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Assessing Externalities: Destructive Technologies and War:

Conflict and Communication Platforms



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Conflict and Communication Platforms

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1. Introduction

This deliverable is part of a series of five that each zoom in on one of the particular dynamics that impact on platformization and Europeanity. In our case, we focus on a theme that was originally (and formally) labelled ‘destructive technologies and war’. In order to capture the multiplicity of intersections between platforms (and other communication technologies), the societal harm they can do and the scale of their impact—ranging from individual, over Europe to global—we prefer to use a broad approach to conflict. This broad approach—grounded in conflict theory—consists of the acknowledgement that violent or armed conflict is only one type of conflict, and that conflict also has a crucial presence in democratic societies, where conflict’s (potentially) violent nature is transformed into non-violent versions of conflict. Moreover, we also want to pay attention to the complexities of violent conflict, and its hybrid frontiers with these democratic contexts, which will result in a basic typology of three main types of conflict: Armed conflict, grey zone conflict and democratic conflict. This basic typology is then enriched with a reflection on platforms and communication technologies, again avoiding a too narrow approach that would limit the analytical strength of this typology, and instead focussing on how communication technologies (including platforms), with their discursive-material dimensions, can strengthen and weaken the different types of conflict.

While the first part of this deliverable provides a theoretical reflection on conflict and communication platforms, its second part returns to the earlier work of the EUMEPLAT consortium. Even though the earlier EUMEPLAT research was not explicitly focussed on conflict and communication platforms, revisiting the research done in the first four EUMEPLAT work packages allows us to further enrich the theoretical reflections on the role of communication technologies in conflict, while at the same time creating the benefit of not having to return to the conceptual discussions on platforms and Europeanity (see, for instance, Carpentier, et al., 2022; Carpentier, et al., 2023). Together, these first two parts provide theoretical support for the empirical part of this deliverable, which is a future studies component.

It is important to stress that the future studies component of this deliverable is not a forecasting exercise, but the analysis of a series of future scenarios—in relation to conflict and communicative platforms—as they were developed by 29 Delphi+ workshop participants and by the EUMEPLAT consortium partners. More than trying to predict the unpredictable, this empirical section provides an analysis of the (discursive) constructions of the future through a diversity of voices. Mapped on an axis of positivity/negativity, this qualitative future scenario analysis establishes six main future scenarios, four of which express a deep concern about this future, while two of them are more hopeful in their formulation. Together, these six scenarios provide a perspective on the anxieties and hopes of the (more creative representatives of the) European societies, allowing for a better understanding of the complexities of the relationships between conflict and communication platforms.

2. A theoretical reflection about conflict

2.1. What is conflict?¹

Conflict itself, as a concept, has a wide variety of meanings, as Pondy (1967: 298) remarked some decades ago: “The term ‘conflict’ has been used at one time or another in the literature to describe: (1) antecedent conditions [...], (2) affective states [...], (3) cognitive states of individuals [...], and conflictual behaviour, ranging from passive resistance to overt aggression.” Important here are the differences in the definitions of conflict as violent practices, as antagonistic positions, and as societal contradictions (Wallensteen, 1991: 130).

If conflict is defined as violent behaviour, it is easy to think its cessation, and the conflict’s resolution is its transformation from a violent to a nonviolent state. When conflict is seen as antagonistic positions between actors, as defined by Wallensteen (1991: 130), as “[...] subjectively experienced or objectively observable incompatibilities,” then these antagonisms are not necessarily resolved when violent behaviour disappears. For Wallensteen (1991: 131), resolution is then the “[...] transcending [of] a basic incompatibility between the parties in conflict in such a manner that they (voluntarily) express their satisfaction with the outcome [...].”

Finally, if conflict is seen as societal contradictions, conflict is not resolved “[...] until more fundamental societal changes are made,” and before that occurs, conflicts “[...] may shift between more latent or manifest phases [...]” (Wallensteen, 1991: 130). This idea can be further radicalized by the argument that societal contradictions do not disappear, and that a fully harmonious society is illusory. Mouffe (2005: 4), for instance, speaks about “[...] the ineradicability of the conflictual dimension in social life [...].” Mouffe’s reflections about conflict are very much embedded in a democratic theory of diversity, where “[...] the specificity of liberal democracy as a new political form of society consists in the legitimation of conflict and the refusal to eliminate it through the imposition of an authoritarian order” (Mouffe, 1996: 8). What matters in this broad approach to conflict is the acknowledgement of the continuous presence of conflict, combined with the need to avoid violent manifestations of conflict by containing conflict within a democratic order.

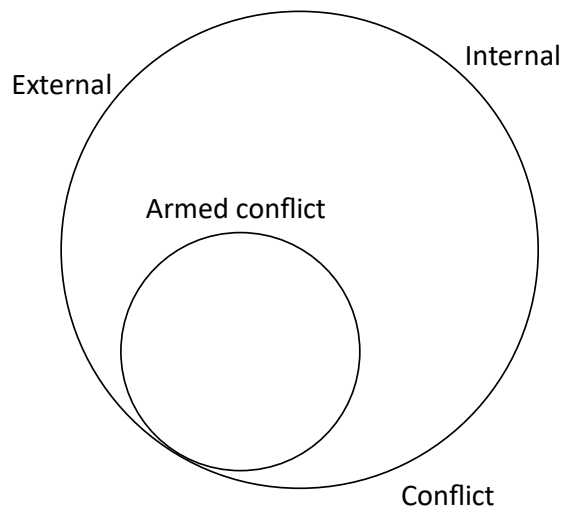
It is important to stress that a theory on the ineradicability of conflict also does not imply the acceptance of oppression or violence. For instance, Mouffe’s (2005; 2013a) work on agonistic democracy is aimed at democratically transforming antagonism and violence in order to limit their damaging impact. In 1993, Mouffe (153) captured this idea as follows:

“Instead of shying away from the component of violence and hostility inherent in social relations, the task is to think how to create the conditions under which those aggressive forces can be defused and diverted and a pluralist democratic order made possible.”

¹ This section uses text from Carpentier (2017).

Nevertheless, Mouffe warned against the idea that violence can be eradicated: She argued that “[...] we have to realise that the social order will always be threatened by violence” (Mouffe, 2000: 131). Again, she used theories of consensus as constitutive outside, to strengthen her own argument of the permanent threat of violence and antagonism:

“Violence and hostility are seen as an archaic phenomenon, to be eliminated thanks to the progress of exchange and the establishment, through a social contract, of a transparent communication among rational participants” (Mouffe, 2005: 3).



Particularly important in this line of argument is the concept of symbolic violence, which is deployed in democratic settings. For instance, Bourdieu (1998) used this notion of symbolic violence to capture this idea (from a gender studies perspective, in *Masculine Domination*). He referred to symbolic violence as “[...] a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling” (Bourdieu, 1998: 1–2). This

“logic of domination” uses a “[...] symbolic principle known and recognized both by the dominant and by the dominated [...]” (Bourdieu, 1998: 2). In a co-authored book, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 168) defined symbolic violence as “[...] an act of recognition and misrecognition, which is situated beyond the control of the conscious mind and the will, in the misty regions of the schemata of the habitus.”

Mouffe’s (and Bourdieu’s) argumentation(s) aligns well with Spivak’s (1985) use of the notion of othering to analyse British colonial domination in its ethnicized, gendered, and class-based logics. Spivak (1985: 76) labelled “[...] the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other,” which consists of the “[...] asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subjectivity” as the “[...] clearest available example of [...] epistemic violence [...].” Here, it is equally important to keep in mind that “In Spivak’s explanation, othering is a dialectical process becoming the colonizing *Other* is established at the same time as its colonized *others* are produced as subjects” (Ashcroft, et al., 2000: 141—emphasis in original). Moreover, as Spivak’s analysis focusses on the colonial setting, her work also brings out the importance of the distinction between internal and external conflicts—and its complexities—as conflict can arise *within* a society or community (or any other symbolic unit, see Anderson, 2006), or *with another* society or community. The notion of class struggle is an example of a (class) conflict within a society, as illustrated by Marx’s (2006: 68—emphasis removed) famous sentence: “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.” At the same time, the Internationale aimed to push class struggle beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, and unify all members of ‘the’ working class. A similar argument about the complexity of this

internal/external conflict dimension can be made about the colonial condition, where the colonial project consisted of moving beyond the nation-state by absorbing other territories into the internal of the coloniser, at least partially, while the decolonial project defined the conflict (and the coloniser) as external to the colonised community, and aimed to establish a new internal, namely to decolonised state, by expulsing the external coloniser.

2.2. The complexities of armed conflict

The dynamics of conflict, in the broader meaning of the concept, are not the only complexities. Also when we zoom in on armed conflict, we find ample complexities. One set of arguments points to the changing nature of armed conflict over time, for instance, with the decrease in the inter-state conflicts, coupled with an increase in intra-state wars and civil wars (Coralluzzo, 2015: 14). Here, the concept of the generation is used to theorize these differences. Even though this concept is used in a variety of ways, with different categorizations (see, for instance, FitzGerald's (1994) rather distinct six generations), often the following five generations of warfare are distinguished:

“First Generation war was fought with line and column tactics. It lasted from the Peace of Westphalia until around the time of the American Civil War” (Lind and Thiele, 2015: 94).

“Second Generation war, also sometimes called firepower/attrition warfare, relied on centrally controlled indirect artillery fire, carefully synchronized with infantry, cavalry and aviation, to destroy the enemy by killing his soldiers and blowing up his equipment” (Lind and Thiele, 2015: 95).

“Third Generation war, also called maneuver warfare, was developed by the German Army during World War I. (...) Third Generation war relied less on firepower than on speed and tempo” (Lind and Thiele, 2015: 95).

In **Fourth Generation wars**, there is a “greater dispersion on the battlefield,” which “is likely to include the whole of the enemy's society” and “decreasing dependence on centralized logistics.” There is “more emphasis on maneuver,” while there is the “goal of collapsing the enemy internally rather than physically destroying him. Targets will include such things as the population's support for the war and the enemy's culture” (Lind, et al., 1989: 23).

