

WAR PROFITEERS: ONLINE ADS AND THE MACHINERY OF PROPAGANDA FOR WAR



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***“When there is war, there is war,
and propaganda is part of it.”***

—
*Ferdinand Nahimana, convicted by the
International Tribunal for Rwanda for his
role in the Rwandan genocide.¹*

Introduction

War propaganda is as old as war itself. Its roots can be traced to ancient societies, where religious, military, and political elites employed communication strategies to legitimize conflict, mobilize support, and construct enemy images.²

With the expansion of communication technologies, war propaganda has evolved in both its methods and reach, increasingly instrumentalizing social media platforms to shape public opinion at both national and international levels, often through targeted digital content such as online ads.

Online ads can be powerful tools for influencing our thinking, potentially impacting not only our receptivity to specific policies, but shaping our opinions about them. The strategic collection and use of our personal data, and the development of algorithmic recommendation systems, can make these ads more effective. Our receptivity is further reinforced by the nature of the human brain, which is wired to rely on emotional shortcuts that can significantly impact behavior.³ This explains why marketers and advertisers target people for emotional manipulation; it allows them to bypass critical scrutiny of their products and messages.⁴

¹ International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), Trial Chamber I, *The Prosecutor v. Ferdinand Nahimana, Jean-Bosco Barayagwiza, Hassan Ngeze (Judgment and Sentence)*, Case No. ICTR-99-52-T, December 3, 2003, para 391. Available online at: <https://www.refworld.org/jurisprudence/caselaw/ict/2003/en/91852>

² Taylor Philip, *Munitions of the Mind: a history of propaganda*, Manchester University Press 2013.

Nicholas J. Cull, David Culbert, David Welch, *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion: A Historical Encyclopedia, 1500 to the Present*, ABCCLIO, California, 2003.

Lionel Pearson, *Propaganda in the Archidamian War*, Classical Philology Vol. 31, No. 1, 1936, The University of Chicago Press.

John B. Whitton, Arthur Larson, *Propaganda: Towards Disarmament in the War of Words*, New York: Oceana Publications, 1964, p. 12.

ARTICLE 19, *Clearing the Fog of War*, Policy Brief, 2024, p. 20. Available online at:

<https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Clearing-the-Fog-of-War-3-December-2024.pdf>

³ Tiffany C. Li, *Privacy and disinformation*, June 24, 2025. Available online at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=5318708>

⁴ David Walsh and Douglas A. Gentile, *Slipping Under the Radar: Advertising and the Mind*. Available online at: https://drdouglass.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Slipping_Under_the_Radar_Advertising_and.pdf

Government use of social media to shape public opinion in support of military objectives has been significantly enhanced by digital tools,⁵ particularly online ads,⁶ which enable targeting based on opinions, beliefs, behaviors, and interests. Such targeting can make war narratives more effective and potentially more dangerous by allowing governments to manipulate national and international audiences in increasingly sophisticated ways, amplifying both the reach and impact of propaganda. In some cases, individuals can even become unwitting agents of propaganda, spreading war narratives and messages within their own communities.

International law imposes limits on different forms of war propaganda. Such limitations can be found in international human rights law (IHRL), international criminal law (ICL), and international humanitarian law (IHL). For example, in certain cases, war propaganda that seeks to justify violations of the Geneva Conventions may also constitute a breach of IHL.⁷

The focus of this report is on the IHRL prohibition of a specific kind of war propaganda – “propaganda for war.” **Article 20 (1)** of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) provides that “Any propaganda for war shall be prohibited by law.” Unlike other provisions that enshrine human rights, this article reflects a different legal philosophy by imposing a specific obligation on states to prohibit a specific category of expression: propaganda for war.⁸ Despite the widespread use of war propaganda, **Article 20 (1)** remains one of the least invoked and implemented provisions by states, despite the existence of over 110 armed conflicts.⁹ This limited effectiveness can be attributed to various factors, including economic and military interests, as well as the ambiguity surrounding the term “propaganda for war” and its potential harmful impact on freedom of expression.

At the same time, **Article 20 (1)** raises a fundamental question in international law: through which mechanisms can states engaging in propaganda for war be held accountable? As one scholar aptly

⁵ Grayson S. Walker, *From Instagram to Infowar: The Weaponization of Social Media and its Consequences*, 38 Emory International Law Review, Vol 38, Issue 3, 2024, p. 674.

Available online at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.emory.edu/eilr/vol38/iss3/4>

Mahsa Alimardani and Sam Gregory, *Iran-Israel AI War Propaganda Is a Warning to the World*, July 28, 2025. Available online at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/07/iran-israel-ai-war-propaganda-is-a-warning-to-the-world?lang=en>

⁶ The Guardian, *Meta allows ads crowdfunding for IDF drones, consumer watchdog finds*, July 21, 2025. Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/jul/21/meta-idf-drone-ads-israel>

⁷ “Pursuant to common Article 1, the High Contracting Parties have certain negative obligations, which means they must abstain from certain conduct. In particular, they may neither **encourage**, nor aid or assist in violations of the Conventions.” ICRC, Convention (I) for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field. Geneva, August 12, 1949, Commentary of 2016, para. 158. Available online at:

https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gci-1949/article-1/commentary/2016?activeTab=#index_Toc452378943

To learn more about how international humanitarian law norms prohibit specific propaganda content, see: Sally Alexandra Longworth, *Freedom of expression in armed conflict: The silence between spaces*, Doctoral Thesis in Legal Science, specialisation Public International Law, Stockholm University, Sweden, 2022, p. 420. Available online at:

<https://su.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1689232/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

⁸ Agnes Callamard, *Expert meeting on the links between Articles 19 and 20 of the ICCPR*, UNHCR, October 2-3, 2008, Geneva.

Available online at: <https://www.article19.org/data/files/pdfs/conferences/iccpr-links-between-articles-19-and-20.pdf>

⁹ Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, *Today's armed conflicts*. Available online at:

<https://geneva-academy.ch/galleries/today-s-armed-conflicts>

noted, “*article 20 (1) of the ICCPR is an odd provision indeed. It is almost completely ineffective as a coercive approach to forbidding war propaganda except to punish the minions of defeated nations after the fact.*”¹⁰

Propaganda for war may not always be the direct cause of a breach of peace, but it can significantly contribute to the outbreak of armed conflicts by exploiting racial, religious, strategic, and political divisions. It aims to shape public opinion so that people are more receptive to the prospect of military action. Therefore, addressing propaganda for war is fundamentally a pre-conflict exercise that requires the engagement of all stakeholders committed to preserving peace and upholding international law. Once hostilities have commenced, countering such propaganda becomes far more challenging, and efforts at mitigation are considerably less effective.¹¹

In today’s context, which is marked by the rapid expansion of information warfare tools and tactics, it is crucial for the international community to take action on multiple fronts to safeguard international peace. This includes addressing propaganda for war without undermining the fundamental right to freedom of expression.

The legal ambiguity regarding the use of online ads to spread propaganda for war creates a serious challenge for ensuring that social media platforms are respecting human rights and states are upholding and protecting these rights, such as rights to life and to equality and non-discrimination.¹²

It is important to highlight the existing gap in the interpretation of **Article 20 (1)**, which hampers effective implementation by both states and social media platforms. Unlike **Article 20 (2)**, which has been extensively interpreted by international bodies, there is only limited guidance on the scope and application of **Article 20 (1)** via international jurisprudence and reports by UN bodies and human rights experts and mechanisms.

This limited guidance also applies to the relationship between **Article 20 (1)** and the protection of the right to freedom of expression under **Article 19** of the ICCPR. During the outset of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU introduced measures suspending the broadcasting activities of *Sputnik* and *RT/Russia Today*¹³ and some EU states have also reportedly pressured social

¹⁰ Richard B. Collins, *Propaganda for War and Transparency*, 87 Denv. U. L. Rev. 819, 2010, p. 829. Available online at: <https://scholar.law.colorado.edu/faculty-articles/215>.

¹¹ John B. Whitton, Arthur Larson, *Propaganda: Towards Disarmament in the War of Words*, New York: Oceana Publications, 1964, p. 1.

ARTICLE 19, *Clearing the Fog of War*, Policy Brief, 2024, p. 24. Available online at: <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Clearing-the-Fog-of-War-3-December-2024.pdf>

¹² Grayson S. Walker, *From Instagram to Infowar: The Weaponization of Social Media and its Consequences*, 38 Emory International Law Review, Vol 38, Issue 3, 2024, p. 678.

