2018).

IW was already gaining traction long before the popularity of the internet and social media (Aalai & Ottati, 2014; Müller et al., 2017). However, as technology continues to evolve, IW is becoming an increasingly prevalent and sophisticated threat bringing immediacy to its understanding and development of effective counterstrategies. The rise of web, social media, and instant messaging (SM/IM) platforms as conventional communication channels has significantly amplified IW’s potential. SM/IM platforms allow seamless global connectedness like never

before, empowering people to share various content, their opinions, experiences, and perspectives. As of January 2023, a remarkable 5.16 billion (64.4% of the global population) individuals worldwide were actively using the internet, 4.76 billion (59.4% of the global population) of which were also avid social media users (Petrosyan, 2023). The capability to connect with audiences worldwide, as offered by SM/IM platforms, can be both advantageous and disadvantageous; a concerning disadvantage is that it grants a platform for uninformed individuals to widely disseminate narratives that are often far from the truth, thus distorting discussions and spreading misinformation. Conventional media, whether in print or digital format, provides a more regulated information setting. It operates as a one-way channel, with information flowing in a single direction, where publishers and broadcasters serve as gatekeepers who determine what is made available to the public. In contrast, social media is a multidirectional roadway, but one that lacks proper guidelines, restrictions, and endpoints (Farwell, 2020). Thus, as the quantity and variety of online news sources and SM/IM platforms continue to expand, it creates more room for alternative information sources to surface.

To date, little research has studied the execution of IW through the digital battlefields of social media and instant messaging platforms. Some studies have examined the use of social media platforms in employing classic information weaponization techniques to achieve extensive outcomes, uncovering the novel execution of time-tested techniques (Prier, 2017; Bessi & Ferrara, 2016; Kiebling et al., 2020). However, the existing research has largely focused on the IW implementation through SM/IM in the context of extremism (Prier, 2017; Gaikwad et al., 2021), elections interference (Daniels, 2010; Bond et al., 2012; Neyazi, 2019), selected conflicts (Makhortykh & Sydorova, 2017; Golovchenko et al., 2018), and usually solely focusing on the major platforms Facebook or Twitter (Courchesne et al., 2021).

A less studied but rapidly evolving IM application is Telegram, which has become attractive for its supposedly highly secure, private but unregulated environment. Telegram's appeal has been attributed to its distinctive hybrid system, which allows users to participate in social media while maintaining control over their personal information (Dargahi Nobari et al., 2021). Unlike other SM/IM platforms, it primarily functions as a messaging app, allowing users to create an account, send messages to individuals and join private or public groups. However, in addition to this, Telegram also has some features of social media, including the ability to create public channels and allow others to subscribe to

them (Rogers et al., 2020). As such, Telegram has been identified as a platform that is frequently used as a news source, but more importantly to spread misinformation and disinformation, playing an active, influential role in politics and beyond (Ng & Loke, 2021; Wijermars & Lokot, 2022; Herasimenka et al., 2023). While several studies have found evidence linking the platform to the spread of false or misleading information in various contexts, research on Telegram, especially in relation to IW, is still limited.

Another area that has been largely overlooked is the role of cultural and historical factors in IW. Studies indicate that individuals from diverse cultures may have varying attitudes and reactions to news and information. For instance, those from collectivist cultures may prioritize group harmony over individual expression and may be more susceptible to disinformation campaigns that target groups (Heine, 2016). Despite the global nature of IW, most research has been confined to specific regions, such as North America, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Northern Asia (Johnson et al., 2019; Goldstein et al., 2013; Aalai & Ottati, 2014; Bail et al., 2019). This highlights the requirement for cross-cultural studies in IW that can offer significant insights into strategies and tactics used in diverse contexts.

The objective of this study is to bridge the aforementioned gaps in IW research by investigating the expression of IW through unregulated SM/IM platforms and lesser-studied regions. This study contributes to the existing research on IW by analyzing the emerging themes in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on Telegram. To explore the variations in IW tactics employed by both sides of the conflict, this study examines two Russian-language public channels on Telegram, Caspian Broadcasting Company (CBC) TV Azerbaijan and Armenian Life, during the 2022 escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The study employs content analysis to answer the following research questions: What are the IW tactics adopted by the Armenian and Azerbaijani Telegram news channels? How do the observed tactics compare to the known presentations of IW in traditional media and regulated SM/IM platforms?

