The Syrian data glut: Rethinking the role of information in conflict

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Introduction

Central to the longevity of the free flow of information doctrine is the idea that greater access to information will facilitate improved international cooperation, decreasing the likelihood of conflict in the international system.¹ This commentary² challenges the pervasive narrative of ‘information as peace inducing’. Political actors are employing big data tools to better understand conflicts, but not necessarily to end them. Building on an historical record of ways in which information freedom is selectively used to justify geo-strategic policy, we explore the relationship between information and conflict through the lens of the Syrian civil war, ‘the most well documented conflict in history’ (Balian, 2014). Since 2011, the Syrian conflict has been mapped by various international actors, including governments and NGOs, facilitating real-time tracking of violence, opposition and government forces, as well as foreign fighters and weaponry. Yet, despite this avalanche of data, the Syrian conflict continues today, leaving nearly half of the Syrian population displaced and more than 200,000 dead. Specifically, we argue that the conditions required for information to reduce the likelihood for violence are at fundamental odds with the conditions of war. Thus, while greater access to accurate information can, theoretically, reduce the likelihood of conflict breaking out, adding an abundance of data...
to an ongoing conflict is ineffectual at best, and, in the case of Syria, potentially dangerous. There is a need for empirical research to properly conceptualize the relationship between access to information and international conflict, and to challenge the underlying logic behind both the value of freedom of information policies and enhanced information gathering in conflict zones.

**Information and conflict**

Information – ‘facts provided or learned about something or someone’ – is a broad term used here to refer to the data upon which reports, news stories, maps, resolutions and official communications form surrounding a particular series of events (Oxford English Dictionary, 2015). The idea that more information will bring about greater peace is a myth firmly embedded in Western political thought. It is also at the foundation of the modern international system. The first two intergovernmental organizations, the International Telegraph Union and General Postal Union, were established in the mid-19th century in order to better coordinate international communication flows. Their success laid the groundwork for greater international cooperation and shared governance. For example, the fifth Universal Postal Congress, held in Washington DC in 1897 declared:

> The Postal Union … is ultimately to bring all the nations of the world into a regular and harmonious cooperation in the promotion of the highest interests of each and all. Such a Union established, so far, the peace of the world, and must prove a powerful antidote, in its way, in preventing the periodic outbreak of war with its disturbances and destructions. (p. 127)

These institutions, and their effective management of global communication flows, were among the first tangible embodiments of Kant’s (2003[1795]) theory of perpetual peace.

At the turn of the 20th century, there was great enthusiasm surrounding the possibility that new media technologies could foster greater mutual understanding across nations. For example, wireless telegraphy mastermind Guglielmo Marconi (1924) declared: ‘communication between peoples widely separated in space and thought is undoubtedly the greatest weapon against the evils of misunderstanding and jealousy.’ The more connected the world is, the more difficult it is to engage in conflict, or so the thinking goes. Nearly a century later, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (2010) echoed this sentiment, proposing a global right to connect to the world wide web: ‘Information freedom supports the peace and security that provides a foundation for global progress. Historically, asymmetrical access to information is one of the leading causes of interstate conflict.’ While critical political economy scholars of international communication question the economic motives behind arguments for ‘free’ information flows (see Hills, 2007; Schiller, 2007), the notion remains embedded in the foundational norms guiding information policies, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and others. The idea of *information as peace inducing* is pervasive, institutionalized, and integral to the broader freedom of expression meta-narrative at the core of modern norms guiding the regulation of information.
Is there truth to such proclamations? What evidence indicates that a lack of access to information actually causes conflict? How important are misperceptions in contributing to competition and conflict? Does information’s value vary across the stages of conflict, and do digital crisis mapping or citizen journalism now offer scope to generate credible information flows between warring groups even in the midst of conflict?