Available online at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.emory.edu/eilr/vol38/iss3/4>

¹³ Council of the European Union, *EU imposes sanctions on state-owned outlets RT/Russia Today and Sputnik's broadcasting in the EU*, March 2, 2022. Available online at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-state-owned-outlets-russia-today-and-sputnik-s-broadcasting-in-the-eu/>.

media platforms like Meta to ban the Russian state-affiliated media outlets.¹⁴ Additionally, social media platforms reportedly subjected certain individuals to viewership suppression for disseminating pro-Russian propaganda.¹⁵ These measures sparked debate over whether those outlets are spreading propaganda for war, whether viewership restrictions constitute disproportionate responses, and whether they risk undermining the right to seek and receive information related to armed conflict. This raises critical questions about how to reconcile the right to freedom of expression under **Article 19** of the ICCPR with the obligation imposed on states by **Article 20 (1)** to prohibit propaganda for war.¹⁶

This report aims to contribute to these debates, including interrogating the role of the private sector. It will do so by examining in particular **the relationship between propaganda for war and online ads from the perspective of IHRL**, while acknowledging that IHL and ICL may also offer additional insights.

We focus on online ads due to the unique nature of this online content, which allows propagandists to deliberately target and amplify specific messages for selected audiences, a method of dissemination well suited to the systemic and strategic character of propaganda. Nonetheless, our recommendations can also be applied to other forms of online content, provided they amount to propaganda for war.

We approach the issue of propaganda for war from a legal perspective, analyzing state obligations as well as the content moderation and advertising policies that could apply to war-related propaganda and the safeguarding of freedom of expression, particularly in contexts involving public-interest discourse on armed conflicts and humanitarian crises.

Acknowledging the absence of a precise and universally accepted definition of propaganda for war, this report adopts the definition provided by the UN Human Rights Committee in its **General Comment No. 11**, which refers to “**all forms of propaganda threatening or resulting in an act of aggression or breach of the peace contrary to the Charter of the United Nations.**”

This definition focuses on the objective of the content, which is the illegal use of force, rather than the specific forms of expression used to achieve that objective, encompassing a wide range of both subliminal and non-subliminal content.

¹⁴ Aljazeera, *Facebook to restrict access to Russian state media outlets in EU*, February 28, 2022. Available online at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/28/facebook-to-restrict-access-to-russian-state-media-outlets-in-eu>

¹⁵ Björnstjern Baade, *EU Sanctions Against Propaganda for War – Reflections on the General Court’s Judgment in Case T-125/22* (RT France), Heidelberg Journal of International Law 83 (2), 2023. Available online at: <https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/667623.pdf>

¹⁶ Andrei G. Richter, *International legal responses to “propaganda for war” in modern warfare*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2023/2024, p. 76. Available online at: <https://www.swlaw.edu/sites/default/files/2024-01/JIMEL%2010.1%20Richter231215.pdf>
David Kaye, *Online Propaganda, Censorship and Human Rights in Russia’s War Against Reality*, Cambridge University Press, May 23, 2022. Available online at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-journal-of-international-law/article/online-propaganda-censorship-and-human-rights-in-russias-war-against-reality/359EF362F588AC8F601FE6C28260AD83>

At times in this report, we describe phenomena or dynamics — and refer to sources discussing them — that apply not only to propaganda for war but also to other forms of war-related propaganda falling outside the precise scope of **Article 20 (1)** of the ICCPR, or even propaganda more generally. We use the term “war propaganda” as an umbrella concept encompassing various types of propaganda related to war, including but not limited to “propaganda for war.” When we refer specifically to “propaganda for war,” it denotes the particular form of propaganda prohibited under **Article 20 (1)**.

To better assess how social media platforms should address ads related to propaganda for war, we first examine the concept of propaganda for war under IHRL, and analyze the corresponding obligations of states. We then turn to an evaluation of social media platforms’ policies, exploring the extent to which these policies align with international human rights standards and the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs).¹⁷

This is a highly complex and debated area. We do not aim to provide definitive answers but rather to offer analysis and reflections on the issues, highlighting key risks and the pressing need for continued dialogue. We also acknowledge the significant challenges that social media platforms face in navigating these issues. Through this report, we seek to contribute to this discussion by offering guidance and serving as a resource to inform further reflection and collective action. Addressing these challenges requires a sustained, multistakeholder effort grounded in human rights principles.

1. Propaganda for war under international human rights law

Definitions of propaganda for war

At the outset, it is important to highlight the absence of a universally agreed definition of “propaganda for war,”¹⁸ which is largely due to the historical and ideological conflict between the Soviet Union and the Western bloc. The concept of “war propaganda” was introduced by the Soviet Union as a ground for permissible restriction on the right to freedom of expression. This is a reflection of the national positions expressed during the drafting of the ICCPR, when the Western bloc viewed a prohibition on propaganda for war as a potential tool by the Soviet Union to suppress internal dissent and restrict western media.¹⁹

Article 20 of the ICCPR stipulates that:

1. Any propaganda for war shall be prohibited by law.

¹⁷ UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. Available online at:

https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf

¹⁸ Agnes Callamard, *Expert meeting on the links between Articles 19 and 20 of the ICCPR*, UNHCR, October 2-3, 2008, Geneva.

Available online at: <https://www.article19.org/data/files/pdfs/conferences/iccpr-links-between-articles-19-and-20.pdf>

¹⁹ Richard B. Collins, *Propaganda for War and Transparency*, 87 Denv. U. L. Rev. 819, 2010, p. 823. Available online at: <https://scholar.law.colorado.edu/faculty-articles/215>.

2. Any advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence shall be prohibited by law.

Several aspects pose a challenge in defining “propaganda for war” starting with the term “propaganda” itself. The term propaganda remains difficult to define, particularly given its intersection with other forms of information operations occurring during elections, armed conflicts, protests, or other politically sensitive events. In such contexts, various actors often deploy a range of techniques to pursue political, economic, or military objectives.²⁰

Scholars define propaganda as *“the use of facts, fiction, argument, and suggestion, sometimes supported by an effort to suppress inconsistent material, with the calculated purpose of instilling in the recipient certain beliefs, prejudices, or convictions which will serve the interest of the author, usually by producing or tending to produce certain line of action.”*²¹

Referring to “propaganda for war” more specifically, human rights expert Manfred Nowak defines the “propaganda” element as *“intentional, well-aimed influencing of individuals by employing various channels of communication to disseminate, above all, incorrect or exaggerated allegations of fact.”*²² To constitute propaganda for war, he then argues that *“what is decisive is that the propaganda aims at creating or reinforcing the willingness to conduct a war of aggression.”*²³

Several key elements can be identified across the different definitions of propaganda, including in the context of propaganda for war. These elements include the process of persuasion, consistency of the methods, specific intent, the aim to influence individuals, the use of false or exaggerated facts, and the harmful effects produced. According to Nowak, taken together, these elements frame propaganda as a purposeful strategy deliberately designed to shape national or foreign public opinion in favor of illegal war, often through various techniques that spread wholly or partially false information or exaggerated claims.²⁴

This means that propaganda for war, like any form of propaganda, could in theory include content containing correct facts. But the key element to distinguish propaganda *for war* from any other type of content is the objective to influence individuals to be more willing and accepting of an illegal use of force by states. Nowak argues that incitement would also be covered by propaganda for war when the aim is to shape opinions to accept a war of aggression.²⁵

²⁰ Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, *Report on disinformation and freedom of expression during armed conflict*, A/77/288, August 12, 2022, para 15. Available online at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a77288-disinformation-and-freedom-opinion-and-expression-during-armed>

²¹ John B. Whitton, Arthur Larson, *Propaganda: Towards Disarmament in the War of Words*, New York: Oceana Publications, 1964, p. 9.

²² Manfred Nowak, *UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, CCPR Commentary*, 2nd rev. ed., Kehl Germany, 2005, p. 472.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 473.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 473.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 472.

The intersection between propaganda, disinformation, and incitement has been underscored in numerous reports.