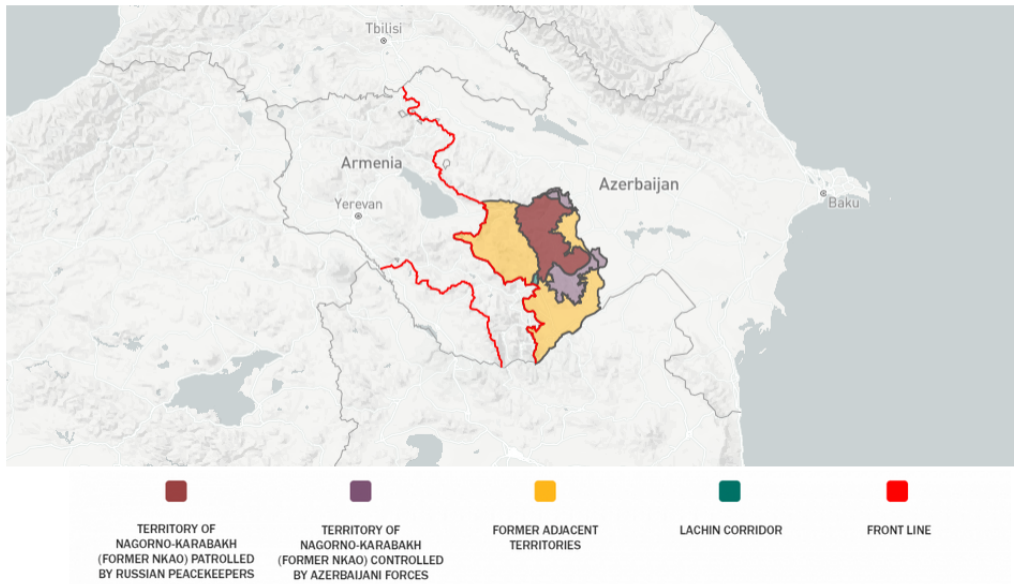
The Nagorno-Karabakh War

The Armenia-Azerbaijan war, also known as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, is a long-standing territorial dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, a landlocked enclave in the South Caucasus. The region is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan but has been under the

de facto control of ethnic Armenian population backed by Armenia since a war between the two countries in the early 1990s (Figure 1) (de Waal, 2013).

Figure 1

The Nagorno-Karabakh War Map



Note. The map depicts the conflict territory as of November 20, 2022 (International Crisis Group, 2022). The Lachin Corridor is the only road linking Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. The Former Adjacent Territories were part of Nagorno-Karabakh (formerly known all together as the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast - NKAO- in the USSR) from 1994-2020; those were seized by and transferred to the control of the Republic of Azerbaijan as a result of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and the ceasefire agreement.

The conflict has its roots in complex historical and ethnic tensions, as well as geopolitical interests in the region. Nagorno-Karabakh is home to a predominantly ethnic Armenian population, which has been seeking independence from Azerbaijan for over 30 years. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, claims the region as an integral part of its territory and has sought to regain control over it (de Waal, 2013; Khachikyan, 2016).

Prior to the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Nagorno-Karabakh region was widely considered to be a part of historical Armenia, as attested by most scholars and historical sources (Geukjian, 2012; Khachikyan, 2016). However, with the establishment of Soviet rule in the Caucasus and the inclusion of Armenia and Azerbaijan as republics of the Soviet Union, the status of Nagorno-Karabakh became a subject of political and administrative reorganization. In 1923, the Caucasian Bureau of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party decided to grant Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous status within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, despite its predominantly Armenian population (Kambeck & Ghazarean, 2012; Khachikyan, 2016). This decision proved to be a significant source of tension and conflict in the decades that followed.

After a series of ethnic violent attacks incited by nationalist Azerbaijani mobs against Armenians in Azerbaijan in 1988, resulting in the deaths of several hundred Armenians and leaving many more injured, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict escalated to a more violent and active phase (Khachatryan, 2016). This event became known as the Sumgait Pogrom and is now widely regarded as the turning point in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh (Khachatryan, 2016). The Nagorno-Karabakh regional legislature passed a resolution shortly after declaring its intention to join the Republic of Armenia which subsequently led to the First Nagorno-Karabakh War. The war lasted from 1988-1994, claiming the lives of roughly 30000 people and stopping with a superficial ceasefire brokered by Russia. The resulting ceasefire defined Nagorno-Karabakh as de facto independent although within the borders of Azerbaijan, with a self-proclaimed government, but heavily reliant on close economic, political, and military ties with Armenia (de Waal, 2013; Khachatryan 2016).