Finally, **Fifth Generation war** focusses on “information and perception,” where “Moral and cultural warfare is fought through manipulating perceptions and altering the context by which the world is perceived” (Deichman, 2009: 6).

The generation concept is not the only one to capture the complexities of contemporary armed conflict, also because 5GW (and 4GW) theories have been severely critiqued. For instance, Barnett (2010: 2) refers to the “overly-simplistic reconciliation of the history of warfare” and that “there appears to be a great deal of focus on its seeming uniqueness.” He continues:

“4GW falls into the conventional future-centric (sans historical context) logic that it (falsely) claims to be antithetical to. 5GW then focuses on total-resource exploitation, with an emphasis on digital tools, which is not all that dissimilar to the netcentric

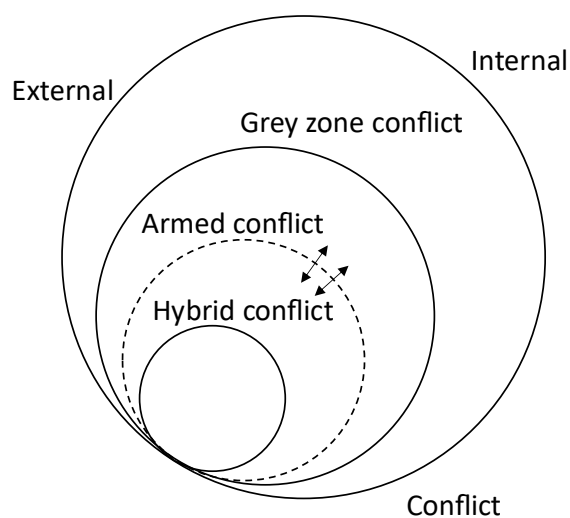
cyber-warfare concept already developed that 4GW/5GW advocates have been incredibly critical of” (Barnett, 2010: 2-3).

5WG’s claim towards novelty of information warfare is considered problematic, as it tends to downplay the long history of propaganda, and its utilization of communication technologies. “Information and perception” (Deichman, 2009: 6) have always been a key part of warfare, and 5WG theories unnecessarily privilege this component. Moreover, its emphasis on ignorance—to use Abbott’s (2009: 5) words: “violence is so dispersed that the losing side may never realize that it has been conquered. The secrecy of 5GW makes it the hardest generation of war to study”—seems to feed paranoia more than it can offer a viable framework for analysis.

Other concepts are, for instance, hybrid warfare (Murray and Mansoor, 2012; Fridman, et al. 2019; Najžer, 2020), and grey zone conflict (Mazarr, 2015). Hybrid warfare refers to conflicts where “conventional as well as irregular – or hybrid – forces (are) working in tandem” (Mansoor, 2012: 2), while grey zone conflict refers to actors who “maneuver in the ambiguous no-man’s-land between peace and war, reflecting the sort of aggressive, persistent, determined campaigns characteristic of warfare but without the overt use of military force” (Mazarr, 2015: 2). As Krishnan (2022: 27) writes, in a comparison (of 5GW, hybrid warfare and grey zone conflict):

“All three theories of contemporary conflict share the same intellectual roots and they have some commonalities, such as the idea that in future conflicts the role of the military and the use of force would be small and that the role of civilians and civilian instruments would be much more pronounced. They also assume that conflict will take place in multiple domains simultaneously and that the battlefield can be literally anywhere.”

Even though the 5GW concept has its relevance—especially in combination with hybrid warfare and grey zone conflict—as they all capture the increased militarization and



weaponization of the civilian world, including the civilian communicational spaces (Singer and Brooking, 2018). Virilio and Lotringer (1997: 47-51), with their theory of pure war as a new regime of exception fostered by the combination between the major powers in the age of speed—the technological, the military, and the cinematic/communication—make a similar argument.

All these different concepts also allow to acknowledge that civilian (communication) infrastructure can become targeted and that proportionate responses are far from

straightforward, as illustrated by the 2007 cyberattacks on Estonia (Denisenko, 2022: 173).

This is why we prefer to use hybrid warfare and grey zone conflict in this text, to theorize the

complexities of contemporary armed conflict (and how communication platforms are integrated in these conflicts).

2.3. Conflict and communication platforms

Conflict intersects with a multitude of societal fields, as it is an all-pervasive mechanism resulting from the diversity of the social. Arguably, this diversity of the social also prevents one field to dominate (or determine) other fields, which implies that conflict has no privileged 'home' from which it operates. Instead, conflict intersects with a wide variety of fields, each with their own semi-autonomies, their own logics and mechanisms, and with their own particular articulations of discourses and materialities.

In this section, we will focus on the field of communication platforms, characterized by its combination of technologies and institutions, whose articulation allows for the circulation of meaning in society. Even though we argue that this field is important, we want to shy away from media-deterministic (see, e.g. McLuhan and Fiore, 1968) approaches that privilege this field, at the expense of other (equally vital) fields, such as, for instance, the political or the economic field. Instead, our focus on the field of communication platforms needs to be understood as grounded in the acknowledgement that all these fields of the social are particular while still interrelated.

Nevertheless, communication platforms play a significant role in the different types of conflict that we have identified in the previous section of this text, as they allow for meanings about these conflicts to circulate, but are sometimes also (discursive and/or material) targets of conflicts. The different nature of armed, grey zone and democratic conflict also implies that the roles of communication platforms need to be differentiated, which is why the next three subsections will detail these roles for each type of conflict. The last subsection will then produce an overview of these different roles, also keeping in mind that communication platforms can be used to enhance conflict, but also to reduce it. Behind this logic is the idea that, even when conflict cannot be eradicated, its pacification (or agonization)—which implies the reduction of its negative impacts through a strive for agreement, consensus and inclusion—is often socially desirable.

2.3.1. Communication platforms and armed conflict

Communication technologies have played vital roles in armed conflict. It is an ancient theme of military theory and practice to work out ways that technical capabilities can help win war (Van Creveld, 1989; Krepinevich, 1994). For instance, radio, radar and sonar continue to be important in armed conflict, later complemented with remotely controlled drones and the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), often programmed to target specific groups of individuals. The 2022 phase of the Russia-Ukraine war, for instance, has witnessed a variety of technologies—including civil ones, e.g. commercial drones—being harnessed into the war effort, even though the results were sometimes less than expected (Givens, et al., 2023). This militarization of communication is of course a much broader process, which also renders intrinsically civil infrastructures military targets, but which also pulls the world of entertainment (e.g., video games) into the military realm (Sholy, 2023). As Manuel de Landa put it, the synergy between the civil and the military technological apparatus has become

the more frequent since the age of nuclear weapons, as “war games” and simulations have been widely adopted for testing high-risk situations, as such types of war had “never been fought” before, and no other “way of training” would be thinkable (De Landa, 1991: 2).

Particularly media organizations are of vital importance in cases of armed conflict. As Kellner (1992: 58) framed it, media are “a crucial site of hegemony,” which also implies that they are significant targets for the propaganda efforts of parties involved in violent conflicts. Or to use Stewart and Carruthers’s (1996: 1) words: “Governments and their militaries have always considered it important how the wars and conflicts in which they have been engaged were reported and presented to the wider public.” But, simultaneously, media have the possibilities of identifying with counter-hegemonic discourses, including agonistic discourses that have the potential to question the taken-for-grantedness of antagonism. Moreover, within mainstream journalism, critical voices and reform projects do exist, with peace journalism as one of the most prominent examples (Galtung, 1998; Keeble, et al., 2010; Lynch, 2008; Lynch and Galtung, 2010; Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005).

Still, in many cases, states engaged in armed conflict and (mainstream) media organizations active within these states tend to align in (re)producing and hegemonizing particular (antagonistic) ideological positions. This alignment has led some scholars to use the concept of the media-military industrial complex (or related concepts) (see Miller, 2011; Der Derian, 2001). As one of us wrote before (Carpentier, 2011a: 17-18), from this point of view, propaganda can be seen as one of the available (and widely used) instruments for the purpose of hegemonization. Propaganda is supplemented by censorship, which can be considered a second main instrument. The specific characteristic of propaganda is its emphasis on a priori planning by organized groups, which can range from a small number of special advisors to large bureaucratic organizations responsible for the propaganda and counter-propaganda efforts (Taylor, 1995: 6; see also Jowett, 1997: 75) This characteristic also marks the difference between propaganda and hegemony, as the latter is seen here as the rigid but ultimately unstable result of a negotiative societal process determining the horizon of our thought in a specific spatial and temporal setting. Although propaganda can be instrumental in establishing hegemony, the societal construction of the collective will (e.g., to fight a war) supersedes all propaganda efforts.

When attempting to further define propaganda, the parallel with the definition of ideology—a much broader notion—is helpful. The (negative) traditional Marxist definition of ideology as false consciousness parallels the common sense meaning of propaganda as a lie. Taithe and Thornton (1999: 1) describe this meaning as follows: “most readers will assume that [propaganda] is largely composed of lies and deceits and that propagandists are ultimately manipulators and corrupt.” More neutral definitions of ideology, as a set of ideas that predominate a social formation, allow for an approach that defines propaganda as a persuasive act with a more complex relationship towards truthfulness. Taylor (1995: 6) thus defines propaganda as the use of communication “to convey a message, an idea, an ideology [...] that is designed primarily to serve the self-interests of the person or people doing the communicating.” This broader and more neutral approach also allows differentiating between black, grey and white propaganda, where black propaganda is “credited to a false source and spreads lies, fabrications, and deceptions” (Jowett and O’Donnell, 1999: 13). As Jowett and O’Donnell (1999: 18) also argue, disinformation is similar to black propaganda,

with the former defined by Shultz and Godson (1984: 41) as “false, incomplete, or misleading information that is passed, fed, or confirmed to a targeted individual, group or country.” White propaganda, in contrast, “comes from a source that is identified correctly, and the information in the message tends to be accurate,” and grey propaganda is a concept to capture the non-dichotomous nature of propagandistic communication. Still, in all these concepts, the intent to persuade or deceive is part of the communicative action; to capture the possibility of the absence of intent, the concept of misinformation is used.