Irene Kahn, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, noted in her report on disinformation and freedom of expression during armed conflict that “propaganda and disinformation may overlap as part of ‘information operations,’ which are commonly understood as campaigns by States or political actors to influence the views, attitudes, and behavior of adversaries or the public in order to achieve political and military objectives.”²⁶

Similarly, “propaganda for war” itself can also overlap with other forms of expression. For instance, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has argued that propaganda for war can simultaneously constitute incitement to violence based on the advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred. In this context, **Article 20 (1)** of the ICCPR addresses direct incitement to war, whereas paragraph two is intended to cover antecedent propaganda that fuels such incitement.²⁷

The meaning of the term “war” is comparatively easier to define. The term “war” was defined by the UN Human Rights Committee, which has drawn a clear distinction between, on the one hand, propaganda for war that threatens or results in acts of aggression or breaches of the peace contrary to the Charter of the United Nations, and, on the other hand, expressions advocating the sovereign right to self-defense or the right of peoples to self-determination and independence.²⁸ As a result, **Article 20 (1)** applies only to propaganda for wars of aggression, and not to wars conducted in self-defense or for the purpose of liberation. Of course, applying these principles to specific situations of war can be extremely challenging in practice.

Under this interpretation, any form of propaganda that intentionally threatens or results in an act of aggression constitutes a violation of **Article 20 (1)** of the ICCPR. The Rome Statute,²⁹ under **Article 8 bis**, defines an act of aggression as “*the use of armed force by a State against the sovereignty, territorial*

²⁶ Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, *Report on disinformation and freedom of expression during armed conflict*, A/77/288, August 12, 2022, para 15. Available online at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a77288-disinformation-and-freedom-opinion-and-expression-during-armed>

²⁷ OSCE, *Propaganda and Freedom of the Media, Non-paper of the OSCE Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media*, Vienna, 2015, p. 14. Available online at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/3/203926.pdf>

²⁸ UN Human Rights Committee, *General Comment No. 11: Prohibition of propaganda for war and inciting national, racial or religious hatred* (Art. 20), July 29, 1983. Available online at:

<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Opinion/CCPRGeneralCommentNo11.pdf>

Manfred Nowak, *UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, CCPR Commentary*, 2nd rev. ed., Kehl Germany, 2005, p. 473.

Richard B. Collins, *Propaganda for War and Transparency*, 87 Denv. U. L. Rev. 819, 2010, p. 826. Available online at: <https://scholar.law.colorado.edu/faculty-articles/215>.

²⁹ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Available online at: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/2024-05/Rome-Statute-eng.pdf>

integrity, or political independence of another State, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Charter of the United Nations.”³⁰

Likewise, propaganda that contributes to a breach of the peace contrary to the UN Charter would similarly fall under the scope of **Article 20 (1)**. The determination of such a breach lies within the competence of the United Nations Security Council pursuant to **Chapter VII** of the UN Charter.

However, opinions have diverged on the temporal scope of **Article 20 (1)**, as some experts have noted that it should be applied only during the time of peace, while others have maintained the position that it should be extended to the time of war.

For example, Special Rapporteur Kahn observes that there is “confusion among some States and companies about its scope.” She argues that **Article 20 (1)** of the ICCPR applies primarily in the pre-conflict phase, rather than during an ongoing armed conflict, stating that “the prohibition is understood to be applicable only in relation to aggression or breach of peace contrary to the Charter of the United Nations and limited to incitement of war and not to propaganda during war.”³¹

Professor of media studies Andrei Richter disagrees with such limited understanding of **Article 20 (1)** arguing instead that propaganda for war continues to apply during war.³²

Similarly, in a ruling criticized by some for undermining freedom of expression,³³ the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has ruled that the prohibition under **Article 20 (1)**, which applies to any

³⁰ It is important to note that the Rome Statute does not criminalize incitement to aggression. The reference to Article 8 bis serves solely to define the concept of aggression.

³¹ “Interpreting ‘war’ as aggression precludes the misuse of this provision to crush internal disturbances, while limiting it to incitement of aggression allows States that have been attacked to rally support in self-defence. There is, however, confusion among some States and companies about its scope, which underlines the need for further clarification.”

Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, *Report on disinformation and freedom of expression during armed conflict*, A/77/288, August 12, 2022, para 39. Available online at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a77288-disinformation-and-freedom-opinion-and-expression-during-armed>

³² Andrei G. Richter, *International legal responses to “propaganda for war” in modern warfare*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2023/2024, p. 62. Available online at: <https://www.swlaw.edu/sites/default/files/2024-01/JIMEL%2010.1%20Richter231215.pdf>

³³ Ronan Ó Fathaigh and Dirk Voorhoof, *RT France v. Council: General Court finds ban on Russia Today not a violation of right to freedom of expression*, Inform’s Blog, August 19, 2022. Available online at: <https://inform.org/2022/08/19/case-law-eu-rt-france-v-council-general-court-finds-ban-on-russia-today-not-a-violation-of-right-to-freedom-of-expression-ronan-o-fathaigh-and-dirk-voorhoof/>.

propaganda for war, extends beyond incitement to future war. It also applies to propaganda in support of an ongoing war.³⁴ This view is also shared by some scholars.³⁵

At Access Now, we believe it's important to recall that **Article 20 (1)** of the ICCPR serves as a legal response to the atrocities committed during World War II and to the conduct of states throughout that conflict.³⁶ The spirit of this article is to safeguard international peace and security. Therefore, in our view, restricting its scope only to propaganda prior the commencement of conflict would contradict its core objective. It can have serious consequences, including prolonging the duration of hostilities. We believe that propaganda for war during an armed conflict constitutes an ongoing violation of **Article 20 (1)** in the same way that the commencement of a conflict does not signify that further breaches of the prohibition of the illegal use of force are not possible. We acknowledge at the same time that neither IHRL (nor IHL or ICL) prohibit propaganda per se and that unduly broadening the scope of propaganda for war can carry significant risks for freedom of expression.

This is why we endorse Special Rapporteur Khan's suggestion when she says that "[t]he prohibition of propaganda for war should be interpreted narrowly to ensure that it does not infringe on the right to protest and criticize. Guidelines should be produced by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for the use of States and companies." We note that similar guidance has been developed in the context of **Article 20 (2)** with the Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence, which is an expert's interpretation of **Article 20 (2)**.³⁷

This has also been supported by freedom of expression organization ARTICLE 19, which has stated that "Such guidance would also ensure that the measures to tame propaganda for war would not produce a chilling effect that will prevent and discourage media work, including reporting on armed conflict,

³⁴ "...it should be pointed out that the scope of the prohibition imposed by Article 20 (1) of that covenant, which refers to 'any' propaganda for war, includes not only incitement to a future war, but also continuous, repeated and concerted statements in support of an ongoing war, contrary to international law, especially where those statements come from a media outlet under the direct or indirect control of the aggressor State." CJEU, Judgment of the General Court (Grand Chamber), July 27, 2022, Case T-125/22, *Russia Today v Council*, para 210. Available online at: <https://curia.europa.eu/juris/document/document.jsf?text=&docid=263501&pageIndex=0&doclang=EN&mode=req&dir=&occ=first&part=1&cid=7359402>

See also: Björnstjern Baade, *EU Sanctions Against Propaganda for War – Reflections on the General Court's Judgment in Case T-125/22 (RT France)*, Heidelberg Journal of International Law 83 (2), 2023. Available online at: <https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/667623.pdf>

³⁵ Sally Alexandra Longworth, *Freedom of expression in armed conflict: The silence between spaces*, Doctoral Thesis in Legal Science, specialisation Public International Law, Stockholm University, Sweden, 2022, p. 237. Available online at: <https://su.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1689232/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

³⁶ OSCE, *Propaganda and Freedom of the Media, Non-paper of the OSCE Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media*, Vienna, 2015, p. 13. Available online at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/3/203926.pdf>

³⁷ OHCHR, *Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence*, A/HRC/22/17/Add.4. Available online at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Rabat_draft_outcome.pdf

and an unhindered debate on issues of public interest. States and the private sector should receive informative and practicable guidelines on their obligations in this area.”³⁸

States’ obligations under Article 20 (1)

As we noted previously, while **Article 20 (2)** of the ICCPR has been the subject of extensive legal scholarship, jurisprudence, and interpretive guidance, **Article 20 (1)** remains comparatively underdeveloped and subject to debate.

Moreover, states have demonstrated weak engagement with this provision. Many have refrained from adopting explicit legislation prohibiting propaganda for war, asserting instead that general content-related offenses or educational policies are sufficient to address such propaganda.³⁹

The UN Human Rights Committee has stated that states should take the necessary measures to fulfill their obligations under **Article 20**, which primarily include enacting legislation that clearly establishes that the propaganda described therein is contrary to public policy, and providing appropriate sanctions for violations.⁴⁰

States should also refrain from engaging in or disseminating such propaganda themselves, whether directly or through private actors, including media outlets under their direct or indirect control.