Following several cross-border attacks over the years, the ceasefire was officially violated in September of 2020 with heavy fighting breaking out along the Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh border claiming the lives of over 7000 (Kramer, 2020). Once again, after several failed attempts by various third-parties and organizations, Russia successfully brokered a deal ending the six-week war, with Azerbaijan taking control of some of the Nagorno-Karabakh territory and Russian peacekeeping troops being deployed to the border to maintain the peace (Guerin & Vendik, 2020). Yet again, the ceasefire was violated almost two years after the start of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, this time along the official borders of not only Nagorno-Karabakh but also Armenia (Bigg, 2022).

It is prudent to note that the involvement of Turkey as an external power has added to the complexity of the conflict. Turkey, historically a vocal military and political supporter of Azerbaijan, is an undeniable adversary to Armenia given the long-standing conflict largely stemming from the Armenian Genocide of 1915 (Khachatryan, 2016). Despite the overwhelming recognition by historians and many states, Turkey continues to deny the systematic massacres and deportations of over 1.5 million Armenians from 1915-1923 (Arango, 2015). This disagreement has led to ongoing tensions between the two countries, as well as political and economic isolation of Armenia by Turkey, inclusive of the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh war (Khachatryan, 2016).

As of April of 2023, diplomatic efforts to stop the war or mediate a truce between Armenia and Azerbaijan have not succeeded. Despite the decades-long conflict, it has received relatively little attention from the scientific community, with most literature pertaining to the novel military technologies (Postma, 2021), geopolitical and social importance (Kolosov & Zotova, 2020; Ruys & Silvestrem, 2021), and the various repercussions of the conflict (Sheikh et al., 2022; Balalian et al., 2021; Brutyan et al., 2021). To our knowledge, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has not been studied in the context of IW to date; the current study aims to fill this gap by conducting a content analysis of two unregulated influential Telegram chats representing the Armenian and Azerbaijani news perspectives.

Method

To explore the expression of IW in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh war through an unregulated SM/IM platform, I used data from two Russian language Telegram channels, Armenian Life and CBC TV Azerbaijan, to conduct a Reflexive Thematic Analysis from the direct, opposing perspectives of the conflict.

The specific Telegram channels were chosen after a careful analysis of channel statistics for reach and visibility across the platform. Using the statistical analysis of the Telegram bot TGStat, Armenian Life was found to be the largest public Armenian news channel at the time in terms of the subscriber count (11,179 as of November 20, 2022). The public channel was created on October 31, 2020, with the modest description set as “your trusted source of information” (Armenian Life, 2023). Unfortunately, demographic statistics were unavailable. In the duration of the selected observation period, an average of 48 posts were published on the channel (a total of 3118 posts reviewed). The immediate exposure and

visibility, that is the ratio of the average reach of one post to the number of subscribers of the channel, yielded a noteworthy 27%. This indicates that approximately 3000 individuals actively read and engaged with the content that was posted within the initial 24-hour period.

Again, with the help of TGStat, CBC TV Azerbaijan, the self-described “international, round-the-clock channel that offers an objective view of events” (CBC TV Azerbaijan, 2023), was determined to be the largest public Telegram channel on the Azerbaijani side. The channel was created on June 7, 2018, and as of November 20, 2022 had managed to gather 29,887 subscribers. However, this channel also showed no visibility on the demographics of the subscribers including but not limited to age, geolocation, and gender. During the observation period, 84 messages on average were published daily (total 5124 posts reviewed), with 23% visibility from the readers within the first 24 hours of the posting.

The time period selected for the observation of the channels’ posts started on September 11, 2022, which is the day before the official commencement of the war, to November 12, 2022. I chose the selected period as it allowed me to gather enough and representative data within the scope of this project.