The popularization of online media—in a context where the cold war no longer structured international relations—initially led to significant optimism about online media’s potential as counter-force to state propaganda, as, for instance, voiced by Boler and Nemorin (2013: 411): “Despite this skepticism, the proliferating use of social media and communication technologies for purposes of dissent from official government and/or corporate-interest propaganda offers genuine cause for hope.” We should acknowledge that online media have offered opportunities for peace-building through their capacity to “diffuse latent or existing conflicts” (Singh, 2013: 239). Even if online media can easily be used to produce antagonistic signifying practices (see below), the decentralized nature of online media offers substantial opportunities for the production and dissemination of a wide variety of signifying practices, including those agonistic signifying practices that counter hegemonic articulations of conflict.

But the popularization of online media also made them relevant platforms for the dissemination of propaganda; as Bastos and Farkas (2019: 2) noted: it “offered propagandists a wealth of opportunities.” The decentralized nature of online communication did produce a major change, as these online tools for the dissemination of propaganda came within reach of many different actors, a process that some have called—with some irony—the democratization of propaganda (Woolley and Howard, 2018: 191; Carpentier, 2022: 74). For instance, terrorist movements, such as ISIS / Daesh, have made abundant use of the abilities of the internet to communicate their ideology, and to generate support and new recruits (Golan and Lim, 2016; Vacca, 2020). Moreover, human propagandists are gaining increased assistance of non-human actors, which has led Woolley and Howard (2018) to coin the term computational propaganda. They define it as “the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully manage and distribute misleading information over social media networks”: “As part of the process, coders and their automated software products (including bots) will learn from and imitate legitimate social media users in order to manipulate public opinion across a diverse range of platforms and device networks” (Woolley and Howard, 2018: 4).

The second instrument is censorship, which is aimed at preventing the material circulation or dissemination of information. Blum defined censorship as “A systematic, single-minded and universal control, enacted by the state (in countries with a secular regime) or an official church (in a theocratic state) over the functioning of the media by means of particular actions of a more or less violent character” (Blum, quoted in Sherry, 2015: 4). In the case of armed conflict, censorship becomes activated in relationship to what can be witnessed, described or shown, can have different timings (prior or preventive censorship and posteriori censorship) and can different modes—Sherry (2015: 7), for instance, mentions manipulation and exclusion. Throughout the history of modern warfare, in combination with

in particular its visual (media) representation, access to the battlefield, to knowledge about the events, tactics and strategies related to the armed conflict and to the voices of the enemy has varied considerably, even though some key concerns (e.g., operational secrecy) have always been present.

As Hallin (1986: 126) argues, during the First World War, the “modern precedent was established: the right of the press to be granted access to the front on a routine basis was accepted, on the condition that the press submit to censorship by military or political authorities.” Behind this was the government’s rationale that the media’s credibility needed to be ensured but that it was also necessary to prevent damage to the morale at the ‘home front’ (and vital information being made available to the enemy). In this book on the Vietnam War, entitled the *Uncensored War*, Hallin (1986: 126) also points out that the Vietnam War was different from this model, as there was “no military censorship—a situation which, while by no means new in itself, had never before been combined with routine official accreditation of war correspondents.” When the USA media were subsequently blamed for the defeat of the USA—the “myth of media responsibility” (Taylor, 1995: 276; on this, see also Feldman and Zaller 1992; Berinsky 2006)—the earlier strong military censorship model was reinstated, for instance, for the Falklands War in 1982, where there was “no uncensored war in the South Atlantic” (Taylor, 1995: 277), setting the stage for the later usages of military censorship. It was the Vietnam trauma eventually convinced the decision-makers to take control of information flows (see Mattelart, 1991), acknowledging—quoting the American commander in chief, General William Westmoreland in June 1968 – that “accurateness and balance of the news” was almost as important as the “combat operations themselves” (Bogart, 1972: 91). The USA only recovered from this trauma with the 1990-1991 Gulf War, as was explicitly stated by George W. Bush (Simmons, 1998: 9). The result was a change in paradigm, resulting, for instance, in the embedding journalists with military units.

Still, it is important to emphasize that also self-censorship plays an important role in media representations of war. Hallin’s (1986: 117) model, which discriminates between a sphere of consensus, a sphere of legitimate controversy and a sphere of deviance, is particularly helpful in understanding the dynamics of self-censorship. In particular the sphere of deviance, “the realm of those political actors and views which journalists and the political mainstream of the society reject as unworthy of being heard” (Hallin, 1986: 117), demarcates discourses whose circulation is deemed unacceptable. Moreover, also the degree of destruction—in particular of human bodies—that is considered appropriate to be shown is restricted. To use Carruthers’ (2000: 276) words: “what the bombs witness” is only shown with great restraint, driven by “broad cultural mores”. These reflections echo Sherry’s (2015: 5) argument that “censorship is incorporated into a set of forces that limit speech as a necessary precondition of discourse and are thus constitutive of all discursive production.”

The popularization of online communication has also brought censorship to the online world. Often the focus is on authoritarian regimes, and in particular China (Fritz, 2017) and Iran, while, as Ververis, et al. (2019: 451) argue: “censorship has become an almost omnipresent phenomenon in democracies and authoritarian countries alike □..□ evolving into a global norm applied across all ruling systems.” In the particular case of armed conflict, the reasons for internet censorship remain partially similar, with the aim to prevent

exposure of the ‘home front’ to enemy discourses, and/or to prevent the ‘own’ population from expressing dissent, which are part of a strategy which has been labelled the homogenization of the self (Carpentier, 2017: 180). Or, in Hallin’s (1986) terms, these forms of censorship are aimed at banning communication that is considered to be part of the sphere of deviance. Examples of course vary broadly, but include the Russian responses to Chechen separatists (Simons, 2016), European responses to ISIS (Mitts, 2022; McMinimy, et al., 2023;), Australian responses to domestic terrorism (Leitch and Pickering, 2022), and the limits of these responses. Even more recently, the 2022 stage of the Russian-Ukrainian war has triggered a variety of forms of censorship (and evaluations) (Ciuriak, 2022; Golovchenko, 2022; Kaye, 2022).

2.3.2. Communication platforms and grey zone conflict

In grey zone conflicts, the online realm offers a relatively accessible site for acts of aggression,² which, at the same time, has only limited risks of escalation. Already in 1999, the USA deputy secretary of defence, John Hamre, declared that the USA were engaged in a cyberwar, after the discovery that “Russian hackers had breached some of the most sensitive computer networks in the U.S. federal government, NASA, the Pentagon, the Department of Energy, and a dozen U.S. universities and other research centers” (Walton, 2023: 476). A very well-documented European example—already mentioned above—are the 2007 cyberattacks in Estonia, which followed the moving of a Soviet statute (the so-called ‘bronze soldier’) from the centre of Tallinn to a military cemetery located at the city’s outskirts. Hackers responded with a series of distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, which “shut down the websites of all government ministries, two major banks, and several political parties. At one point, hackers even disabled the parliamentary email server” (Herzog, 2011: 51). Another example is the Stuxnet worm, which “had been specifically designed to subvert Siemens systems running centrifuges in Iran’s nuclear-enrichment program” (Kushner, 2013: 51; see also Nye, 2016/17: 48). In the same period, USA Defence Secretary Leon E. Panetta warned for a “cyber-Pearl Harbor”, stating during a speech at the Intrepid Sea, Air and Space Museum on 11 October 2012 that

“An aggressor nation or extremist group □..□could derail passenger trains, or even more dangerous, derail passenger trains loaded with lethal chemicals. They could contaminate the water supply in major cities, or shut down the power grid across large parts of the country.”³

The cyber-Pearl Harbour metaphor was part of a considerable debate, with a number of voices raising serious security concerns (Lynn, 2010; Clarke and Knake, 2010), while others arguing for a more moderate position, as “much of the damage contemplated by cyberwar is in all likelihood temporary” (Gartzke, 2013: 57). Others, for instance, Nye (2016/17: 49) point to the role of these interventions as examples of “political signalling”.

As Gartzke (2013: 70) argues, another usage of online technologies is espionage: “By far the most compelling scenario for the transformation of political conflict through the internet,

² Of course, these techniques are also used in armed conflict, in combination with traditional warfare. See, for instance, Vu, et al.’s (2023) analysis of hackivism during the 2022 stage of the Russia-Ukraine war.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/12/world/panetta-warns-of-dire-threat-of-cyberattack.html>

and the one that makes new headlines daily, involves the use of the internet for espionage.” Espionage, of course, “dates from the dawn of history” (Warner, 2017: 18), and it is another case of (partially) illegal acts of one actor against another, combined with a degree of acceptance and limited risks for conflict escalation. Again, as Warner (2017: 19) writes, “States have tacitly established protocols for handling espionage flaps,” and “Cyberspace operations gone awry, like intelligence revelations, so far have not provoked wars” (Warner, 2017: 25). Methods have changed, though, because “The internet makes it possible for the spy to telecommute” (Gartzke, 2013: 70). This is where the distinction between computer network exploitation (CNE) and computer network attack (CNA) (Nye, 2016/17: 47) becomes important: “CNE exfiltrates confidential information against the wishes of the owner; CNA uses information to disrupt and destroy.” Nye (2016/17: 47) adds that “The majority of serious intrusions involve espionage for political, commercial, and economic purposes rather than destruction.”