States’ obligations in this context are twofold: they bear a positive obligation to prohibit propaganda for war, whether it is disseminated by internal or external actors targeting individuals under their jurisdiction, or spread by non-state actors targeting foreign states. Simultaneously, they have a negative obligation to refrain from engaging in or disseminating propaganda for war aimed at influencing domestic or foreign public opinion.⁴¹ States have a legal obligation to prohibit propaganda

³⁸ ARTICLE 19, UN: *Statement on propaganda for war and free expression*, September 25, 2023. Available online at: <https://www.article19.org/resources/un-statement-propaganda-for-war-and-free-expression/>.

³⁹ “Sixteen Western industrialized States expressed their rejection of Art. 20 in general - or the prohibition of propaganda for war in particular - not simply by their negative voting conduct in the 3d Committee of the GA, but also by reservations and declarations of interpretation. The reservations by Australia, Malta, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States go the furthest: by referring to the fact that Art. 20 must be interpreted in conformity with the rights of political liberty (Arts. 19, 21 and 22), they reserve the right not to enact any prohibitions going beyond existing legislation. Belgium and Luxembourg additionally indicated the necessity of conformity with Art. 18, but they restricted the reservation of the right not to enact additional laws to the prohibition of propaganda for war. All five Nordic States, Ireland, and the Netherlands submitted general reservations to Art. 20(1), justifying this in part with their voting conduct in the GA. Finally, France declared that the term “war” in Art. 20(1) was to be understood only in the sense of acts of war in contravention of international law.” See: Manfred Nowak, *UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, CCPR Commentary*, 2nd rev. ed., Kehl Germany, 2005, p. 479. Ines Gillich, *Media Coverage and State Propaganda In Armed Conflicts: An International Law Perspective at the Armenia-Azerbaijan “Propaganda War,”* Vol 10, No 2, 2024, *Journal of International Media and Entertainment Law*, Southeastern Law School, p. 138. Available online at: <https://www.swlaw.edu/sites/default/files/2024-12/Gillich%20Article%20-%20JIMEL%2010.2%20-%202012.16.pdf>

⁴⁰ UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 11: Prohibition of propaganda for war and inciting national, racial or religious hatred (Art. 20), July 29, 1983. Available online at: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Opinion/CCPRGeneralCommentNo11.pdf>

⁴¹ Sally Alexandra Longworth, *Freedom of expression in armed conflict: The silence between spaces*, Doctoral Thesis in Legal Science, specialisation Public International Law, Stockholm University, Sweden, 2022, p. 440. Available online at:

for war by law, with appropriate sanctions that may be administrative, civil, or criminal in nature.⁴² Furthermore, in **General Comment No. 34**, the UN Human Rights Committee clarified that while states are required to adopt specific legislation prohibiting acts addressed in **Article 20**, including propaganda for war, any such measures must also comply with the conditions set forth in **Article 19 (3)** of the ICCPR regarding freedom of expression.⁴³

Specifically, any measures taken to prohibit propaganda for war must adhere to the three-part test set out in **Article 19 (3)** of the ICCPR that applies to all forms of expression and which provides that any restrictions must be provided by law, pursue a legitimate aim, and be necessary and proportionate to achieve that aim.⁴⁴

The UN Human Rights Committee confirmed this approach in the *Ross v. Canada* case (in a decision concerning Article 20 (2)) by considering that “restrictions on expression which may fall within the scope of article 20 must also be permissible under article 19, paragraph 3, which lays down requirements for determining whether restrictions on expression are permissible.”⁴⁵

As we have noted, states have an obligation to refrain from engaging in propaganda for war.⁴⁶ Failure to do so not only constitutes a breach of **Article 20 (1)** of the ICCPR, but also undermines the state's duty under **Article 19** to protect, respect, and fulfill the right of individuals within its jurisdiction to seek and receive information.⁴⁷

We observe that the use of online ads for purposes of propaganda for war has legal implications that could entail consequences beyond a mere violation of **Article 20 (1)** of the ICCPR. By employing microtargeting techniques to influence individuals based on specific personal characteristics, using

<https://su.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1689232/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

Manfred Nowak, *UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, CCPR Commentary*, 2nd rev. ed., Kehl Germany, 2005, p. 473.

⁴² Manfred Nowak, *UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, CCPR Commentary*, 2nd rev. ed., Kehl Germany, 2005, p. 474.

⁴³ UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 34: Article 19: Freedoms of opinion and expression, September 12, 2011, para 51-52. Available online at: <https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/docs/gc34.pdf>

Manfred Nowak, *UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, CCPR Commentary*, 2nd rev. ed., Kehl Germany, 2005, p. 477.

⁴⁴ “Articles 19 and 20 are compatible with and complement each other. The acts that are addressed in article 20 are all subject to restriction pursuant to article 19, paragraph 3.”

UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 34: Article 19: Freedoms of opinion and expression, September 12, 2011, para 50. Available online at: <https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/docs/gc34.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Human Rights Committee, *Malcolm Ross v. Canada*, Communication No. 736/1997, UN Doc. CCPR/C/70/D/736/1997 (2000). Available online at: <https://juris.ohchr.org/casedetails/902/en-US>

⁴⁶ Manfred Nowak, *UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, CCPR Commentary*, 2nd rev. ed., Kehl Germany, 2005, p. 473.

Andrei G. Richter, *International legal responses to “propaganda for war” in modern warfare*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2023/2024, p. 64.

Available online at: <https://www.swlaw.edu/sites/default/files/2024-01/JIMEL%2010.1%20Richter231215.pdf>

⁴⁷ Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, *Report on disinformation and freedom of expression during armed conflict*, A/77/288, August 12, 2022. Available online at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a77288-disinformation-and-freedom-opinion-and-expression-during-armed>

Sally Alexandra Longworth, *Freedom of expression in armed conflict: The silence between spaces*, Doctoral Thesis in Legal Science, specialisation Public International Law, Stockholm University, Sweden, 2022, p. 440. Available online at: <https://su.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1689232/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

online ads this way may also infringe upon the right to freedom of opinion under **Article 19**, particularly when such use amounts to manipulation or indoctrination that hinders autonomous thought.⁴⁸

Tackling propaganda for war in line with IHRL is not only a question of prohibition. For instance, in the context of hate speech as prohibited under **Article 20 (2)**, it is essential states take positive measures. This includes taking measures to foster a diverse and independent media ecosystem and more broadly, measures to support a strong civic space which can provide a counter voice to propaganda for war. More generally, we note that any measures taken should consider the context in which the content circulates, particularly in regions affected by conflict, and the level of risk it poses to human rights and security.

While states' actions to prohibit propaganda for war have been weak and inefficient,⁴⁹ so too have been the measures taken by social media platforms.

While it may seem counterintuitive to expect social media platforms to respond to challenges for which even states and the international community have yet to articulate definitive solutions, their central role in shaping the information ecosystem gives them a particular responsibility to act. There is no dispute that propaganda for war can cause real harm, and this responsibility is heightened when platforms stand to profit from content that may contribute to that harm. As we explain in the next section, we believe that even in the face of legal uncertainty, social media platforms' human rights responsibilities require them to take proactive steps to identify, prevent, and mitigate the potential harms associated with online advertising and the dissemination of propaganda for war.

⁴⁸ "Coercive, involuntary or non-consensual manipulation of the thinking process, such as indoctrination or 'brainwashing' by State or non-State actors, violates freedom of opinion."

Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, *Report on disinformation and freedom of expression during armed conflict*, A/77/288, August 12, 2022, para 43. Available online at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a77288-disinformation-and-freedom-opinion-and-expression-during-armed>

See also: Sally Alexandra Longworth, *Freedom of expression in armed conflict: The silence between spaces*, Doctoral Thesis in Legal Science, specialisation Public International Law, Stockholm University, Sweden, 2022, p. 437. Available online at: <https://su.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1689232/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

⁴⁹ In the General Comment No. 11, the UN Human Rights Committee said that "Not all reports submitted by States parties have provided sufficient information as to the implementation of article 20 of the Covenant. In view of the nature of article 20, States parties are obliged to adopt the necessary legislative measures prohibiting the actions referred to therein. However, the reports have shown that in some States such actions are neither prohibited by law nor are appropriate efforts intended or made to prohibit them. Furthermore, many reports failed to give sufficient information concerning the relevant national legislation and practice."