It should be noted that both Telegram channels were Russian language based due to the availability and accessibility of those specific channels. The pervasiveness of the Russian language in Azerbaijan and Armenia is primarily a historical legacy of the Soviet Union, which both countries were a part of. During the Soviet era, from roughly 1920-1991, Russian was promoted and often imposed as the official or administrative communication language allowing individuals from all over the Soviet Union to understand and communicate with each other (Khachikyan 2016;). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union both Armenia and Azerbaijan, like other former Soviet Union countries, reinstalled their respective native languages (Armenian and Azerbaijani). Nevertheless, the legacy of the Soviet era has continued to influence language use with Russian remaining a commonly used language in both countries (Fierman, 2015).

While Azerbaijani and Armenian-language sources might have been more relevant, my limited understanding of Azerbaijani paired with the scarce presence of Azerbaijani and Armenian-language only channels on Telegram made it challenging to extract the necessary information. Thus, due to my proficiency in Russian as a native-speaker, and the popularity of the chosen Russian-language

Telegram channels, Armenian Life and CBC TV Azerbaijan were selected to ensure a more accurate and reliable dataset.

To maintain the quality and validity of the data and limit any issues related to challenges of language differences in research, the analysis was guided by Squires' (2009) and van Nes et al.'s (2010) recommendations about conducting cross-English qualitative research. Specifically, the coding and analysis were completed in Russian; any references or quotes to the specific posts in the data were paired with fluid descriptions of meanings to preserve the message within the language and cultural context; and most translations and interpretations into English were reserved for significant themes and example phrases for reporting purposes (Squires, 2009; van Nes et al., 2010).

The data for the defined period was extracted from the Telegram chats and coded using NVivo, a software commonly used in qualitative data analysis. The analysis of the Telegram channel messages was conducted using a Reflexive Thematic Analysis methodology informed by Braun and Clarke (2019) with the means of exploring and interpreting patterned meaning across the messages. Due to the need for inquisitive research on IW presentation in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, I used an inductive approach to systematically code the data. Meaning, each post was carefully searched for patterned meaning relevant to the topic at hand. Initially, most coding was semantic, focusing on finding patterns relating to explicit meaning (i.e., mention of the Armenian genocide). However, during the later stages of analysis, deeper codes were detected through latent coding (i.e., influential historical woes). The coding framework was refined and revisited several times while applying to the entire dataset. The analysis process was accompanied by continuous research journaling to maintain objectivity and avoid the interferences of potential biases in the analysis.

Subsequently, the ensuing codes were grouped together in meaning clusters to produce the initial set of themes. The initial themes were revisited and redefined by working closely with the data, resulting in the final 3 core and 5 subthemes presented in the current paper.

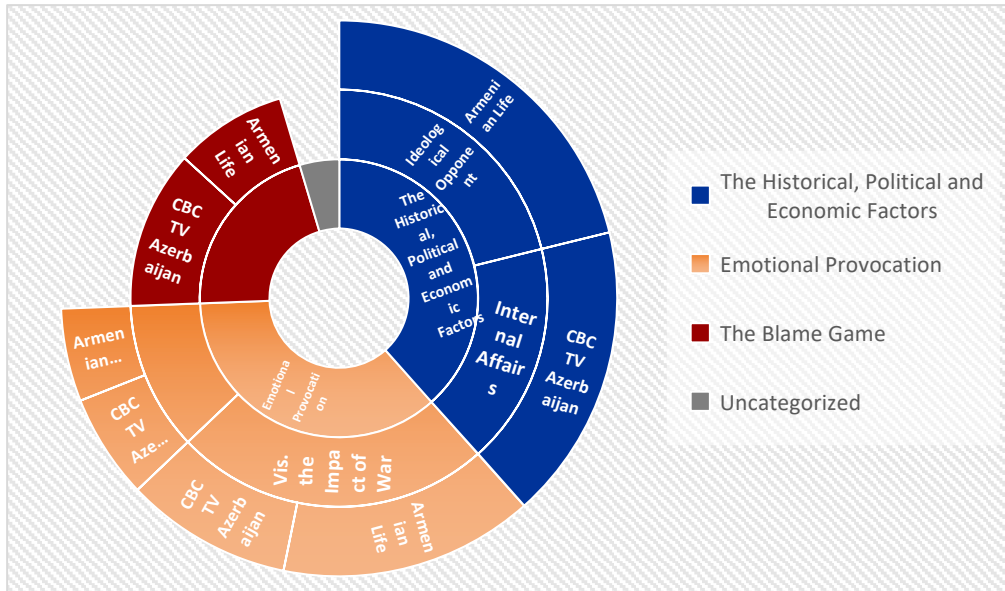
Findings

The objective of this study was to examine the expression of information warfare (IW) on the unregulated SM/IM platform Telegram in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Through the thematic analysis of two public Telegram

channels, CBC TV Azerbaijan and Armenian Life, during the 2022 escalation of the conflict, this study sought to explore the variations in IW tactics employed by both sides.