A third (overlapping) component of grey zone conflict is the support for opposition movements (or for political parties that are more sympathetic towards the supporting actor), which also includes supporting their online activities and the provision of information extracted (of exfiltrated) online. While in some cases external support can be provided to actors involved in armed conflict (Karlén, 2017), in other cases this support can be provided in regions not at war, while these interventions might still be perceived as hostile, for instance, because they are aimed at (or perceived to be aimed at) regime change. One historical example is the careful western support for the dissident movements in the then communist countries in Europe (e.g., Barder, 2017: 20), often “under the banner of promoting human rights throughout the world.” In more contemporary cases, we find examples for supporting online opposition activities and information extraction aimed to cause embarrassment. As an example of the latter: Nye (2016/17: 48) suggests that the information distributed by Wikileaks in 2016, embarrassing the USA’s Democratic Party, might have been “exfiltrated by Russian intelligence agencies.” More recently, the BBC reported on the early June 2023 announcement of Russian security services that they had “uncovered a reconnaissance operation by American intelligence services carried out using Apple mobile devices.”⁴

Finally, the last cluster of practices related to grey zone conflicts focusses on the distribution of propaganda in foreign territories, again with the ambition to disrupt the functioning of the regimes who are exposed to these strategies. In particular the interventions in the 2016 USA presidential election and in the United Kingdom’s referendum on European Union (EU) membership are frequently used as examples of what Baskos and Farkas (2019: 1) call the “weaponization of social media platforms”. So-called troll factories or farms⁵—such as, for instance, the Russian Internet Research Agency⁶—have been documented to combine white, grey and black propaganda, “simultaneously targeting the conservative base and Black Lives

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-65977742>

⁵ The label ‘troll factory’ (or ‘farm’) is problematic. As Bastos and Farkas (2019: 3) write, the work of these organizations “extends beyond trolling and includes large-scale subversive operations.”

⁶ These practices are of course not limited to Russia. A Polish example is discussed here <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/01/undercover-reporter-reveals-life-in-a-polish-troll-farm>, while a Turkish example is analysed here: <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/publication/june-2020-turkey-takedown>

Matter activists” in the case of the 2016 USA election (Bastos and Farkas, 2019: 11), and combining the use of campaign advertisements with social media posts from false identities (Lukito, 2020: 250). At the same time, it is vital to keep in mind Bail, et al.’s (2020: 250) comment, again focussing on the USA elections, that “the American public is not tabula rasa and may not be easily manipulated by propaganda.”

2.3.3. Communication platforms and democratic conflict

As is the case with the borders between armed conflict and grey zone conflict, also the frontier between violent conflict—grey zone or not—and non-violent democratic conflict are not stable and clearly-demarcated. In other words, also the logic of antagonism can enter into the realms of democracy. As we mentioned earlier, the social order (of democracies) “will always be threatened by violence” (Mouffe, 2000: 131), and in particular symbolic violence (with, for instance, its various forms of othering) keeps rearing its head in democracies. At the same time, Mouffe argues for the transformation of antagonism, which is structured through the logic of the enemy, into agonism, which is structured through the logic of the adversary. Vital for this argument is that the existence of conflict is not ignored, but that the aim of democratic politics is to “tame” or “sublimate” (Mouffe, 2005: 20–21) antagonisms, without eliminating passion from the political realm or relegating it to the outskirts of the private.

The analysis of the dynamics of antagonism and agonism in democracies also allows us to structure the discussion on the role of social media in democratic conflict, as they are sometimes used to feed into antagonistic conflict, but can also be deployed in more agonistic manners. In addition, we can also use the commonly used dimensions of media’s contribution to democracy, which are the (1) provision of information, the (2) enabling of debate, dialogue and deliberation, the (3) monitoring of (state) dysfunctions and the (4) mobilization of the citizenry.

Traditionally, Communication and Media scholarship on the media-democracy relationship has emphasized the importance of information distribution—allowing for informed democratic choices to be made by citizens. As Street (2001: 253) wrote, “This means informing citizens about their (prospective) representatives’ plans and achievements; it also means reflecting the range of ideas and views which circulate within society, subjecting those who act in the name of the people to scrutiny, to make them accountable.” Online media still play this role, allowing for the circulation for democratically relevant information. Still, information is not outside conflict (as it is not necessarily neutral), and in some cases information becomes implicated in antagonistic versions of conflict. Particularly important here is the generation and circulation of propaganda (including, but not exclusively, forms of disinformation) and erroneous information (linked to misinformation) (see Applebaum, 2018; European Parliament, 2019), which, at least in some cases, becomes activated in antagonistic struggles, against particular political (competing) actors or in a populist rejection of ‘the’ establishment. Here, arguably, the generation and circulation of objective, factual, truthful and fact-checked information (keeping in mind the limits of objectivity) has the potential to keep political struggles at the level of agonism, in the sense that this type of information allows for these struggles to remain fair.

A second dimension is that media enable citizens to engage in debate, dialogue and deliberation, allowing for the formation of what is called public opinion. Habermas's (1974: 49) concept of the public sphere—which he describes as follows: “A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body”—is one of the many ways to describe and analyse the democratic importance of communicational exchanges, where media provide one of the most significant platforms to enable these exchanges. While mainstream media were critiqued for colonizing the public sphere (and integrating it into the system), online media were at first heralded as ‘purer’ examples of the public sphere. Later, more critical analyses emphasized the (democratic) limits of online media, with continued power imbalances between elite and non-elite actors (‘who speaks’) (Borge-Holthoefer, et al., 2011: 6; Wilson and Dunn, 2011: 18; González-Bailón, 2013), the increase of the usage of symbolic violence in the online realm (‘how is spoken’), which is overlapping with the increase of content quality problems (‘what is said’), and continued ideological fragmentations of actors (the so-called bubbles or echo chambers—‘who speaks to whom’; see Manjoo, 2008; Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017).

Moreover, also in the online realm, limits are imposed on what can be said, and censorship does occur, in relation to copyright, pornography, national(ist) symbols, hate speech, defamation etc. (Chun, 2006; Deibert, et al., 2010). Again, these online exchanges and their limitations—an indispensable part of democratic conflict—can be organized in a variety of ways, ranging from antagonistic to agonistic modes. We should add here that also the participatory intensity of these exchanges is part of the democratic conflict, with Street's (2001: 228) position, arguing for a more maximalist participatory democratic practice, as one of the many positions in this part of the political struggle over democracy itself:

“At the same time, it is not just a matter of increasing access to information and allowing for discussion. There has also to be the opportunity for deliberation, which requires networks that enable an open dialogue about the public good. People have to make decisions, not just exchange thoughts or register interests.”

A third dimension is the role of media in holding other power holders accountable, by disclosing dysfunctions related to particular societal systems (in particular in relation to the state). What is sometimes called the watchdog function of media, attributes to media—and in particular journalism, and even more so investigative journalism—the role of “scrutineer of officialdom and elected representatives” (Street, 2001: 151). Online technologies have provided additional resources for journalists to engage in investigative journalism, stimulating the development of Digital Investigative Journalism (Hahn and Stalph, 2018; Carson, 2020). But media, in whatever era they are situated, have not in all cases performed the watchdog role, which has triggered the lapdog critique. Gitlin (1991: 123), for instance, critiqued journalists, already quite some time ago, for “dancing attendance at the campaign ball while insisting that they were actually following their own beat.” Moreover, in several cases, political actors have attacked media and their journalists, either physically or rhetorically, as is evidenced by former USA president Donald Trump ‘fake newsing’ strategy (Gore, 2017; Benkler, et al. 2018: 105-144; Sunstein, 2021: 17-21), bringing in more antagonistic forms of conflict between elite actors, and limiting media's capacity to maintain a power balance in relation to the field of politics.

In principle, the decentralized nature of online media also allows for citizen journalists (or non-professional journalists performing journalistic tasks) to engage in investigative journalism more than before (see Atton and Hamilton, 2008), which does occur (Bruns, 2003; Allan, 2009). But in practice, the semi-publicness of online media has turned the monitoring situation around, with citizens being the one's more scrutinized than being the one's scrutinizing, as the political usage of data analytics (Becker, et al., 2017; Ginsburgh, et al., 2020) has demonstrated. Even though this changing relation between the political field and citizens is not a strong form of antagonism, the panoptic politics of observation and the potential forms of manipulation that can be derived from it, still weaken the democratic position of citizens. The result is a situation which was been described in various terms: a centralized disciplinary strategy (Lyon, 2018: 49), a new embodiment of social agency (Andrejevic, 2020), a form of economic exploitation (Allmer, 2015; Seignani, 2016), or even a machine for behaviour modification (Zuboff, 2019: 293-300).

Finally, the fourth dimension concerns mobilization and participation. Media have had a long tradition of organizing different forms of participation, empowering different groups in societies to have their voices heard, even though the most intense (or maximalist) versions of participation were generated by community media (Carpentier, 2011b; 2017) and to a lesser degree by mainstream media (e.g., through talk shows and audience discussion programmes, see Carpentier, 2011b). The activist nature of community media also allowed them to actively mobilize their publics, again more than mainstream media could (and did), aptly working against the backdrop of the traditional media's shortcomings (Margetts, John, Hale and Yasserli, 2015; Della Ratta, 2018). The popularization of online communication also strengthens the ability of, for instance, new social movements to deploy these tools for organizational and mobilizing purposes, not only to inform or debate (Gibson, et al., 2003; Cammaerts, 2005; 2007; Castells, 2012). As, for instance, Cammaerts (2007: 270) wrote:

“While the Internet increasingly constitutes an opportunity structure for activists and social movements, in terms of self-representation, mobilizing for (direct) actions, or distributing information, this clearly has to be seen as being embedded in a larger communication strategy, including other media and ways to distribute their aims and goals.”

But more critical voices point out that social media are not be *per se* political tools, while they can be activated when and where the official channels are more controlled and censored by political powers (Jamali, 2015: 12-14; Margetts, et al., 2015: 114-118). Moreover, due to the negative externalities of digital networks, and to the alleged “neoliberal” translation of contemporary decentralization strategies, the notion of decentralization itself has been questioned and arguments in favour of centralization have been made (Dean, 2010; 2016; Gerbaudo, 2012).

Moreover, mobilization and participation can serve different purposes, and also has the potential to serve more antagonistic purposes. Extreme examples, in the case of online media participation, are provided by the use of the internet by radical right-wing groups (Saunders, 2011; Caiani and Parenti, 2013; Mihelj and Jiménez Martínez, 2021; Ahmad, 2022; Fuchs, 2022) that use the online to live out their nationalist and racist fantasies in ways that can only be described as formally (but not substantively) participatory, at least in

relationship to the members of these groups, and to those who are ideologically aligned with them.