Also the status of states' reservation, understanding, and declaration has not changed. "Of the treaty's 173 States Parties, seventeen—primarily European countries—issued a reservation, understanding, or declaration with respect to Article 20(1)." Evelyn Aswad, *Propaganda for War & International Human Rights Standards*, Chicago Journal of International Law, 2023, Vol. 24: No. 1. Available online at: <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cjil/vol24/iss1/1>

2. Propaganda for war and online ads under social media platforms' policies

In many ways, the issues related to how social media platforms handle propaganda for war through online ads are similar to those posed by other types of content. However, online ads present a particularly stark example of the platforms' shortcomings in moderating and curating such content. Not only are platforms dealing with the ambiguity surrounding the definition of propaganda for war, they are committed to an online advertising business model that is driven by mass data collection and revenue through targeted promotion, which impacts how they make content moderation decisions.⁵⁰

Absence of dedicated policy for propaganda for war

The previous section illustrates the difficulty of addressing propaganda for war. This difficulty is, however, not only due to the ongoing legal debate over the exact scope of **Article 20 (1)**. Questions of who is the aggressor and who is the victim state also tend to be highly contested and, of course, often political. Determinations around propaganda for war may be particularly complex at the outset of a conflict, when a court process may take considerable time to determine whether an act constitutes aggression or a breach of international peace, and when the legal debate over the legality of the use of force remains unsettled. Yet, this does not mean that social media platforms should refrain from putting measures in place to appropriately address content that may fall under **Article 20 (1)**, given their human rights responsibilities.

Specifically, in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), social media platforms have a responsibility to respect human rights, and to mitigate and remedy abuse.⁵¹

To meet their responsibility to respect human rights, social media platforms must take proactive measures to avoid causing or contributing to adverse human rights impacts through their own operations or products and to address such impacts when they occur.⁵² This responsibility requires the adoption of appropriate and clear policies to uphold human rights, a robust human rights due diligence process, and mechanisms to mitigate harm.⁵³

⁵⁰ Interactive Advertising Bureau, *Internet Advertising Revenue Report Full-year 2024 results April 2025*. Available online at: https://www.iab.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/IAB_PwC-Internet-Ad-Revenue-Report-Full-Year-2024.pdf

See also: Jeffrey Gleason, Alice Koeninger, Desheng Hu, Jessica Teurn, Yakov Bart, Samsun Knight, Ronald E. Robertson, Christo Wilson, *Search Engine Revenue from Navigational and Brand Advertising*, Proceedings of the Eighteenth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media (ICWSM2024).

Available online at: <https://ojs.aaai.org/index.php/ICWSM/article/view/31329/33489>

⁵¹ Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, *Report on the Global threats to freedom of expression arising from the conflict in Gaza*, A/79/319, August 23, 2024, para 49. Available online at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a79319-global-threats-freedom-expression-arising-conflict-gaza-report>

⁵² UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, para. 13. Available online at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf

⁵³ Ibid, para. 15.

Moreover, social media platforms must respect all applicable laws and internationally recognized human rights wherever they operate and treat the risk of involvement in gross human rights abuses as a matter of legal compliance.⁵⁴

In contexts where actions must be prioritized, social media platforms should first address the most severe or potentially irremediable human rights harms.⁵⁵ Overall, these principles underscore that respecting human rights is not a passive obligation but an ongoing, dynamic responsibility requiring diligence, transparency, and accountability.⁵⁶

There are significant human rights harms that can result from the circulation of propaganda for war on social media platforms, and those risks can be exacerbated when it comes to online ads. Therefore, in the particular context of online ads and propaganda for war, social media platforms should develop a policy on how they deal with propaganda for war in line with **Article 20 (1)**. As we explained earlier, there are legal ambiguities surrounding the term. But even if legal thresholds are debated, social media platforms have a responsibility to proactively reduce the risk that content might contribute to human rights risks, including through real-world violence or armed conflict.

Dedicated policies can help social media platforms implement consistent, proactive measures in line with international human rights principles and allow for greater scrutiny by civil society and the broader public regarding the type of content a platform is willing to profit from. As with other categories of online content, platforms should adopt dedicated policies to address, for example, incitement to violence, without necessarily waiting for an official legal interpretation. Similarly, dedicated rules on propaganda for war, supported by adequately trained teams, could enable more accurate assessments and better-informed content moderation decisions.

Importantly, meeting their responsibility to uphold human rights also means ensuring that any ad policies and related content moderation practices do not undermine the right to freedom of expression, which retains particular significance during armed conflict.⁵⁷

Despite the importance of the issue, a review of social media platforms' policies and community standards reveals an absence of specific rules addressing propaganda for war, whether in the context of online advertising or broader content moderation policies.⁵⁸ However, we note that while propaganda for war is not explicitly addressed, there may be overlap with other categories of content, such as incitement to violence, hate speech, or misinformation.

⁵⁴ Ibid, para. 23.

⁵⁵ Ibid, para. 17.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ ARTICLE 19, *Clearing the Fog of War*, Policy Brief, 2024. Available online at: <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Clearing-the-Fog-of-War-3-December-2024.pdf>

⁵⁸ We examined the policies of four major social media platforms which are Google, Meta, TikTok, and X, but our analysis is equally relevant to other platforms that host online ads, including video games, adult content sites, etc.

For example, Meta’s Violence and Incitement policy states that any “*content that asks for, offers, or admits to offering services of high-severity violence (for example, hitmen, mercenaries, assassins, female genital mutilation) or advocates for the use of these services*” will be removed. While such content may be disseminated as part of propaganda for war, it would be taken down under other grounds rather than being explicitly identified or addressed as propaganda for war.⁵⁹

Another example can be drawn from YouTube’s Hate Speech policy, which prohibits “*dehumanization of individuals or groups by calling them subhuman, comparing them to animals, insects, pests, disease, or any other non-human entity based on their protected group status.*” Propaganda for war often includes dehumanization of the enemy, which could lead to removal of such content. However, in these cases, the content is not taken down for being propaganda for war *per se*, but rather because it violates hate speech policies.⁶⁰

TikTok, on the other hand, does not allow political ads or ads run by government entities, except in very limited cases related to specific topics, and even then, they may be geographically restricted to the advertiser’s home region.⁶¹ This could act as a barrier to allowing propaganda for war ads, including those run by states.

The lack of clear and dedicated policies for moderating online ads containing war propaganda, including propaganda for war specifically, has allowed social media platforms to address this content in ways that are seemingly arbitrary and opaque. This lack of policies not only endangers users but also indicates that platforms may not be acting in a manner that is consistent with international human rights standards and their responsibilities under the UNGPs.

The contemporary propaganda landscape has evolved significantly since the drafting of **Article 20 (1)**. At that time, the dissemination of propaganda was predominantly a top-down process, controlled by state actors or institutional media gatekeepers such as print and broadcast outlets. These traditional media channels exercised substantial editorial oversight and largely dictated the flow of information to the public. However, the advent of the internet, and in particular, the rise of social media platforms has disrupted this dynamic. The capacity to influence public opinion and engage in propaganda is no longer confined to state or institutional actors. Individuals and non-state entities, acting on their own

⁵⁹ Meta, Violence and Incitement policy, current as of Oct. 16, 2025. Available online at:

<https://transparency.meta.com/en-gb/policies/community-standards/violence-incitement/>

⁶⁰ YouTube, Hate Speech policy, current as of Oct. 16, 2025. Available online at:

<https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2801939>

⁶¹ “What is allowed:

- Promoting tourism, cultural, or entertainment initiatives
- Promoting a significant public interest relating to the welfare or well-being of the general public, such as public health, safety, or education*
- Promoting employment or volunteer opportunities*

*These ads can only be targeted within the home region of the advertiser.”

TikTok, Advertising policies (Politics, Governments, and Elections). Available online at:

<https://ads.tiktok.com/help/article/tiktok-ads-policy-politics-government-and-elections>

initiative or as state proxies, now possess the technological means to initiate, amplify, and disseminate propaganda independently, often on a global scale.