Figure 2

Main Findings



The analysis uncovered five main subthemes across three main themes, with the most prominent being *The Historical, Political and Economic Factors*, which comprised approximately 38.4% of both channels’ publications (Figure 2). The *Ideological Opponent* subtheme was more frequently observed in the Armenian Life channel, spanning 55.2% of the total posts of the main theme in the defined period, compared to the *Internal Affairs* subtheme, which accounted for 44.8% of the CBC TV Azerbaijan channel’s coverage within the main theme (Figure 2).

The *Emotional Provocation* theme was the second most observed, with an average coverage of 36% across both channels. Interestingly, *Visualizing the Impact of the War* subtheme comprised around 24.5% of the posts across both channels: the Armenian Life channel’s reports dominated with 14.8% of the total posts in the channel, compared to the 9.7% in the Azerbaijani channel. The disparities between the channels were less significant in the case of *Our Fallen*

Brothers subtheme with just 6.1% and 5.4% of the posts in the Azerbaijani and Armenian channels respectively.

The Blame Game theme accounted for 21% of the total channel posts, with the CBC TV Azerbaijan channel having approximately 12.3% of the posts in this category. The remaining uncategorized posts did not exhibit persistent observable patterns during the defined scope of the study (Figure 2).

Remarkably, the large majority of the messages on both channels were not accompanied by any external evidence. In the Armenian Life chat, 68% of the total posts referenced the source of the news, however only 43% contained an external link to the said source with almost 30% of those being Armenian sources. A similar pattern was observed in the CBC TV Azerbaijan channel; while 57% of the posts contained a mention of the origin of the news, only 34.8% included a link to a valid source with 29.4% being strictly Azerbaijani news sources.

Thematic Analysis

The Historical, Political and Economic Factors

Ideological Opponent: The Armenian Life Channel Point of View

Considering the intricate interplay of historical, political, and economic factors that have shaped the conflict's backdrop, it is unsurprising that these very elements have manifested themselves within the thematic patterns that emerged in the Telegram channels.

The presence of hints and explicit accusations of Azerbaijani Armenophobia or anti-Armenian sentiments, xenophobia, promotions of pan-Turkic ideology, and ethnic cleansing were obvious in many forms. Whether incidentally mixed in the news reporting or framed as the focus of the given post's messaging, the alleged ideological motivation of the opponent was used to justify the legitimacy of Armenia's victimhood and the violence of the Azerbaijani attacks. The mentions of the Azerbaijani anti-Armenian sentiments were framed as an extension of the historical political attitudes including the speculated official Azerbaijani discriminative practices such as blacklisting Armenian names, dehumanization and demonization of the Armenian character, the destruction of Armenian cultural and historical heritage, mythologization of the Armenian Genocide and more (Adibekian & Elibegova, 2013). To illustrate, in the routine reporting of yet another violent clash, the Armenian Life channel noted how "these actions are a

vivid manifestation of the anti-Armenian sentiments and genocidal policy, a flagrant violation of international law and norms” (Armenian Life, 2022). This quote highlights how the theme seamlessly emerged along with the factual reporting, serving to uphold the direction and the impact of the information shared.

References to the presumed ongoing Ottoman and Pan-Turkic ideologies were also noted (Table 1). This is important as the very same policy, promoting the unification of Turkic-speaking peoples and nations under a single political and national entity, was used to justify numerous other historical clashes in the region and most significantly, the Armenian Genocide of 1915. The Armenian Life chat routinely reminded readers of the idea of Pan-Turkism in reporting of alleged and actual interference and support from other Turkic countries, including but not limited to Turkey, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and others.