From a theoretical perspective, there are at least three ways in which greater access to information can help to resolve international conflicts. First, accurate and timely information should reduce misunderstanding, decreasing the likelihood that states will mistakenly react to non-aggressive measures. This clarifying effect should reduce the likelihood of a ‘security dilemma’, whereby a state overreacts to defensive posturing due to a lack of knowledge regarding an adversary’s intentions. Second, shared information can enhance trust among international partners. Transparency measures, for example, are often used in conjunction with arms control treaties in order to ensure that all parties bound by agreement actually follow through with their promises. Information verifying compliance can build trust among states and lay the foundation for reduced geopolitical competition. Third, greater access to information may expose the scale and brutality of a violent conflict, sparking greater international pressure to curtail the violence or to intervene to prevent further atrocities.

Each of these mechanisms are, of course, theoretical. Realists may argue that states (and their leaders) do not go to war simply due to misunderstandings. Instead, there are typically incentives to fight, including the possibility of gaining access to valuable resources, or weakening threats to one’s legitimacy. This perspective does not discount the mechanisms outlined above, as international pressure or enhanced trust may shift the incentives surrounding a decision to go to (or end) war. But, if we think of conflict in terms of incentive structures, the question then becomes: how does enhanced access to accurate and/or strategically valuable information change the existing incentives in a conflict zone? We explore this question, and its relevance to the broader topic of information and conflict, through the lens of the ongoing Syrian civil war.

**Syria**

The ongoing conflict in Syria is by all accounts the most digitally documented war in history (Lynch et al., 2014). Ubiquitous access to mobile information communication technologies and high levels of e-literacy among Syrian citizens and fighters resulted in unprecedented access to events on the ground, oftentimes in close to real-time.

The Syrian data glut is to a large extent driven by protagonists keen to expose the scale of their own brutality, through hostage videos, photographs of the dead or maimed, and rhetorical statements glorifying such violence. The Assad regime also documents the bodies of those it captures and tortures, with 10,000 digital photographs being leaked to US investigators in 2014 (Entous and Nissenbaum, 2014). Ordinary Syrians are caught in a game of censorship and surveillance; information is a matter of mistrust and risk. In 2011, the Syrian government relaxed censorship so as to surveille the population in order to gain military advantage. Opposition groups know they are monitored but must still have a media presence to promote, recruit, fundraise and mobilize. In short, the procurement and publication of information is inseparable from the strategies and tactics of
those pursuing interests within the conflict. It is a matter of managing perceptions of hope and glory, injustice and pain.

Crucial to this access is the fact that Syrians rely on many of the same, familiar social media portals Americans and Europeans are familiar with: Youtube, Facebook and Twitter in particular (Della Ratta, 2014). By mining or tracking such data, organizations are mapping the conflict, providing routine updates on the status of armed opposition and government forces, humanitarian conditions, and the state of government and opposition control throughout the country. The level of detail provided is extraordinary often able to analyze conditions block by block in a given city.

There are numerous examples of Syrian conflict mapping that are publicly accessible to anyone connected to the world wide web (we assume governments involved or interested in the conflict have even more sophisticated mapping and monitoring technologies). Among the most well-known mapping projects is the Syria Needs Analysis Project (SNAP), which draws from a wide variety of sources, including humanitarian organizations, the Syrian government, opposition groups, media and key informants to produce in-depth maps of the conflict. SNAP not only maps the conflict through an aggregation of open source data and confidential informants, but also engages in scenario planning, outlining likely consequences of particular changes to conflict dynamics (international intervention or instability in a neighboring country, for instance). SNAP’s mapping is used by news organizations around the world, including the BBC, The New York Times and Reuters, in their reporting on the Syrian civil war (for example, see BBC, 2014).

Another example is the Carter Center’s Syrian Conflict Mapping Project which tracks: (a) the presence and growth of opposition groups throughout the country; (b) the hierarchies within armed opposition groups at local, regional and national levels; and (c) the evolution of pro-government forces. According to partner Palantir Technologies (2014), ‘The result is a living archive of active militant groups, what they are doing and where they are operating, and how they relate to other armed groups.’ In just over two years of data collection, the project has tracked approximately 5,600 armed group and military council formations, representing approximately 100,000 fighters. According to project lead Chris MacNaboe (2014):

We now have a detailed database of all known battalion formations and can figure out the structure of the opposition as it exists. By piecing together the allegiances and connections between various groups, we get a better picture of what grievances they have, what they want, and what is needed for peaceful resolution.