Another distinct challenge with combating propaganda for war through online ads lies in the fact that platforms' content moderation systems largely assess individual pieces of content in isolation. This narrow approach is inadequate for detecting and moderating war propaganda, as a single ad rarely reveals the broader narrative or coordinated campaign it is part of. Propaganda is inherently a complex process in which the propagandist uses "various channels of communication"⁶² over time to shape the opinions of the targeted audience or to incentivize individuals, whether knowingly or unknowingly, to disseminate such messages. As a result, an isolated ad may not reveal the broader narrative or intent behind the campaign. In this context, strengthening and expanding policies on coordinated inauthentic behavior to include the dissemination of propaganda for war could help address this gap. By incorporating clearer rules, platforms can significantly improve their ability to identify and moderate propaganda for war, ensuring that harmful and coordinated campaigns do not evade detection and contribute to further human rights abuses.

Typically, propaganda for war would be prevalent in contexts that require platforms to exercise heightened due diligence. Therefore, beyond adopting content policies addressing propaganda for war at all times, any serious effort to address propaganda for war in high-risk contexts flows from such heightened due diligence processes. This should include resources and processes that go beyond evaluating individual pieces of content and take into account the overall context, the cumulative impact of such content, and the behavioral patterns of propaganda disseminators, including coordinated efforts between states and proxy actors. Similar to existing policies or measures that detect and tackle foreign influence operations, such as Meta's Inauthentic Behavior Policy, propaganda for war, particularly in the realm of online advertising, should be assessed in whole through analysis of the broader context in which a single ad is disseminated.

It is worth noting that if tech companies were to amend coordinated inauthentic behavior policies and internal monitoring procedures to address propaganda for war tactics and strategies, these policies could serve as an effective tool to counter such propaganda, well suited for the complexity and diversity of methods used to manipulate public opinion. However, current policies at X⁶³ and Google⁶⁴ do not address propaganda for war. In contrast, Meta's Inauthentic Behavior Policy contains a noteworthy rule that could be refined and expanded to explicitly cover propaganda for war.

At the time of writing, the rule in question states that Meta, which acknowledges the need for context, does not allow "*governments that have instituted sustained blocks of social media to use their official*

⁶² Manfred Nowak defines propaganda as "intentional, well-aimed influencing of individuals by employing various channels of communication to disseminate, above all, incorrect or exaggerated allegations of fact." Manfred Nowak, *UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, CCPR Commentary*, 2nd rev. ed., Kehl Germany, 2005, p. 472.

⁶³ X, Authenticity Policy. Available online at: <https://help.x.com/en/rules-and-policies/authenticity>

⁶⁴ Google, Coordinated deceptive practices. Available online at: https://support.google.com/adspolicy/answer/6020955?hl=en&ref_topic=1626336&sjid=10599579205764010552-EU#373

departments, agencies, and embassies to deny the use of force or violent events in the context of an attack against the territorial integrity of another state in violation of Article 2(4) of the UN Charter.”⁶⁵

While this makes it clear that denying violations of **Article 2 (4)** is prohibited, the rule’s scope is narrowly limited to situations in which a government has imposed prolonged social media blocks. This condition undermines its core purpose: preventing governments from using social media platforms to justify aggression or breaches of peace in violation of the UN Charter.

Several reports have highlighted the failure of social media platforms to address war-related online ads.⁶⁶ From blanket ad prohibitions to the selective and inconsistent application of its policies, the approaches social media platforms have generally taken demonstrate a politicized approach to propaganda for war rather than adherence to international human rights standards.

For example, in the context of Russia’s illegal full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Twitter (now X) responded to a letter from the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre regarding its human rights due diligence with a statement that “[s]ince the first signs of a potential crisis prior to the invasion (...) We’ve paused advertising in Ukraine and Russia to ensure that critical public safety information is elevated, and that ads don’t detract from the conversation on Twitter.”⁶⁷

While we recognize that social media companies may need to respond swiftly during emergencies to minimize risks, if they are to meet their human rights responsibilities, it is essential that they develop robust policies and establish permanent mechanisms for systematically monitoring regions vulnerable to rapid conflict escalation, so they can take action to protect people before a crisis occurs.

Twitter’s decision underscores the platform’s institutional shortcomings in addressing complex legal obligations under IHRL. Rather than developing robust, rights-respecting policies to ensure that online ads do not contribute to the dissemination of propaganda for war, the platform opted for sweeping, temporary measures that avoid substantive engagement with its responsibilities. This “ostrich strategy” of evading urgent human rights issues until they can no longer be ignored, and then making ad hoc decisions, is not sustainable. Social media platforms should instead strike a balance between respecting users’ rights to freely express themselves, including through ads, and ensuring user safety while upholding IHRL obligations.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Meta, Inauthentic Behavior Policy. Available online at:

<https://transparency.meta.com/en-gb/policies/community-standards/inauthentic-behavior/>

⁶⁶ ARTICLE 19, *Clearing the Fog of War*, Policy Brief, 2024, p. 36. Available online at:

<https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Clearing-the-Fog-of-War-3-December-2024.pdf>

See also: Andrei G. Richter, *International legal responses to “propaganda for war” in modern warfare*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2023/2024, p. 77. Available online at: <https://www.swlaw.edu/sites/default/files/2024-01/JIMEL%2010.1%20Richter231215.pdf>

⁶⁷ Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, *Russian invasion of Ukraine: What companies have to say about their human rights due diligence* (Twitter response), March 23, 2022. Available online at:

<https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/twitter-response/>

⁶⁸ Commercial advertising is entitled to the same protection under the right to freedom of expression as other forms of content. See for example: UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 34: Article 19: Freedoms of opinion and expression, September 12, 2011, para 11. Available online at: <https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/docs/gc34.pdf>

The escalation of the conflict between Israel and Palestine two years ago provides a good case study for the many complexities surrounding potential propaganda for war and online ads. Right after the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched a large-scale online advertising campaign targeting key European countries. The campaign, disseminated across platforms such as X and YouTube, featured graphic and emotionally charged content aimed at garnering public support for the military invasion of Gaza.⁶⁹

Most reports addressing Israel's use of online ads have not analyzed the issue with reference to propaganda for war, instead concentrating on the inadequate enforcement of policies against incitement to violence.⁷⁰ While that perspective may be relevant in certain instances, it remains insufficient to address the broader issue. Content disseminated by states or individuals that falls outside the narrow scope of incitement to violence or disinformation can still contribute to propaganda for war, yet may escape scrutiny in the absence of a dedicated policy.

Google removed around 30 ads containing violent content related to Gaza from its library,⁷¹ which hinders the ability of researchers, journalists, and other actors to conduct a factual assessment of whether such content may constitute propaganda for war. This demonstrates the shortcomings of platforms' existing limited, insular approach to content moderation and underscores the need for a broader assessment of content that may form part of a systemic and intentional propaganda effort targeting specific audiences.

For instance, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs disseminated an online ad featuring a brightly colored cartoon with prancing unicorns and a soothing lullaby, designed to mimic children's content. As the video plays, bold text appears in all capital letters: "We know that your child cannot read this. We have an important message to tell you as parents." The lullaby halts, and another message is displayed: "40 infants were murdered in Israel by the Hamas terrorists (ISIS)...". The music then resumes with the concluding message: "Now hug your baby and stand with us."⁷²

⁶⁹ POLITICO, *Israel floods social media to shape opinion around the war*, October 17, 2023. Available online at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/israel-social-media-opinion-hamas-war/>

⁷⁰ The Intercept, *Facebook Approved an Israeli Ad calling for Assassination of Pro-Palestine Activist*, November 21, 2023. Available online at: <https://theintercept.com/2023/11/21/facebook-ad-israel-palestine-violence/>

Tamleh, *Position Paper on YouTube's Impact on Palestinian Digital Rights during the War on Gaza*, April 2024. Available online at: <https://tamleh.org/storage/Advocacy%20Reports/YouTube%E2%80%99s%20Impact25.4.pdf>

⁷¹ POLITICO, *Israel floods social media to shape opinion around the war*, October 17, 2023. Available online at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/israel-social-media-opinion-hamas-war/>

⁷² Babies Can't Read The Text In This Video But Their Parents Can. Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hh8t8sHnTng>



This ad was circulated on platforms such as YouTube, including during broadcasts of the 2024 Super Bowl and within content targeting children, such as video games.⁷³ The use of emotionally charged and child-oriented content raises serious legal concerns, particularly regarding the exploitation of traumatic imagery to galvanize political support, potentially amounting to propaganda for war.⁷⁴

Such an ad does not clearly fall within the scope of existing platform policies on incitement to violence or disinformation, although it might be removed under a broad interpretation of those rules. Nevertheless, the specific content of this ad appears designed to subtly influence international public opinion in ways that normalize or justify atrocities committed in Gaza.⁷⁵ When examined in conjunction with a broader set of sponsored content disseminated across multiple platforms, this ad may reasonably be characterized as a component of Israel's broader strategy of propaganda for war.