2.3.4. Communication platforms and conflict: An overview

When we bring together the three different types of conflict, the discursive and material dimensions, and the many different tools that can be used to strengthen and intensify conflict, rendering it more antagonistic (as discussed in the previous parts), then we can produce the overview in Table 1. In this table, the grey scale is used to mark that all tools are activated in all three types of conflict, but in more or less intensive ways.

Table 1: Platforms Strengthening Antagonistic Conflict

Armed Conflict	Grey Zone Conflict	(Democratic) Conflict
Discursive dimension		
Antagonistic argumentation and othering feeding societal polarisation		
Recruitment and (military) mobilisation		
(Counter)Propaganda		
Disinformation / Misinformation (“fake news”)		
Spying, Surveillance and Monitoring		
Material dimension		
Censorship (from tech-walls to access/content restrictions)		
Cyber warfare (political hacking, exfiltration, ...)		
Supporting oppositional movements		
Deployment and destruction of communication infrastructure and its operators		
Militarisation of civil/military technologies (games, drones, ...)		

Table 2 follows the same structure and logics as Table 1, but provides an overview of the different manners that online platforms can be used to weaken antagonism, and to transform antagonism in more agonistic modes.

Table 2: Platforms agonizing conflict

Armed Conflict	Grey Zone Conflict	(Democratic) Conflict
Discursive dimension		
Agonization of argumentation and debate		
Democratic mobilisation and participation		
Deconstruction of (counter) propaganda		
Information distribution, knowledge sharing and legitimation		
Responsible transparency and privacy protection		
Material dimension		
Free and balanced flow of information, (regulated) media freedom and responsabilization		
Platform security		
Respect for national integrity		
Protection of communication infrastructure and its operators		
Civilisation of civil/military technologies (games, drones, ...)		

3. What has the EUMEPLAT research added to these debates?

As mentioned earlier, the EUMEMPLAT research did not focus explicitly on conflict (and on ‘destructive technologies and war’). Nevertheless, we can find a number of relevant discussions, in particular to the regulation of platforms, fake news and online exchanges on social media. In all cases, these discussions relate to democratic conflict, which remains relevant to broaden the theoretical framework outlined in Section 2, and to feed into the future scenario analysis in Section 4.

3.1. Regulating platforms and conflict

EUMEPLAT Work package 1, deliverable D1.4 (Grassmuck and Thomass, 2022) extensively discusses the European media legislation for the period of 1990 to 2020. Several of these legal elements are aimed to regulate (potential) conflicts in (future digital) societies (or that affect the conditions of possibility of these conflicts).

One key element is the protection of privacy, which, in its very core, deals with the conflict between individual citizens on the one hand, and state and market actors on the other, where the latter are keen on organizing various forms of surveillance, which might harm citizens. A second key element is related to content-related concerns, in particular towards content that might be considered harmful, at the individual level—manipulating citizens—or at the societal level—feeding conflict and generating polarization.

The authors of deliverable D1.4 describe how, starting in the 1970s, multilateral negotiations went under way to work out a way to create a common framework for the digital society under way. The Council of Europe issued ministerial resolutions in 1973 and 1974 on the handling of automated personal data. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) adopted Guidelines on Trans-border Data Flows and the Protection of Privacy. UNESCO and the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-Operation Organization (APEC) outlined privacy frameworks for the wider world around 2000. In parallel, negotiations went under way to arrive at a common approach to manage other aspects of digitalization, as in the case of cybersecurity, cryptography, authentication, electronic commerce, and so forth.

Different regions and actors adopted different positions in those policy deliberations. The main dichotomy arising was between the effort of the European Union to reach agreement on how to regulate the Internet and various aspects of digital communication, whereas the USA opted for leaving extensive freedom for market actors, with reference to the importance of avoiding stifling of innovation and a belief in self-regulation to prevent bad conduct. Gaining the upper hand was the view that restrictions of cross-border data flows would hamper the benefits of sharing and re-use of data.

The unprecedented market power of online platform companies, based almost exclusively in the US but exercising next to unlimited access and control of data from users all around the world (Cusumano, et al., 2019), however, has belatedly spurred an urgency in policy circles to rein in platform business models and governance (Jacobides and Lianos, 2021). The prevailing de facto hands-off approach – i.e., reliance on *laissez faire*—appears

particularly problematic in the light of the role that has arisen for digital platforms in instigating user manipulation and fuelling conflict. Various observers increasingly present these outcomes as constituting a failure of state actors (Khan, 2016).

For long, the main instrument applied by the EU to counter the influence of digital platforms, centred on competition law. The pursuit by EU authorities has been far more interventionist than the quiescent passivity of USA antitrust authorities in the Federal Trade Commission and the Department of Justice. The aggressive review and assessment by the EU of mergers and acquisitions exerted at least a modest impact. On the whole, however, the combined complexity of interwoven technological and market considerations, conflicting national priorities, and heavy lobbying by the platform industry, tempered what EU authorities could achieve.

Competition (or anti-trust) law in effect represents a limited subcategory of economic regulation, largely preoccupied by market mechanisms. Gradually, the focal point of the conflict of interest, between on-line platforms with their preference for operating in unregulated markets and the need of countervailing policies has shifted back to data governance and control, along with actual content. Responding to a multitude of complaints about a spike in both harmful and illegal content, and a consequent request from the European Parliament, in 2020 the European Union prepared and launched the Digital Markets Act (DMA) and Digital Services Act (DSA).

As elaborated in *D1.4-European Media Legislation: Overview*, the DSA addresses the different types and sizes of online intermediaries, their liabilities and their graded obligations. The DMA, on the other hand, addresses the role of gatekeepers between businesses and customers. In effect, this regulation (EU 2018/334, 01.03.2018) codifies measures to tackle illegal content online.

Additional EU frameworks have been devised to regulate the role of digital platforms in instigating conflicts:

- i) Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) of 2018, which governs audiovisual media services, promotes cultural diversity, protects minors, etc., with a view to reducing conflicts arising from the dissemination of harmful content.
- ii) Platform-to-Business Regulation (P2B) of 2019, establishing rules to mitigate conflicts between platforms and businesses.
- iii) The EU Copyright Directive of 2019, makes online platforms liable for copyright infringement by their users and requires proactive measures to prevent unauthorized sharing of copyrighted content, hampering conflicts between digital platforms and content creators by stipulating fair remuneration and protecting IPRs.
- iv) European Democracy Action Plan, of December 2020, tackles disinformation, protects electoral processes, enhances transparency and accountability of digital platforms, promotes media literacy, and strengthens cooperation between platforms, authorities, and fact-checkers, thereby reducing conflicts arising from disinformation and manipulation of the public.

In conclusion, the diminished effectiveness of EU legislation in combating the excessive market and social influence of platform companies has contributed to the sharpening of a range of other policies, ranging from privacy protection to regulation of content in various forms. While the core business models and anti-competitive strategies of dominant platform firms, almost exclusively US-based, remain mostly unchecked, a plethora of policy initiatives and also socio-economic regulation more broadly, is in place to counter misinformation, polarization, and conflict-generation more broadly, beyond what digital platforms as such serve as carriers of.

3.2. Fake news as conflict

A second component of the EUMEPLAT project where conflict becomes apparent is Deliverable D2.5, entitled *Anti-European Fake News and What to Do* (Galeazzi and Zollo, 2022), which includes the results of two data-driven analyses of the discursive conflict in Europe. Here, we focus on the content of digital platforms, and its potentially harmful nature. The first section of this analysis is focused on 25 million tweets related to Europe, uploaded in the 2019-2021 period, in the four major languages (English, German, Italian, and French). The second part is devoted to an in-depth investigation of the Twitter discussion about the Brexit, aiming at detecting the spread and the effects of anti-EU arguments, based on the latent ideology estimation technique.

If we put things in the perspective of conflict and conflict resolution, two main indications are to be considered. Firstly, the conventional methods for fighting disinformation and polarization – fact-checking and debunking – have their limits, not to mention their cost, and they can even backfire and produce further radicalization (Zollo, 2019). The observation of the information trends over time, additionally, shows how most topics become subject to misinformation strategies within a day from their uploading. With this respect, *time* plays a fundamental role, so that the algorithmic timely detection of these information threads – what we call the early-warnings approach – appears to be the best way for countering disinformation cascades.

3.3. Online communication and indications of conflict

Even though the EUMEPLAT Work Packages 2 and 4 did not focus explicitly on conflict, which does not allow us to conclude anything about the conflict-related nature of these online debates—for instance, in relation to its antagonistic or agonistic nature—both work packages provide great detail about the diversity of positions, subjects and actors, and the potential contestations.

In Deliverable 2.2, entitled *Platformisation of News in 10 Countries*, Cardoso, et al. (2023) focus on online postings on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube that included references to Europe and to a series of key dimensions (namely economy, health and climate). The entire corpus consisted of 6233 postings. The first component, the actor analysis, made one particular conflict visible, namely the conflict about who has voice (see, e.g., Couldry, 2010). Even though the majority of the actors communicating were still so-called elite actors (namely “media agents” and “political agents”, totalling 68,4% of the postings), the corpus

also included a considerable amount of postings originating from “non-organizations” and “other organizations”. We cannot conclude that the proportion of elite and non-elite actors is balanced—elite actors, as in traditional news, still have a strong presence—but this struggle about who can gain a media presence has still resulted in more visibility for non-elite actors, in comparison to the pre-Internet period. One additional element here is that the radical right-wing political actors have the largest online presence in the category of political actors, often bringing in more antagonistic positions.

When the analytical gaze is reversed, and the deliverable focusses on who is spoken about, the news media only take a small proportion of the total postings (9,2%), while political actors are still more frequently talked about (22,4%), which implies that many actors featuring as topics are outside the realm of these two traditional elite categories. When focussing more closely on the content, in particular in relation to Europe, we can see the substantial diversity of components that are being discussed, again bringing out the diversity of (European) public online debates. Nevertheless, also here we can see a strong representation of themes that are institutional, legal, political and economic in nature, while themes related to the European people, culture or values have a much smaller presence.