The US State Department and the United Nations, among others, utilize the Carter Center’s database to improve their understanding of the on-the-ground conditions within Syria.

There are, of course, others. A March 2014 study of Aleppo, Syria, conducted by Caerus, combined ‘geo-located, monthly, citywide survey of residents, with participant observations of conflict across the city pinpointing the locations of military checkpoints’, to identify ‘neighborhoods where armed groups, civil society organizations and aid agencies are working’ and map indicators for ‘freedom of movement and food security’ all in order to help understand the humanitarian crisis (Caerus, 2014).
Collectively, conflict mapping has made clear the devastation Syrians have experienced over the course of three years of civil war. In 2011, there were approximately 21 million people living in Syria. Today, 3 million Syrians live as refugees in neighboring countries, while another 6.4 million are internally displaced, oftentimes living in transient conditions and communities with no hope for long-term safety. In addition, 10.8 million Syrians – more than half of its remaining population – are in need of substantial humanitarian assistance. Over 150,000 have died due to the civil war.

Clearly, all of this mapping has not resulted in a de-escalation of violence in Syria, nor moved groups closer to a negotiated settlement. Not only does conflict continue, but the summer of 2014 – the third year of the conflict – saw substantial escalations as the UN and Arab League’s representative for Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, resigned, and political negotiations were suspended. This is in large part because each of the warring parties – namely, the government, opposition, extremist and Kurdish forces – are at ideological odds and see no benefit in a negotiated solution. Worse, according to Max Fisher (2014), the maps ‘show the intractability of the Syrian conflict: no one side is anywhere close to a military victory’.

How do we reconcile the fact that there is tremendous access to information about the Syrian conflict (and Syrians have tremendous access to information about international support or interest in intervention) and continued conflict escalation? As transparency and information gluts becomes more and more a norm, even in conflict zones, the types of challenges the Syrian war presents are only likely to become more common, and more complex.

Analysis: Not all information is equal

Two of the three explanations how information can reduce violence in the international system – that accurate, real-information decreases misunderstandings and that information verifying compliance builds trust between actors – are only relevant outside periods of sustained conflict. This is to say, while these theories may have relevance before and after a conflict, during a conflict, when warring parties have shown little interest in a cessation of violence based upon mutually agreeable negotiated terms, they simply do not apply. As the Syrian case shows, some conflicts are not mistakes; they are intentional, planned and strategic attempts to gain power or punish others for perceived historical injustices.

For information to provide a clarifying effect in times of conflict, there must be a free flow of information between those on opposing sides, as well as an interest in listening to what the other side has to say. Actors in Syria record and distribute information for their particular purposes. They wish to assign blame and, through images and rhetoric, present a distribution of pain and suffering that warrants their actions. Citizens and activists seeking to influence public opinion first uploaded images of protests, then of shelling, before beginning to post interviews with victims. Initial postings lacked any sectarian character, but as videos emerged of Syrian soldiers with Alawite accents torturing activists, ethnic and religious identity became an important dimension. In turn, information framed through a sectarian lens brought into Syria foreign fighters who already identified with those ethnic and religious markers.
This fragmentation results in a proliferation of narratives and no shared understanding of what is happening or what that means. Wolfsfeld (2004) argues that the existence of news media consumed by opposing groups in a conflict can produce at least a shared basis for understanding ongoing events. Resolution after decades of conflict in Northern Ireland was greatly assisted, he argues, because audiences could watch national television news whose staff and reporting crossed sectarian lines. In Syria, there is no credible, independent non- or cross-sectarian news media. Without shared attention around a singular reporting of events there are no grounds to support dialogue. Either information is only accessed by one community, or the same information is framed differently by the particular news media consumed by each community.