Table 1. Overview of the Themes and Example Codes

Main Theme	The Historical, Political, and Economic Factors		Emotional Provocation		The Blame Game
	Sub theme	Ideological Opponent	Internal Affairs	Visualizing the Impact of War	
Sample Codes	<i>Anti-Armenian rhetoric</i> <i>Azerbaijani terrorists</i> <i>Pan-Turkism</i> <i>Fake news watch</i>	<i>Uproar against Nikol</i> <i>Sold lands Reference to 2020</i> <i>NKR war</i> <i>AZ reporting</i> <i>ARM news</i>	<i>Azerbaijani: back home videos</i> <i>Armenian: active attack footage</i> <i>Civilian/infrast ructure damages</i> <i>Humanitarianism</i>	<i>Martyr’s lane</i> <i>Armenian loss count</i> <i>Safety watch</i>	<i>Foreshadowing uprising</i> <i>First report of aggressions</i> <i>Turkish involvement</i> <i>Peacekeepers</i>

The Armenian Telegram channel reporting presented the presumed Pan-Turkic ideology and anti-Armenian sentiments as the defining features and motivators of the Azerbaijani attack and used it to justify their victimhood and the predetermined violence of the Azerbaijani conflict strategy.

Internal Affairs: The CBC TV Azerbaijan Point of View

On the other hand, the Azerbaijani Telegram channel primarily depicted the conflict as an issue of national sovereignty and economic destabilization caused by Armenia. The channel focused largely on criticizing Armenian interference in Azerbaijan's internal politics, portraying the Nagorno-Karabakh issue as an internal civil conflict in Azerbaijan that was used as an excuse for the Armenian attack. The channel justified this perspective by highlighting the strategic importance of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which was recently identified as a vital corridor for pipelines carrying oil and gas in the South Caucasus region. Azerbaijan, being the second-largest gas exporter in the area, depends heavily on this corridor for its economy and development. The CBC TV Azerbaijan chat explicitly accused Armenia of preventing Azerbaijan from accessing its vital resources and engaging in the illicit extraction of Azerbaijani materials. In reporting the official roadmap for the development of the soon-to-be liberated and reclaimed territories presented by Azerbaijani President Aliyev, the channel message noted:

“In the future, the Karabakh region will become the driving force of the Azerbaijani economy... There are huge resources here, which we lost during the years of occupation, because the Armenians not only occupied our cities, but also our resources... The occupying Armenians and the continued violence remain the main obstacle to the large-scale restoration work in the region” (CBC TV Azerbaijan, 2022).

Although the Armenian channel concentrates on victimhood and historical grievances, the Azerbaijani channel justifies the Azerbaijani state and military actions by emphasizing national sovereignty and economic interests. Despite their differing approaches, both channels extensively weaponize the information provided by presenting their respective viewpoints within their reporting, thereby distorting the factual reporting to an extent.

Emotional Provocation

Visualizing the Impact of the War: The Multimedia Evidence

Multimedia evidence depicting each side's moral and humane stance, or the lack thereof, was a recurring theme in both Armenian and Azerbaijani channels.

Both sides of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict often utilized a range of multimedia tools to disseminate news and information about the atrocities executed by the opposing side. For instance, graphic pictures and videos of bombs, shells, bullet holes, rockets, pieces of various military equipment, and ruins of civilian infrastructure were commonly observed accompanying the posts about the ongoing Azerbaijani aggression in the Armenian Life chat, attempting to convey the unprovoked nature of Azerbaijani attack. For example, an image published on September 12, 2022, depicting a large bullet shell placed on top of an average, blue cigarette box, presumably for size comparison, is paired with the following quote: “Azerbaijan's goal is to terrorize people living in Artsakh [Armenian name for Nagorno-Karabakh]” (Armenian Life, 2022). This and similar images of burned houses, shelled emergency responders’ vehicles, bandaged and wounded soldiers in hospitals, civilians hiding in shelters or behind the shelled walls of their apartment buildings, residents fleeing with bindles, sacks, garbage bags and last-minute keepsakes were all shared as a sobering reminder and proof of Azerbaijani aggression’s devastating impact. The justification for the graphic images and videos was not only to convey the realities of the war and provide a visual understanding of the conflict to the readers, but to also document the war crimes and violence committed, show the human impact of the war, the devastation to the homes and cities as well as the suffering of the innocent civilians caught in the middle of the crossfire.