Also in EUMEPLAT Work Package 4, we find a strong focus on the online content, this time, in particular in relation to immigration (Ingebretsen Carlson, et al., 2023a) and gender (Ingebretsen Carlson, et al., 2023b). These studies focussed on data extracted from Facebook and Twitter, through particular keywords (related to immigration and gender). In the case of the immigration study, slightly more than 50.000 social media postings were analysed, while in the case of the gender study, the number of postings was slightly more than 62.000. When focussing on the immigration study, one significant result is the diversity of thematic differences across the 10 countries of the study, in relation to the five core themes (institutions, law, values, people and territory). Nevertheless, when comparing postings with a European and a non-European element (or focus), then institutions and territory become the most important dimensions. Also the affective load of the postings (whether negative or positive) seems to increase, when postings have a European element, indicating the discursive-material struggle over immigration at the European level.

Also in relation to gender, we can find significant diversity in relation to the thematic focus in the 10 countries, where the themes are here new social movements, law, values, people and identity, even though the diversity is less outspoken than in the case of immigration (Ingebretsen Carlson, et al., 2023b: 20). Values and law are the most prominent in debates in relation to postings with a European element (which is not surprising, given the prominence of gender-related regulations at the European level), while identity is more important in postings without this European dimension. Ongoing, more qualitative-oriented analyses of these data do show more details about (representations of) discursive material struggles, for instance concerning gender-related violence, but also concerning the intersection of immigration and gender, where discursive-representational struggles over immigration also become gendered.

4. A future scenarios analysis

The theoretical framework outlined in Section 2, and enriched by a re-analysis of the earlier EUMEPLAT research, served as sensitizing concepts for the analysis of the future scenarios generated by the Delphi+ workshops and the EUMEPLAT researchers, allowing for a better understanding how the future of conflict and communication platforms is constructed.

4.1. The Delphi+ method and the data gathering

The Delphi method is a method for future scenario-building and forecasting with a long history. To illustrate: Gordon (2009: 1-2) relates this method to the work of RAND in the early 1960s. Developed in the early stages of the Cold War, in order to predict the impact of technology on warfare (San-Jose and Retolaza, 2016: 3), its consolidation started with the RAND projects, which were established to predict the probability or intensity of enemy attacks. These think tanks, such as RAND, “provided the methods and techniques for the military and strategic planning of US administrations” (Seefried, 2014: 3; see also Amadae, 2003). Currently, the Delphi method – as a technique offers a “systematic means of synthesizing the judgments of experts” (Gordon, 2009: 11) – is used across various academic disciplines and fields. There are also many variations of the Delphi method itself, but several characteristics are still transversally present. Landeta (2006: 468) defines the Delphi method as “a method of structuring communication between a group of people who can provide valuable contributions to resolve a complex problem.” As Gordon (2009: 4) summarizes it, the Delphi method is grounded in a “controlled debate” which allows for the establishment of consensus among experts, through a series of iterations. This implies that expert-participants discuss the responses of others and the work of the group as a whole, but also that they can alter their own positions during the process.

Even though the Delphi method can be used outside future studies (Poli, 2018) and despite its flaws and limits (Winkler and Moser, 2016: 63), it is often used in future studies. This field is defined by Inayatullah (2012: 37) as “the systematic study of possible, probable and preferable futures including the worldviews and myths that underlie each future.” As a field, future studies has moved “from predicting the future to mapping alternative futures to shaping desired futures” (Inayatullah, 2012: 37). These three components refer to three different approaches—with different ontological assumptions—namely, forecasting (to predict the most likely future), scenario-building (to explore alternative futures) and backcasting (to assess the feasibility of a desired future). As it is often emphasized in future studies publications: “Futurists do not know what will happen. They do not claim to prophesy. However, they do claim to know more about a range of possible and desirable futures and how these futures might evolve” (Glenn, 2009, see also Robinson, 1988: 325). In the end, future studies relates to “thinking the unthinkable” (Kahn, 1962).

In our case, we adjusted the Delphi method into a 3-and-a-half-hour face-to-face scenario-building workshop (see Carpentier and Hroch, 2023 for more detail), which focussed on five pre-given themes (surveillance and resistance, algorithms and choice, toxic debate and pluralistic values, destructive technologies and war, and gender in society). The four

workshops⁷ we organized all had two stages. Stage one consisted of small group discussions, with one moderator for each of the subgroups, with the aim of producing three future scenarios for each theme. In stage two, which was a plenary stage, the Delphi+ workshop participants introduced a selection of scenarios to the entire group. The four workshops were organized in three different European cities, with in total 29 participants (see Table 3 for an overview). As a method, these adjusted (and time-compressed) workshops approximate what Pan, et al. (1996) called a mini-Delphi, although we prefer to label these four workshops ‘Delphi+’ workshops.

Table 3: The EUMEPLAT Delphi+ workshops

Number	Date	Location	Participants
1	5 July 2022	Malmö, Sweden	Science fiction writers and foresight researchers, experts on science communication or philosophy of science, and specialists in digital marketing and applied predictive models (6 participants)
2	4 October 2022	Sofia, Bulgaria	A theatre artist, a Roma activist, a journalist, and a former representative of the Bulgarian government in the field of culture (7 participants)
3	13 April 2023	Rome, Italy	Expertise ranging from cultural relations, bioethics and AI to political science and the futures of electronic music (6 participants)
4	23 June 2023	Sofia, Bulgaria	A film maker and producer, a TikTok influencer, journalists, media studies professors, and chatbot and new media experts (10 participants)

The analysis rendered in this text focusses on one of the five pre-given themes, namely destructive technologies and war. In the Delphi+ workshops, each subgroup of participants was asked to each produce 3 future scenarios, which resulted in a total of 35 scenarios (see Table 4). In addition, the authors of this text themselves also wrote four scenario essays,⁸ to complement the Delphi+ workshop scenarios. All scenarios were written before the data analysis, as part of a EUMEPLAT future scenario writing project, which allowed to enrich and diversify the future scenarios, adding an auto-ethnographic dimension (Ellis, et al., 2010) to the data gathering process.

⁷ Before, we had a pilot Delphi+ workshop in Prague, on 5 May 2022. These data were not used.

⁸ One essay was written in collaboration with a co-author, who is also a member of the same organization as one of the authors of this text.

Table 4: Distribution of scenarios per workshop location

Delphi+ workshop location	Number of scenarios
Sofia 1	8
Malmö	9
Rome	10
Sofia 2	8
Essay	4

The analysis presented in this section used different types of data, namely (1) the scenario cards that the Delphi+ workshop participants filled out during their discussions (summarizing each scenario in keywords), (2) the transcriptions of the Delphi+ workshop participant discussions and (3) the essays generated. For the analysis, we mostly used the procedures of qualitative content analysis (see Saldaña, 2013, on coding), driven by the theoretical framework—outlined in the previous sections—that provided sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1969: 7) for the analysis. Additional sensitizing concepts came from assemblage theory (DeLanda, 2006), utopian/dystopian approaches (Featherstone, 2017; Booker, 1994; Haschak, 1994) and in particular from narratological approaches, with its stress on actor roles (Propp, 1968). The relationship between theory and analysis was structured through a retroductive approach (Glynos and Howarth, 2007), which allowed for iterations between theory and analysis.

4.2. Analysing the future scenarios: A first overview

As a starting point, we performed a quantitative content analysis on the 39 scenarios, identifying the types of conflict they are referring to. Here we see a fairly equal distribution, when we aggregate armed and grey zone conflict. The other half of the scenarios deal with democratic conflict (see Table 5).

Table 5: Frequency of types of conflict

Type	Frequency (N=39)
Armed conflict	10
Grey zone conflict	11
Democratic conflict	18

Inspired by the utopian/dystopian literature, we also coded the 39 scenarios for their more positive and negative load. Even though our qualitative analysis will allow us to unpack the complexities of these dimensions more (as we will, for instance, see a difference between negative and dystopian scenarios), we still can see a strong presence of negative scenarios. Here, it is important to remark that—although the discussion topic was ‘destructive technologies and war’—the Delphi+ workshop participants and essay-writers were never led into focussing on the more negative aspects. Still, they clearly prevailed.

Secondly, as Table 6 also shows, the neutral scenarios were rare. It was remarkable—during all Delphi+ workshop in their entirety—how participants and authors strongly relied on positive/negative, optimist/pessimist and utopian/dystopian binary oppositions to produce

scenarios. This is also reflected in the absence of a middle ground, or more neutral scenarios.

Table 6: Frequency of types of conflict

Type	Frequency (N=39)
Negative	28
Neutral	1
Positive	10

4.3. How to think the future of destructive technologies?

Also our qualitative analysis of the future scenarios demonstrated the importance of these positive/negative, optimist/pessimist and utopian/dystopian binary oppositions, which connects to our discussion of antagonism/agonism in Section 2. They oppositions will be used to structure our analysis, thus producing two sections, where in the case of the fantasies of negativity section four types of scenarios are distinguished, with a number of actor-related variations. In the case of the signs of positivity and hope section, we identified two types of scenarios, again with a series of variations.

4.3.1. Fantasies of negativity

The first reoccurring dystopian scenario is the **power take-over**, where a particular field of the social is predicted to centralize power, at the expense of the remaining parts of society and the broad populace. Here we can find two variations, with the first focussing on the media corporations and technology assemblage. One scenario card here refers to “Master AI walking the streets”⁹ (Scenario card 4 — Sofia 1), a scenario which is described by S1_1¹⁰ as “some kind of radical ‘overtaking’ by the machinery and algorithms” (S1_1, Sofia 1 Delphi+ workshop). Another card from the same Delphi+ workshop mentions “Corporate platforms take over” (Scenario card 5 – Sofia 1). During the discussions, two Delphi+ workshop participants explain the latter scenario as follows, showing the entanglement of discursive and material dimensions:

“S1_2: I think the real question is how they will take over. And how □..□this □is going to□happen, is that they use their algorithms to basically change public opinion any way they like, so for example they can make people do what they like. □..□ The way I can imagine it, is that they can basically control elections with their algorithms and using this they can for example blackmail parties, they can achieve total control over parties, they can say: We can decide who wins and then they can use that as sort of a leverage, and basically, for example, they can ... I mean, that’s probably the way they will control, like controlling public opinion, because politics depends on public opinion. □..□

⁹ Spelling errors in the data were corrected. No other changes were implemented.