Further, though information could provide clarification in the lead-up or aftermath to a conflict, while the conflict is ongoing, news flows privilege violence; the visual, visceral immediacy of a bombing aftermath and the emotional pull of protagonists and victims trumps coverage of little reconciliations and islands of cooperation. News of violence may be timely and accurate but it generates a particular narrative, and oftentimes hardens ideological divides. The potent role that news media can play in furthering tensions, especially in times of conflict, is discussed in great detail in the peace journalism literature, arguing that journalists should shift their approach to covering conflict-oriented news (see, for example, Galtung and Fischer, 2013; Lacasse and Forster, 2012; Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005; Ottosen, 2010; Ozohu-Suleiman, 2014; Powers and el-Nawawy, 2009).

The third rationale suggesting greater access to information can reduce conflict – that greater access to information exposes the scale and brutality of a violent conflict, sparking greater international pressure to curtail the violence or to intervene to prevent further atrocities – is the most directly relevant to the case of Syria’s ongoing, seemingly intractable civil war. Perceptions of the conflict shape international opinion that could lead to increased humanitarian and diplomatic assistance. However, in the long term, the Syrian conflict is sustained by disagreement between regional and international powers about the optimal outcome for the country and the means to get there. States looking on from the outside have their own international broadcasters who will frame the conflict a certain way for those states’ target audiences. Stories of the Syrian conflict reaching Russian publics and policymakers are very different from the news stories French or American audiences are accessing. Different news outlets employ journalists with varying literacy in the religious dimensions of Syrian society and employ different precedents to frame the current crisis. Information cannot be peace inducing when it sustains competing narratives underpinning strategic interests. For information to result in international pressure to end the conflict, the international community, as it is reflected through transnational news networks, must come to a consensus on the scope of the problem, who is responsible for the violence, and a clear path to restoring peace.

Put another way, not all information is created equal. There are ranges of accuracy, context and validity that are often overlooked in the final presentation of information, be it in the form of a conflict map or a news report. Worse, the abundance of information available today decreases the likelihood of sustained quality control and scrutiny, as experts turn to algorithms and automated systems to try and manage these obese data – data often too ‘fat’ and overflowing to be of use.
Conclusion

Given the lack of prospects for a shared mainstream media and the lack of protection for moderates attacked on social media (sometimes also targeted offline), how can dialogue within and outside Syria be founded? How can information play a role in finding points of commonality of interest or understanding? What little is known about the news-consumption habits of Syrians fleeing conflict zones indicates heavy reliance on sources spouting hatred and hyper-politicized propaganda (Ozil, 2014).

One of the bright spots to emerge from the conflict is that local services and NGOs are holding situations together for people on the ground. However, this is rarely covered by local or international journalists; temporary cease-fires are less dramatic and newsworthy than large bombs. Yet positive news may make international diplomats and donors more likely to feel a productive engagement is possible. Moreover, once a settlement is reached, the mapping methods could be used to chart the healing process — to identify where trade and markets are functioning, where infrastructure is stable. Such peace asset mapping research could closely monitor, track and document the various variables contributing to peaceful settlements in the Syrian conflict, including the negotiation of ceasefires and humanitarian access. This research could be especially helpful in developing models indicating under what conditions productive, peaceful negotiations can result in decreased violence and, possibly, conflict resolution. This research is of obvious interest not only to policy makers working towards conflict resolution and stabilization where there are no straightforward political solutions, but also to academics eager to utilize growing access to data from conflict zones for productive, peaceful purposes.

The purpose of this commentary is not merely to point to weaknesses in existing theories of information and international conflict. Rather, this analysis suggests that there is a need for greater research and critical thinking regarding the role of information in (a) ongoing conflicts when (b) media environments are saturated, (c) there is little to no desire to end the conflict on negotiated terms, and (d) no international consensus exists regarding the proper path forward. These conditions help to clarify the Syrian case, but also exist elsewhere, and help to explain the perseverance of violence in places like the Congo, Somalia and Iraq.

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Notes

1. We are, of course, not the first to challenge this narrative. For example, see Gilboa (2002); Morozov (2011); Mosco (2009); Nordenstreng and Schiller (1979); Roselle (2011); and Winseck and Pike (2008).

2. As a commentary, we aim to provoke additional thought on some of the central questions in the fields of media and conflict, and international communication more broadly. While we situate this provocation within established literatures, there are many perspectives on the relationship between media and conflict that are not discussed in here. For example, see Price (2002).
References

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