

Mob Violence, Mobile Phones Private Messaging and the Future of Peacekeeping

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Peer-to-peer mobile communications are a blind spot for peacekeeping operations in conflict-prone areas. Increased access to cheap mobile phones has allowed misinformation to spread quickly via direct messaging platforms. People are prone to believe private messages from their peers that contain sensational rumors. The more widely these messages spread, however, the greater their risk of inciting violence. Without a strategy to monitor inflammatory rumors on peer-to-peer digital platforms, future peacekeepers will be hampered in their ability to prevent conflict and protect civilians. To address this challenge, the UN should expand the responsibilities of locals acting as community liaison assistants (CLAs) to include gathering information from digital peer-to-peer networks. By expanding this role, rumors on digital platforms will be identified and shared with peacekeepers by CLAs before messages incite violence.

Mobile Technology and the Future of Peacekeeping

Since the inception of UN peacekeeping operations, new threats from non-state actors have prompted a gradual shift towards more expansive and robust mandates. Peacekeepers work to facilitate a fair political process, organize elections, protect civilians, promote human rights, restore rule of law, and disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate former combatants after conflicts.

In the past several years, violence connected to mobile phone-based rumors has risen dramatically. Several factors make mobile communications a potent tool for fostering ethnic violence and unrest: (1) frequency and speed of mobile communications, (2) mass forwarding and the power of direct messaging, (3) obscured authorship, and (4) social cohesiveness on peer-to-peer platforms.

- *Frequency and speed of mobile communications.* Cheaper and more capable mobile communications technology allows individuals to share information rapidly, increasing the ease with which groups can mobilize populations against a chosen target.
- *Mass forwarding and the power of direct messaging.* The ability to easily mass forward messages combined with peer-to-peer networks increases the perceived believability of rumors. Psychological research has shown that individuals are more likely to trust those who

are like them or close to them. Therefore, forwarded messages from a family member, close friend, or community member will evoke more of a response than one from a stranger.

- *Obscured authorship.* Direct messages make the forwarder of mass messages seem to be the original author, increasing the believability of messages because readers connect the message with someone they know or who is similar to them.
- *Social cohesion and peer-to-peer platforms.* Messaging platforms reinforce relationships within existing social groups and contribute to ethno-nationalism and intolerance.

Peacekeeping in the Age of Peer-to-Peer Networks: Walking the Digital Block

Increased access to mobile phones and the acceleration of rumor dynamics on peer-to-peer communication networks threatens the ability of peacekeepers to maintain peace and stability. With local citizens moving discourse to digital platforms rather than traditional, more easily monitored media, peacekeeping forces will have a harder time understanding the dynamic social environment in which they operate. As rumors spread at new speeds and rapidly incite mob violence, peacekeeping forces will need to respond more rapidly in the physical realm.

To prevent and counter violence incited by rumors on peer-to-peer messaging platforms, future peacekeeping forces will need to not only monitor developments on the ground where they serve, but will need to walk the “digital block” as well. Better monitoring of inflammatory rumors spread online will allow peacekeepers to respond more effectively to mob violence in real time.

The United Nations should build on its community liaison assistants (CLAs) initiative to address the threat posed by rumors on peer-to-peer networks. The role of the community liaison assistant (CLA) was created in 2010 during the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo as a tool to link peacekeepers to communities and increase situational awareness. Individuals from the local community take on the role of CLA to bridge the divide between the community and the mission. They provide UN personnel with information regarding the situational context and build relationships between locals and the foreigners who serve in peacekeeping bases.

The CLA program should be expanded to the digital peer-to-peer realm. Digital CLAs monitoring for rumors on peer-to-peer networks have two significant benefits:

- *Operating in the digital domain.* Regular CLAs can improve the ability of a peacekeeping mission to identify and respond to the needs of the local population; however, their close work with UN personnel can alienate them from their communities and key social networks.

Digital CLAs will be responsible for reporting rumors or information of interest to peacekeepers found on peer-to-peer networks. As result, they do not need to have extensive physical contact with peacekeepers. This increased anonymity allows digital

CLAs to maintain both their status and their connections within their communities both in the physical and digital worlds.

- *Maintaining digital privacy.* Although the platforms where rumors are spread are closed to outsiders or peacekeeping forces, digital CLA monitoring of these networks will lessen concerns about invasion of privacy. Digital CLAs are likely already members of these peer-to-peer networks, and the rumors they report are being widely shared within these digital communities. As such, these rumors and messages are not truly private. In contrast to technology-based surveillance, UN forces will not collect and analyze every message transmitted on peer-to-peer networks, raising concerns about state sovereignty and citizens' privacy. Digital CLAs will only report rumors and messages which could lead to violence that are already being widely disseminated in the digital streets of their communities.

Conclusion

The global rise in mobile phone technology is accelerating the spread of rumors on peer-to-peer messaging platforms that will increase instances of rumor-driven violence. This phenomenon will pose a special challenge to peacekeeping forces as it undermines UN efforts to respond quickly to violence and improve social cohesion. Technological solutions to the challenge of peer-to-peer networks are politically and economically problematic because of concerns for state sovereignty, digital privacy, and the unwillingness of members states to share surveillance technology.

By expanding the purview of community liaison assistants to include digital communications, peacekeepers can better monitor the rumors and messages flowing through the digital streets of communities, while limiting concerns about sovereignty and privacy. Given the growing social and economic importance of digital communication and peer-to-peer networks, UN peacekeeping forces will need the cooperation of local citizens to help the “walk the digital blocks” of their communities.