¹⁰ The participants’ names have been anonymized. The first part of the code refers to the location of the Delphi+ workshop, while the second part, after the underscore, is a unique number. The second part of the code of subgroup moderators is “Mod”.

Force the states to adopt favourable rules. We could also have some sort of, like maybe they make people so angry, they elect some types of fascists that remove democracy completely.

S1_3: I thought about this because ... like we are talking about the European Union and we're talking about Europe as democracy, but the control can lead to a totalitarian society" (S1_2 and S1_3, Sofia 1 Delphi+ workshop).

The other variation has a more military dimension, articulating the military and technology in one assemblage, which tends to be more material in its focus. One of the scenarios discussed at the Malmö Delphi+ workshop is entitled the "Robotization of IRL Conflict" (Scenario card 10 – Malmö), which refers to the development of autonomous weapon systems. As M_1 summarizes it: "the killer drones and automated killings is of course the thing in the pessimistic" scenario" (M_1, Malmö Delphi+ workshop). One of the Rome Delphi+ workshop scenario cards is even more dark, describing a scenario with "Robots taking lethal action against civilian population, suppressing protests" (Scenario card 18 – Rome). In an ironic intervention, M_2 (Delphi+ Malmö workshop) describes this type of scenario in the following terms:

"Also, let's not forget the wonderful things that could happen if we add automated control systems to all the really physically deadly weapons we have and, you know, 'cause like manning border fences, which seems to be a really popular thing right now ... I mean, that's much cheaper ... if you just get some robot turret that some company in Texas makes for you. Yeah, you know, guaranteed to only shoot at genuine intruders. What could possibly go wrong? Yeah, the robotization of physical conflict" (M_2, Delphi+ Malmö workshop).

The second reoccurring dystopian scenario focusses on the **intensification of armed conflict** (with some references to grey war conflicts that approximate armed conflict). Again, we can find a variation focussing on the media corporations and technology assemblage. One scenario card, for instance, starts with referring to the fragmentation of society by algorithms, but then adds that "A civil war can erupt" (Scenario card 6 – Sofia 1). During the discussion of this scenario, S1_2 explains this scenario as follows:

"Very dramatic. Algorithms fragment society, let's start with this, people develop diverging views of reality, people's view of reality start to diverge. You know the main issue here is that people are no longer able to act collectively because they cannot connect with each other. Yeah, all these different groups cannot come together, to do something together, right? So for example, they cannot come together behind let's say one party, they fragment in many different small fractions. ... Actually, this can lead to a civil war. People can actually start killing each. That is actually a realistic scenario. Ok, so civil war can erupt" (S1_2, Sofia 1 Delphi+ workshop).

Similarly, another scenario card mentions: "Platforms increase the spread of misinformation. Some echo chambers will lead to establishing militia" (Scenario card 17 – Malmö), where discursive (media) practices are seen to have strong material consequences. During this Delphi+ workshop, M_1 describes the scenario in the following terms: "Social media are creating echo chambers who are creating new militias in the US, which are ready for civil

war. “They are arming the citizens.” But he then adds: “Or maybe that’s too pessimistic. There will probably not be a civil war. I hope. I mean: I don’t know” (M_1, Malmö Delphi+ workshop). Another example is one of the Rome scenario cards, which states:

“Communication as a weapon. AI technologies as weapon/war instruments” (Scenario card 21 – Rome). A similar scenario is the “Mass use of psyops”¹¹ scenario (Scenario card 24 – Rome), which one of the participants of this Rome Delphi+ workshop, R_1, formulates this as follows:

“I mean, so this is about how information is for the mass use of psyops. So, this relates to war, cyber war. So information becomes subjected to the military strategy of the moment, the context of which information is increasingly militarized” (R_1, Rome Delphi+ workshop).

In discussing the role of the media corporations and technology assemblage, also the link between war and capitalism is emphasized, which again brings in a deeply material dimension. One example is scenario card 8 (Sofia 1), which mentions the following: “Super rich people interfering in the war (Elon Musk),” where one of participants of the Sofia 1 Delphi+ workshop, S1_4, says “imagining in the future having like a small conglomerate, like couple of people ...” (S1_4, Sofia 1 Delphi+ workshop). The clearest example, though, is the scenario card entitled “Entrepreneurship of the war” (Scenario card 35 — Sofia 2), whose discussion starts with S2_1 staying “Who controls the algorithm controls the battlefield” (S2_1, Sofia 2 Delphi+ Workshop). S2_3 then points out that “the developing designers, the big brains, big IT brains” will produce new technologies, and will not “share this knowledge”. Instead, “you are going to do a new algorithm which will be better than those before and someone is going to pay for this algorithm, and you will be here. You will become richer” (S2_3, Sofia 2 Delphi+ Workshop).

A second assemblage, similar to the actor-structure of the power take-over scenario, revolves around the military and technology assemblage, which brings us more to the material dimensions of antagonism, with, for instance, one of the essays having the following title “Technical progress opens for Weapons of Mass Destruction” (Essay D). Less strong in its formulation is the scenario card 23 (Rome) which placed more emphasis on “cyber war”, which will become “the direction; making war more effective; anything is possible. No WW3; conflicts more fragmented.” During the summarizing phase at the Rome Delphi+ workshop, one of the subgroup moderators, R_Mod, describes this scenario as follows:

“there's not going to be something like Terminators, super smart drones and what not. But the use of media, the development of media and data would be higher ... That's the technological direction. They'd be used as weapons. Also in terms of economic speculation and economic attacks ... I know where your power centrals are. I'm going to destroy the power plant” (R_Mod, Rome Delphi+ workshop).

¹¹ PSYOPS refers to psychological operations. Similar to propaganda, the methods of PSYOPS place more emphasis on the psychological dimensions.

A third negative scenario, which is less dystopian, still focusses on **conflict intensification**, but this scenario approaches conflict more as a **democratic conflict**, which some connections with (less intense versions of) grey zone conflict. Again, we can find the two main assemblages, articulated in particular variations. First, there is the role of the media corporations and technology assemblage, where again many of the discursive elements of platforms strengthening antagonistic conflict (see Section 2 of this text) were mentioned. The role of this assemblage in (democratic) conflict intensification is illustrated by scenario card 15 (Malmö) which states that “algorithm[s] causing hypes, based on fake news; leaving undesirable/ unverified results.” Another scenario card has a similar future perspective, mentioning “Culture wars caused by the algorithms” (Scenario card 25 — Rome). Here, we can also find links to grey zone conflict, with a scenario described as “Propaganda will be stronger (through digital media),” with “Cyber war intensification” as title (Scenario card 1 — Sofia 1). During the Rome Delphi+ workshop summarizing phase, one of the participants, R_1, summarizes a similar scenario, starting from “A confrontation between China on one side .. and the US-led Western group on the other side,” but then also arguing that each ‘block’ will be dominated by a “hegemonic power”:

The “balkanization of the Internet also means that we'll have increasingly regionalized forms of Internet information. They will be increasingly regionalized, again controlled by the hegemonic power within those spheres of influence. In this scenario, the only real form of resistance that we could imagine was really kind of dropping out, stopping the use of cell phones, using the Internet as less as possible” (R_1, Rome Delphi+ Workshop).

Secondly, the military and technology assemblage again features in a second variation. One example here is scenario card 24 (Rome), which states that “Information becomes subjected to military strategy of the moment. The militarization of information, the deployment of deep fakes at the service of the military strategy.” Here, even though armed conflict is not the focus, we can find a concern with the increased grip of the military over the discursive-material world of communication. This is captured by R_2, during the Rome Delphi+ workshop, when he refers to:

“The deployment of communication technologies to influence both kinds ... Your domestic population as well as the enemy population; what some have called 5th generation warfare, so the mass use of psychological manipulation techniques, through both the traditional media and—but especially—the Internet .. Information becomes completely subordinated to the military strategy of the moment” (R_2, Rome Delphi+ workshop).

The fourth and last negative scenario moves away from conflict, and focusses more on the **harm inflicted on the environment and society**. Actors, in this scenario, are less outspokenly present, as the emphasis is more on processes and the harmful consequences of human activity (in general). Still, one variation is centred around the capitalist assemblage, for instance, when it concerns the material impact of technology on the labour market, as is illustrated by essay entitled “AI Replaces Jobs” (Essay C). Also more criminal profit-seeking activities are included here, with scenario card 15 (Malmö) illustrating this: “Technology being used by criminal groups to scam or rob people.”

But the main victim of the harm discussed in these scenarios is the environment, with the cause sometimes connected with capitalist activity, and sometimes broadened to human activity in general, driven by a “greater realization of what we thought was the immaterial non-place of the internet, which turns out to be a fairly material place indeed” (M_2, Malmö Delphi+ workshop). An illustration of the link between environmental damage and capitalism can be found in the scenario card 14 (Malmö) which talks about “Space mining. E-waste dumping into Global south. Another chance for colonialism or dumping it into the space.” The same participant, M_2, explains the first part of the card as follows: “the new extractivism will be precisely aimed at that, □.□all those □.□places where people who don't have a lot of money” (M_2, Malmö Delphi+ workshop). M_3, in the same group, adds: “Maybe they will need to decide if they want to give another chance to colonialists in our own Earth or go into space. I'm being very science fiction here” (M_3, Malmö Delphi+ workshop).