Another example of war-related ads that could potentially amount to propaganda for war is the solicitation of funds in support of a party to an armed conflict. In July 2025, *The Guardian* reported that Meta had hosted ads aimed at raising funds for drones and tactical equipment intended for the Israeli Defense Forces.⁷⁶ The ads were brought to Meta's attention by the advocacy group Ekō, which documented at least 117 such ads posted since March 2025.⁷⁷ This followed a similar investigation by

⁷³ Just Security, #War #Sponsored: Using Targeted Ads to Promote Compliance with International Humanitarian Law, April 14, 2025. Available online at: <https://www.justsecurity.org/110231/targeted-ads-promote-compliance-ihl/>

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Israel's Crime of Extermination, Acts of Genocide in Gaza*, December 19, 2024. Available online at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/12/19/israels-crime-extinction-acts-genocide-gaza>.

⁷⁶ The Guardian, *Meta allows ads crowdfunding for IDF drones, consumer watchdog finds*, July 21, 2025. Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/jul/21/meta-idf-drone-ads-israel>

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Ekō in December 2024, during which 98 ads were flagged. Despite this, Meta has continued to permit the same publishers to launch new fundraising campaigns featuring nearly identical content.⁷⁸

Inactive

Library ID: 433212703161187

Nov 21, 2024 - Nov 23, 2024 · Total active time 5 hrs

Platforms    

EU transparency 

See ad details

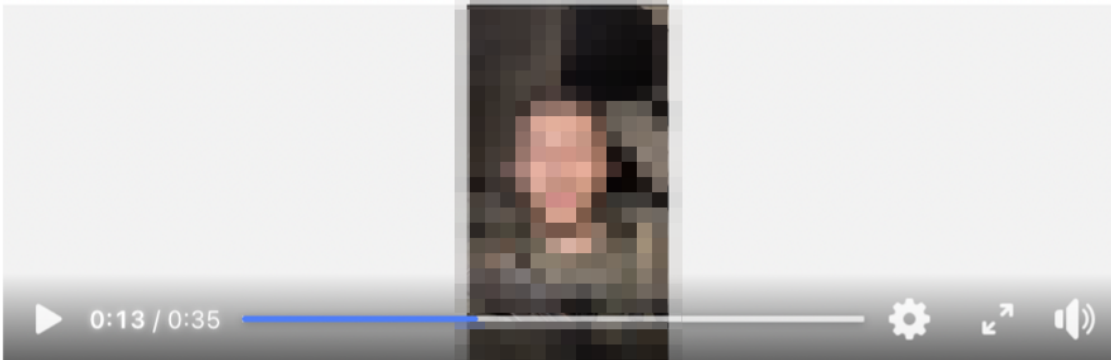


Vaad HaTzedaka
Sponsored

URGENT !! The north of Israel is under attack by Hezbollah

"Vaad Hatzedaka" is currently mobilizing its best resources to support the fronts in Gaza and the North—sending equipment to soldiers (uniforms, drones, generators, and more) while also increasing assistance to the civilian population in the North, who are in need of emergency food supplies, generators and batteries for times of power outages.

...



0:13 / 0:35

An example of an online ad that mentions supplying soldiers with military drones that likely contradicts Meta's policy on Restricted Goods and Services, which bans "*attempts to donate or gift firearms, firearm parts, ammunition, explosives or lethal enhancements.*"⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Eko, *Meta Profiting from Far-Right Genocidal Narratives and Fundraising for Israeli Military Equipment*, December 20, 2024. Available online at: https://aks3.eko.org/pdf/Israel_Meta_Ads_Brief.pdf

⁷⁹ Meta, Restricted Goods and Services policy. Available online at: <https://transparency.meta.com/en-gb/policies/community-standards/restricted-goods-services/>

Online ads may also be weaponized to discredit UN agencies,⁸⁰ international courts,⁸¹ and humanitarian organizations, particularly when these entities pose a challenge to propaganda narratives aimed at legitimizing unlawful use of force.

As noted by Special Rapporteur Kahn in her report on disinformation and free expression during conflict, parties to conflicts or their allies have employed propaganda to undermine the credibility of human rights defenders and humanitarian actors, often spreading unfounded allegations of their supposed bias, criminal conduct, or affiliations with armed groups.⁸² While deeply problematic, not all such propaganda will amount to propaganda for war. At the same time, it could constitute propaganda for war if, for example, it forms part of a coordinated strategy to dehumanize the “adversary” or to justify the continued illegal use of force.

For example, the Israeli government reportedly purchased Google search ads targeting users searching for information about United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), redirecting them to a website alleging links between the agency and Hamas.⁸³ The apparent objective of such advertising is to undermine public trust in UNRWA, discourage donations, and ultimately contribute to the agency’s delegitimization and dismantlement.⁸⁴

Although the UN acknowledged that at least nine UNRWA staff members may have been involved in the October 7 attacks and dismissed them following an investigation, launching a campaign to discredit the entire agency is misleading, especially given that UNRWA remains the only organization capable of delivering aid to the desperate population.⁸⁵ In October 2025 the International Court of Justice (ICJ) also ruled that Israel has a duty to not impede the work of UNRWA.⁸⁶

On August 21, 2025, one day before the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) declared widespread famine (IPC Phase 5) was occurring in Gaza Governorate,⁸⁷ Israel’s Ministry of Foreign

⁸⁰ Middle East Eye, *Israel buying ads on Google searches of 'Unrwa' to discredit UN agency*, August 27, 2024. Available online at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-buying-ads-google-search-unrwa-discredit-agency>

⁸¹ Vice, *Israel Defends Itself Against Hague Genocide Allegations with Google Ads*, January 11, 2024. Available online at: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/israel-defends-itself-against-hague-genocide-allegations-with-google-ads/>

⁸² Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, *Report on disinformation and freedom of expression during armed conflict*, A/77/288, August 12, 2022, para 24. Available online at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a77288-disinformation-and-freedom-opinion-and-expression-during-armed>

⁸³ Middle East Eye, *Israel buying ads on Google searches of 'Unrwa' to discredit UN agency*, August 27, 2024. Available online at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-buying-ads-google-search-unrwa-discredit-agency>

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Also, Misbar, *Israel Uses Sponsored Ads to Flood the Internet With Digital Propaganda*, August 7, 2025. Available online at: <https://www.misbar.com/en/editorial/2025/08/07/israel-uses-sponsored-ads-flood-internet-digital-propaganda>

⁸⁵ UN completes investigation on UNRWA staff, August 5, 2024. Available online at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/08/1152841>

⁸⁶ International Court of Justice, *Obligations of Israel in relation to the Presence and Activities of the United Nations, Other International Organizations and Third States in and in relation to the Occupied Palestinian Territory*, October 22, 2025. Available online at: <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/196>

⁸⁷ Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, *Famine Review Committee: Gaza Strip*, August 22, 2025. Available online at: https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Famine_Review_Committee_Report_Gaza_Aug2025.pdf

Affairs launched a multilingual campaign in English,⁸⁸ Italian,⁸⁹ Polish,⁹⁰ and German,⁹¹ featuring images of food in Gaza's markets and restaurants alongside the statement: "*There is food in Gaza. Any other claim is a lie.*"⁹²



The Guardian, *UN-backed experts declare famine in and around Gaza City*, August 22, 2025. Available online at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/aug/22/ipc-declares-famine-gaza-city>

⁸⁸ Published on August 21, 2025. Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKB0SKNOfbA>

Published on August 24, 2025. Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3usAK5h33iM>

⁸⁹ Published on August 22, 2025. Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fHFQn2lhbUk>

Published on August 25, 2025. Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hgi5lPurKol>

⁹⁰ Published on August 22, 2025. Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spaVOsoJhXw>

⁹¹ Published on August 22, 2025. Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPKXk4FvPhU>