In stark contrast, the Azerbaijani Telegram channel avoided sharing any evidence or support for instances of war crimes, instead opting to promote the “humane” nature of their strategy. Their multimedia content frequently featured images of soldiers celebrating their return to “reclaimed” Azerbaijani land, raising the Azerbaijani flag, and replacing Armenian city and village signs with their own, spreading the underlying message about the wins and benefits of the military action. One such video featured an Azerbaijani woman tearfully recounting her grandfather's stories about the big tree in the backyard of their family home in Nagorno-Karabakh. She described feeling overwhelmed by the sight of the tree, which she had only ever pictured in her mind since early childhood. These types of videos were intended to convey a sense of empathy and compassion for the Azerbaijani people and to highlight the supposed benefits of their military campaign.

Both the Armenian and Azerbaijani Telegram channels utilized powerful and emotionally charged multimedia tools alongside concise and factual statements to elicit immediate and impactful responses to the realities of the war. In doing

so, they manipulated the information at their disposal to convey their respective views on the morality or lack thereof of either side.

Our Fallen Brothers: The Human Cost of the War

Yet another recurring theme in both the Armenian Life and CBC TV Azerbaijan chats was the reporting of fallen soldiers and military casualties, which typically included numerical statistics alongside emotional messages of sorrow, gratitude, and commemoration. While less frequent, some posts provided detailed accounts of the deceased soldiers, including their upbringing, hometown, military service, aspirations, and notable facts.

On the Azerbaijani side, the term “Shehid” (Martyr) was used to refer to those who had died while “liberating” Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding territories from Armenian control. Using the endearing and symbolic term to honour and commemorate those who made the ultimate sacrifice in the conflict provided subtle emotional signaling to the readers. One powerful example is the publication from September 13, 2022 in the CBC TV Azerbaijan channel:

Azerbaijan hosts the funeral of the Shehid of the Azerbaijani army and his father. The father of the martyr Vadim Gochaev, Alik Gochaev, died of a heart attack. He went to Ganja in order to receive the body of his son, but suffered a heart attack at the sight of the body and died in the hospital. Father and son will be buried in Baku” (CBC TV Azerbaijan, 2022).

Although the post contains factual details regarding the funeral of the Azerbaijani soldier, it also conveys a powerful emotional message regarding the martyrdom of the deceased, the profound impact on the soldier's parent, and the symbolic sacrifices made by the entire nation in reclaiming their "lost" territories.

This theme is also extensively observed in the Armenian Life chat, where the deceased soldiers are referred to as “hero brothers”. For instance, a publication from October 25, 2022 includes a candid photo of a mature soldier dressed in Armenian Military uniform accompanied by the following text underneath:

“On September 27, 2020, as enemy forces advanced along the entire border, Major Lalayan fearlessly stood on the front lines, engaging in intense combat from Jrakan to the 2nd Martuni defensive region. With his expert handling of artillery fire, he inflicted heavy losses on the opposing forces, both in terms of personnel and military equipment. Despite his heroic efforts, Major Lalayan

eventually succumbed to his injuries on October 25th. His bravery and unwavering commitment to defending his country will always be remembered” (Armenian Life, 2022).

These posts, strategically scattered between the formal statistical reports of the casualties, are meant to ground and humanize the conflict. The underlying message reminding the readers of the human faces of the tragedy helps to personalize the impact of the conflict bringing attention to the cost of the war.

The Blame Game

Unsurprisingly, another prevalent theme in both Telegram channels related to the deflection of blame or responsibility for certain events or actions that occurred throughout the conflict. This was accomplished in various ways, such as through subtle changes in the wording of factual information, reinterpretation of public speeches to spin the narrative in their favour, and selective verbatim reporting of official sources from each side respectively.

Denials of responsibility spiked during the early stages of the September uprising and tended to occur after ceasefire or temporary agreement violations from either side. The Azerbaijani channel often highlighted the violence across the border, blaming Armenian military provocations, portraying Azerbaijani military forces as merely responding in defense of their national integrity. The following excerpt from the channel exemplifies this typical reporting:

“The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan called the aggression of the Armenian side against Azerbaijan a gross violation of the fundamental norms and principles of international law, as well as the provisions of the trilateral statements dated November 10, 2020. Baku placed all responsibility for the provocations, clashes, and losses on the military-political leadership of Armenia. Azerbaijan will unhesitatingly suppress any actions against the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Azerbaijan” (CBC TV Azerbaijan, 2022).