A more general example, called the “Matrix scenario” (referring to the film tetralogy), talks about “Mind separated from body, you don't care about trees, rivers, pollution” (Scenario card 2 — Sofia 1). S1_1 explains this scenario, which is a metaphor for the detachment from environmental damage through the luxuries of everyday life, more in detail:

“This is the Matrix scenario, when you think you're living in a different environment but your body is just put in a tank with fluids and you don't care if the environment is polluted or not. Because you are living in the other environment and your other environment could be perfect, so you don't care about the planet, you don't care about the trees or pollution or whatever, because you basically function in another environment. □.□In□this scenario that we stopped caring about the environmental impact just because we're completely replaced” (S1_1, Sofia 1 Delphi+ workshop).

4.3.2. Signs of positivity and hope

In the onslaught of negativity, there are nevertheless a number of scenarios that are more positive and hopeful, emphasizing the agonizing role of technology. Not surprisingly, these scenarios are mostly related to democratic conflict, although some of them shift into grey zone conflict scenarios. Here, the main cluster is centred around the **role of supranational organizations**, with the European Union being allocated a prominent role, with often a strong emphasis on the material dimensions of regulation. One illustration can be found in the Malmö Delphi+ workshop, where the following dialogue initiated one of these discussions about the role of supranational organizations:

“M_Mod (subgroup moderator): Shall we go on to the more optimistic? Destructive tech. We don't have an optimistic view of destructive tech.
M_1: That must have something to do with regulation and revitalizing UN and EU stock value” (M_Mod and M_1, Malmö Delphi+ workshop).

A more specific example of this type of scenario is captured on scenario card 30 (Sofia 2), which says “European institutions will take the leadership, the EU government will control

and provide safe digital space.” Another example, focussed more on the European defence capacity is scenario card 26 (Rome), which states: The “European defence system for data becomes less reliant on IT infrastructure.” A more creative example is the scenario entitled “EU as a reservation”, which describes the “let's make EU offline” idea, a scenario which is said to produce the “hippies of the 21th century”, who will still be “protected by electronics” (Scenario card 32, Sofia 2). S1_5 explains this scenario as follows:

“Why don't we make Europe a reserve area, like the Indians sic in United States and we'll solve all the problems with technology .. Just go farming. Just go organic farming. So a US reservation. Yeah, like just like the reserve areas, let's make Europe ... Go organic, free ... Or who wants to be online: Go to China, go to the United States” (S1_5, Sofia 1 Delphi+ workshop).

Related to the focus on supranational organizations we also find the outline of a more cosmopolitan future, as is illustrated by the scenario entitled “United world”, which imagines that “All countries play equal role into the debate to prevent cyberwar” (Scenario card 33, Sofia 2). The development of this scenario starts from S2_2's words, when he argues not to be too restrictive by only focussing on Europe, and says: “Europe has to be equal part of the world.” He adds that “actually every state has to be kind of equal parts” (S2_2, Sofia 2 Delphi+ workshop). One of the subgroup moderators, S2_Mod, at the end of this discussion summarizes the scenario as follows: “This is United Countries. All the countries work together to prevent cyber war. All countries will work together” (S2_Mod, Sofia 2 Delphi+ workshop).

While in general the role of Europe is articulated with positivity, and there are no negative scenarios that give a central role to Europe (or the European Union), during some of the scenario development discussions, Europe is still framed from a more negative perspective (without this making it to the scenario cards). One of these rare examples is formulated by R_1, who adds the following to a scenario:

“In this scenario, we also imagine that Europe, the European Union, could play a particularly negative role because it's one of the few supernatural institutions capable of harmonizing social control across nation states. It could play a negative role in terms of how these policies are harmonized across nation states. And so the European Union would play a negative role in this scenario in terms of, you know, overseeing kind of the super-state control of information” (R_1, Rome Delphi+ workshop).

The second cluster focusses less on institutions—even though they still feature in these scenarios—but more on **cultural change**, with its emphasis on the more discursive components of agonization. The clearest example is the scenario entitled the “I Robot situation”, referring to Alex Proyas's film from 2004. This scenario imagines a “Mutual understanding between machines and humans,” allocating a central role to “Utopian pacifists” (scenario card 3 – Sofia 1). Another scenario, entitled “Cyber-defence for avoid destructive technologies” also highlights this cultural change process, by adding “If you want to have to work on prevention we will work on mentality, to improve it” to the scenario card (Scenario card 29 — Sofia 2). When discussing this scenario, the participants argue this

change in mentality is needed to counter jingoistic tendencies, as is illustrated with S1_6's words:

“If we would like to have prevention, it should start from the □..□awareness □of ...□ values and this comes with the showing of the consequences of what a war can do. So people who are in cyberspace are going to □need to see□the reality of killing because this is one of the effects. Cyber war is just like every war with the same mentality that you, you have to kill. To destroy. Destroy” (S1_6, Sofia 1 Delphi+ workshop).

Some of these scenarios are more specific (as the cyber-defence example already illustrates), with, for instance, a focus on increased platform accountability (Essay A) or increased data and ecological sustainability (Scenario card 27—Rome). An example of the latter can be found in the Malmö Delphi+ workshop, when M_2 says:

“In 20 years I think we could be in a place where I see people are quite serious about saying, OK, well, this app is wonderful, but how much processing power does it actually take, how many flops, how many joules, how many miles of fiber, in sense of the infrastructure all being made visible rather than just rhetorically. So pulling back as a result of realization of destruction before it's complete” (M_2, Malmö Delphi+ Workshop).

5. Conclusion

The relationship between conflict and communication platforms is highly complex and simultaneously intense, even though care needs to be taken to avoid too media-deterministic positions. Partially, this complexity is caused by the complexities that characterize each of the two elements, with, for instance, conflict's fluid borders between violence and non-violence and its role in democratic societies, and the diversity of communication platforms and communicative practices. But also the interactions between conflict and communication platforms add to this complexity, as, for instance, communication platforms can become activated to either enhance or reduce conflict. This brings us to discussions about the non-neutral neutrality of communication technologies, where these technologies can be deployed in an almost endless set of variations, and where the context of that deployment plays a significant role. At the same time, communication technologies are also not neutral, as they have particular characteristics—or affordances (Norman, 1988)—that privilege and facilitate particular deployments. We can make a similar argument for the non-neutral neutrality of conflict, where conflict can be deployed in a wide variety of ways, with again context playing a particularizing role. At the same time, the deployment of conflict often triggers particular mechanisms that can be hard to control, where the dynamics of conflict produces the risk of escalation, with the activation of violent practices always looming beyond the horizon.

This complexity, but also these particularities, are made visible in the analysis of the future scenarios, where the future is constructed by the Delphi+ workshop participants and essay-writers through the benevolence/malevolence dichotomy. The undesirability of an escalation into violence is very present, whether this is a direct escalation of conflict into armed conflict, the risks brought about by grey zone conflict (with its less intense forms of violence), the risks produced by the intensification of democratic conflict (which can then slip into violence) or the risks produced by humans harming themselves and their environment. It may not be surprising that in a scenario-building workshop on 'destructive technologies' the signifiers of destruction and violence gain a strong presence, but these anxiety-triggering scenarios dominated in particular the Delphi+ workshops, quantitatively and qualitatively, pushing the more desirable and benevolent scenarios to the background.

Similarly important is that in many of these scenarios of malevolence, the villains—to use a concept from our narratological framework—are limited in number, with two assemblages featuring prominently: (1) The media corporations and technology assemblage and (2) the military and technology assemblage, which are both associated with risk and distrust. They feature prominently, as actors, in these fantasies of negativity, while they are more absent in the benevolent scenarios. In other words, the Delphi+ workshop participants and essay-writers problematize these assemblages, and do not expect them to play a positive role. Moreover, even though the Delphi+ participants and essay-writers express awareness of the entangled nature of both assemblages—acknowledging the presence of material and discursive components in these two assemblages—they do tend to (over)emphasize the discursive component of the media corporations and technology assemblage and the material component of the military and technology assemblage, which reduces their

complexity and might even lead to an underestimation of their potentially problematic nature.

Interestingly, the actors are that feature in the positive scenarios are the supranational organizations, and in particular the European Union, whose interventions are seen as necessary to protect the citizenry against the media corporations and technology assemblage and the military and technology assemblage. Even though it is important to emphasize that in the more detailed Delphi+ workshop discussions, and in some of the other four future scenario analyses (see, for instance, the future scenario analysis on surveillance and resistance), Europe and the European Union *are* problematized, the positive articulation of Europe in this context remains remarkable. One could suggest that when it comes to the protection of the citizenry from more extreme problems (such as violence), the more critical perspectives towards Europe shift to the background.

Still, not all scenarios are connected to particular actors. Here, we do see a balance, between one type of scenario that sees human activity as detrimental (in particular, as mentioned before, towards the environment), while another type of scenario locates the possibility of the creation of a more just and fairer world with mechanisms related to cultural change, as an overarching principle. Changes to, for instance, the economic structures are less outspoken in these more positive scenarios, as the discursive-ideological-cultural change seems to take precedence over the implementation of changes to the material-economic structures. But simultaneously, these material-economic structures are not ignored, as the capitalist assemblage does feature in the negative scenarios, in intersection with the media and military logics and practices, thus also becoming framed as problematic. The absence of material-economic structures in the more positive scenarios seems to indicate that the Delphi+ workshop participants and essay-writers believe that first the mindsets need to change, before economic reform can even be considered.

Finally, when we return to the diversity of roles that communication platforms can play in enhancing or limiting conflict, it is remarkable to see how the negative future scenarios connect to all roles discussed in this section (see Table 1 and 2), with only the militarization of civil/military technologies (and spying) being granted less prominence by the Delphi+ workshop participants and the essay-writers. In contrast, the roles that communication platforms can play in the agonization of conflict are less diverse and elaborated. This is partially caused by the smaller number of positive scenarios, but the positive scenarios are at the same time vaguer, and less detailed in elaborating more concrete and practical mechanisms to strengthen agonistic cultures (and, in other words, peace). Here, the imagination of the Delphi+ workshop participants and the essay-writers partially fails them, which suggests that there is a need to render these mechanisms more known and visible, in order to contribute to the avoidance of the malevolent scenarios, and to the translation of the benevolent scenarios into the world of the future.

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