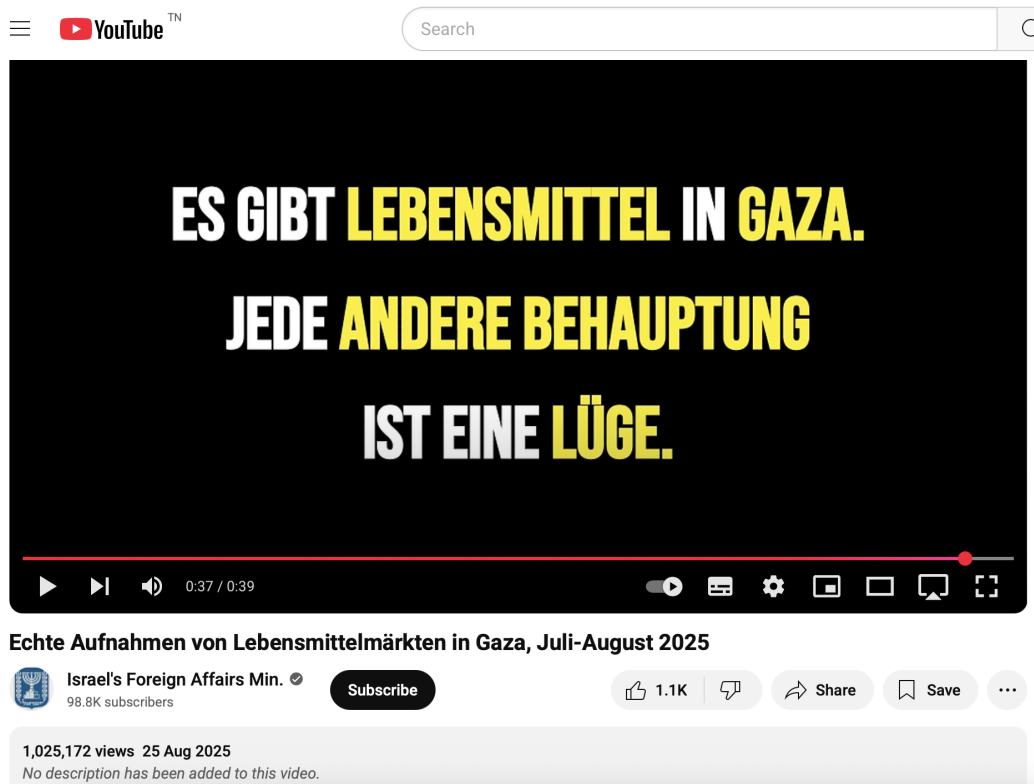
Published on August 25, 2025. Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10V2klT0l3g>

⁹² See on Reddit:

https://www.reddit.com/r/Palestine/comments/1mxfvgg/a_youtube_ad_shown_today_the_same_day_the_un/

Also see: Drop Site, *Google's \$45 Million Contract With Netanyahu's Office to Spread Israeli Propaganda*, September 3, 2025.

Available online at: <https://www.dropsitenews.com/p/google-youtube-netanyahu-israel-propaganda-gaza-famine>



In a typical context, assessing a single piece of content that may constitute misinformation can be addressed through various measures, such as countering the claim with other advertisements or content, or, in extreme cases, removing it. However, in this case, where the ICJ made a preliminary ruling ordering Israel to take all measures to prevent genocide and punish incitement to genocide,⁹³ such content should be examined with heightened scrutiny. This type of ad must be evaluated within the broader context of propaganda for war, as it may intend to justify actions that could amount to breaches of IHRL, as well as IHL and ICL.

Addressing propaganda for war through online ads

Propaganda experts John Whitton and Arthur Larson, in their book *Propaganda: Towards Disarmament in the War of Words*, emphasize that war propaganda is not the root cause of armed conflict. Rather, the roots lie in deeper, persistent national and international tensions, whether ideological, religious, economic, territorial, security-related, or historical in nature. The central challenge for achieving peace is not to eliminate underlying tensions entirely, but to prevent them from escalating into open warfare.⁹⁴

⁹³ ICJ, Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel). Available online at: <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/192>

⁹⁴ John B. Whitton, Arthur Larson, *Propaganda: Towards Disarmament in the War of Words*, New York: Oceana Publications, 1964, p. 1.

In this context, social media platforms, alongside other actors, can play a constructive role in reducing dormant tensions or even addressing them. They can do so in part by dedicating sufficient resources to prevent propaganda for war from fueling escalation.

To address propaganda for war disseminated through online ads, Access Now recommends that social media platforms adopt a dedicated policy on armed conflict. This policy should cover all relevant phases, from the escalation of hostile official rhetoric to the resolution of the conflict, and, in some cases, should cover the phase beyond resolution if there is a credible risk that military action may resume.

At the outset, it is essential for platforms to draw lessons from past experiences by identifying areas of policy failure, pinpointing aspects that require improvement and recognizing strengths that should be maintained or reinforced. The second step should involve a multistakeholder consultation to identify key themes that an armed conflict policy must address in order to mitigate the most salient risks associated with a platform's services.

While social media platforms have occasionally established ad hoc crisis response teams to address specific conflicts, such efforts fall significantly short of what heightened due diligence requires to effectively mitigate human rights harms and prevent the facilitation of gross international law violations.

Given the increasing use of social media platforms by different actors in modern information warfare, these teams should not be temporary or reactive. Rather, they must be permanent structures with the core mandate of monitoring regions at risk of sudden escalation, allowing for timely and appropriate interventions.

Moreover, these teams should include experts in international law, as well as personnel with deep knowledge of the local language, history, and socio-political context of conflict-prone areas.

Recommendations

Responding to propaganda for war, particularly through online ads, is an extraordinarily difficult challenge. Putting the sole onus on social media platforms to fix this problem would only exacerbate an already problematic delegation of regulatory authority. Therefore, all relevant actors — states, social media platforms, and international and regional bodies — must take action.

To address propaganda for war disseminated through online ads, Access Now recommends that:

States:

- Issue policies and codes of conduct related to official channels and the use of social media, particularly by military or political authorities;

- Withdraw any reservation to the Article 20 (1) of the ICCPR;
- Adopt laws that prohibit propaganda for war in compliance with IHRL and particularly Article 19 (3);
- Refrain from encouraging, funding, or further disseminating propaganda for war;
- Condemn propaganda for war; and
- Investigate and take appropriate punitive measures to limit or punish the dissemination of propaganda for war while ensuring respect for freedom of expression, online and offline.

Social media platforms:

Further to the Declaration of Principles for Content and Platform Governance in Times of Crisis published by Access Now and civil society partners,⁹⁵ which provides detailed guidance for social media platforms operating in armed conflict on how to moderate and curate content in a right-respecting manner, companies involved in targeted advertising should:

- Establish permanent mechanisms tasked with systematically monitoring regions vulnerable to rapid conflict escalation;
- Inform and integrate existing cybersecurity threat intelligence teams and mechanisms with those that focus on international law and armed conflict, including through internal information-sharing working groups and external advisory boards;
- Develop a dedicated policy on armed conflict, through robust consultation with affected communities, legal and policy experts, and in respect of IHRL and IHL;
- Issue a precise and clear dedicated ads policy on propaganda for war in line with international human rights standards;
- Adopt heightened human rights due diligence measures when operating in conflict-affected or high-risk areas, including conducting regular risk assessments particularly of their algorithms, ad-targeting tools, and content moderation systems, to prevent their services from being used to amplify propaganda for war, and publish transparency reports on these efforts;
- Adopt a more comprehensive and holistic approach to detecting, investigating, and moderating propaganda for war in lieu of the standard approach to assessing content in isolation;

⁹⁵ Access Now and others, *Declaration of principles for content and platform governance in times of crisis*, November 29, 2022. Available online at: <https://www.accessnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Declaration-of-principles-for-content-and-platform-governance-in-times-of-crisis.pdf>

- Establish a mechanism to securely archive online ads related to conflict that can be used by national and international courts or investigative commissions; and
- Establish a clear, transparent, and accessible mechanism for documenting and researching online advertisements related to conflict.

International and regional bodies:

- Develop more comprehensive guidance on the definition of propaganda for war as well as state duties under Article 20 (1) of ICCPR, including by establishing clear guidelines for both states and corporate actors, similar to the Rabat Plan of Action related to Article 20 (2); and
- Encourage international tribunals to explicitly examine and incorporate propaganda for war as a legal basis and evidentiary element when prosecuting crimes of aggression, genocide, and other serious international crimes, thereby ensuring accountability for all those responsible for causing or substantially contributing to such violations.