Although CBC TV Azerbaijan often took responsibility for the violence in its reporting, it always prefaced its statements with deflections toward the opposing side for initiating conflicts.

Meanwhile, Armenian Life heavily engaged in deflection of responsibility in its reporting, but the focus was mainly on the provocation of violence by Azerbaijan,

rather than the Armenian response. Although both approaches seek to assign fault to the other party, there are stark differences in how each side justifies the ensuing fighting. For instance, a notable example is the reporting on civilian casualties caused by Azerbaijani aggression. While Armenian Life reported on the non-military casualties, the corresponding report in the Azerbaijani channel blamed Armenia for provoking the conflict and using civilians as human shields. This selective reporting illustrates how each side controls the narrative to discredit their opponent.

Discussion and Conclusion

This current study aimed to fill the gaps in research on IW by exploring how IW is expressed through unregulated SM/IM platforms and regions that have received less scientific scrutiny. By analyzing the emerging themes in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on Telegram, this project provides much needed insight into the use of IW through Telegram. The findings collectively reflect how both Armenian and Azerbaijani sides weaponize information to protect themselves against the opponent's information but also create a favorable environment for their own narrative.

The results regarding the incorporation of historical, political, economic, and ideological factors into the news messages are in line with the discourse in the current literature on both conventional and IW channels. This is noteworthy as it indicates that the manner in which some IW is carried out appears to be unaffected by the type of information distribution channel used. Whether the communication takes place through a decentralized and unregulated SM/IM platform or a traditional mass media outlet, some IW tactics are commonly employed across all channels.

Also consistent with the existing knowledge on IW expression through SM/IM platforms are the themes of emotional provocation and denial of responsibility tactics. Similar deliberate attempts to evoke strong emotional responses and attempts to influence the thoughts and actions of the readers or delegitimize the opposing side and the ensuing public opinion have been observed in IW studies including SM/IM platforms.

What is unknown, however, is how these similar expressions of the IW tactics through SM/IM platforms, especially unregulated ones, reach and impact the readers. To address this limitation of the current study, future research should

investigate the consequences of such exposure to IW by analyzing the patterns in the single-emoticon reactions to the news postings, the subsequent discussions corresponding the Telegram messages, as well as the external sharing and citation behaviour of the readers. These can shed light on how SM/IM platforms provide unique avenues to manipulate the public opinion and promote certain beneficial narratives. It is also vital to explore what role such an execution of IW can have in the course of the conflict itself; how would the potential outcome of the manipulation impact the ongoing war differently?

Another limitation pertains to the scope of the present study. While the data from the included time period provided valuable insight into the prevalent themes, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, unfortunately, is still ongoing; many pivotal events, decisions and sentiments have occurred since the conclusion of the data gathering period, including various ceasefire negotiations, third-party power engagements, certain penalties, internal civil unrest in both countries, natural disasters and more. These occurrences could have important implications on the IW strategy presentation bearing new patterns to be uncovered. Additionally, it is unknown how the findings from this study compare to the IW patterns exhibited in the previous major outbreaks of the war at hand (or others), especially pertaining to the different media dissemination tools popular at those times. Further studies are required to accurately understand how IW tactics compare across different conflicts dependent on the size, political influence, parties involved and other factors.

Overall, the implications of this research extend beyond the immediate findings to a conceptual and theoretical level. The data presented contributes to our understanding of IW mechanisms within the SM/IM setting, particularly within the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh war. By doing so, the findings effectively enrich the growing body of research on IW and SM/IM studies, particularly in the culturally and historically diplomatic contexts. What distinguishes this research is its affirmation of the potentially devastating consequences of information operations, highlighting the pressing necessity for deeper exploration.

The findings of this study are very timely and important considering the recent aggressions not only in the South Caucasus, but also the ongoing crises in the Middle East, the Internal conflicts in Myanmar and Ethiopia, the Russo-Ukrainian War, and numerous other global hotspots. In an era where IW has transcended its status as a mere strategic arm of traditional military operations,

attaining the position of an equal military component, the imperative to continually examine the role of IW within both current and anticipated conflicts becomes more pronounced than ever before.

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