

# Social Media App TikTok the New Military Tool for Military Defence and Cooperation?

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In today's age of social media and Generation Z (Gen Z) "taking over" the world, there is a new modern approach to military defence. Ordinary citizens record military activities on their phones and post videos on social media. The social media app TikTok, which is often associated with dance trends, is currently being used to watch a very different kind of choreography: the movement of military forces that could be on the brink of a new severe conflict on European soil (Britton and Mulligan, 2022). The app has recently come into the spotlight as tensions between Russia and Ukraine have led to what could be called "the first TikTok conflict" (Bowman, 2022). Videos of Russian troops gathering at the borders of Ukraine are widely distributed on TikTok (Sonne et al., 2022). However, this is not the first time social media have been used to illuminate a conflict from the ground up. The instinct to turn to social media in a crisis - and the use of similar techniques by armchair detectives and internet sleuths - has been an essential tool in navigating events during the Arab Spring in the early 2010s (Brown, Guskin and Mitchell, 2012). In a report published by the United States Institute of Peace in 2012, the authors concluded that the importance of social media lay in communicating to the rest of the world what was happening on the ground during the uprisings (Aday et al., 2012). While Facebook and Twitter were mainly used at the time, TikTok and Instagram have now become the platforms for sharing military-related videos (Britton and Mulligan, 2022).

It comes at a time when the nature of warfare is changing; social media have not only redefined how people at home experience conflict around the world but also how governments themselves wage war. The first mistake an oppressive state can make is censoring or banning the Internet. Hence, a country like Russia, which does not want to look like a dictatorship, does not ban Facebook, Twitter or TikTok. On the contrary, it goes on those platforms and uses those same platforms to spread its propaganda, its stories and maybe even its fake news. After all, Russian propaganda is not aimed at painting a positive picture of Russia, unlike the Soviet Union, which tried to paint a positive picture of the USSR or communism as the ideal society. Instead, the propaganda aims to create and spread as many competing falsehoods and stories as possible so that the average user is much less able to recognise the truth when he sees it. Ukrainian officials have warned that such videos are more likely to further the Russian campaign to destabilise Ukraine by spreading panic about a possible invasion (Shull, 2022). Moreover, the Russian Defence Ministry itself has posted videos of some troops beginning to withdraw from the border, but experts warn that Moscow still has the capacity to launch a major invasion (Ali, 2022).

It is not a new fact that disinformation is spread via the Internet, weakening democracy and the rule of law through the distortion of facts, fake news, and social media abuse. As a result, it fuels internal divisions within the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and within European societies (AIV, 2020). But social media can also be used as a tool of military defence. Although the nature and scope of information in social media increase the likelihood of disinformation and fear, the same media are used to critically monitor military activities. Indeed, the videos posted on TikTok are used by researchers as a rather official source and serve as evidence for the movement of troops and equipment from Russia's Far East (Psaledakis and Culliford, 2022; Krutov, 2022). They offer an unprecedented view of military preparations in real-time, as they often warn of Russia's military movement faster than the government (Krutov, 2022). Moreover, social media can lead to greater military unity and cooperation. For example, they can provide military officers with a platform to collaborate, share best practices, learn from each other's experiences, and stay informed on issues of importance to their units in real-time. Most importantly, however, as civilian technologies find their way into military applications, it will particularly benefit civil-military relations by helping to bridge the gap between civilian and military communities. The above-mentioned platforms have essentially given voice to those who were once voiceless and have ensured that asymmetrical wars are no longer so asymmetrical. People on the ground who are victims of bomb blasts, for example, can make a TikTok about it and tell what is happening, and governments who cover things up can no longer hide it because these people have a platform on which to livestream. Or, as is the case now: the build-up of troops around Ukraine is visible to everyone. Gen Z users born between 1997 and 2012 even take it to a higher level and unite in the comment sections to avoid a war that is unwanted by the people, or as they put it on TikTok and Instagram, "Vladdy daddy please no war" (Latu, 2022). The nickname "Vladdy Daddy" refers to Russian President Vladimir Putin, whom they ask not to start a war (Britzky, 2022). Another way to describe it is what I like to call "peacekeeping in the modern age".

In conclusion, the world has moved away from a top-down approach where the public was only informed about major military movements through the big media outlets and governments (Fischer and Basu, 2022). The new modern approach is a bottom-up one, where civil-military cooperation is encouraged. Or as Peter Singer (author of the book "LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media") said: "Part of that aspect of it being a conflict is all the sides are watching, all the sides are learning. And they're learning not just from whom they're directly facing off against, but also from people in other kinds of conflicts." (Knowledge@Wharton, 2019).

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