THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE IDENTIFICATION IN THE ESCALATION OF CONFLICTS IN VIRTUAL SOCIAL SPACE

Rahimov Ravshanjon Ne'matjon o'g'li
Researcher, Namangan State University
Phone: +998 93 678 70 80

Abstract. The article examines the role played by individual and collective identification in the escalation of conflicts within virtual social space. The author proceeds from the thesis that the two accounts which dominate public discussion the technological one, according to which the medium itself generates aggression, and the reflective one, according to which online conflict merely displays divisions formed elsewhere — are both inadequate, since the first cannot explain why identical platforms produce different conflict dynamics in different communities and the second cannot explain why conflicts conducted online follow a trajectory that their offline counterparts do not. Employing theoretical analysis, the comparative method and the systemic approach, the study demonstrates that the specific contribution of the digital environment consists in a systematic displacement of the balance between personal and social identity. The conceptions of H. Tajfel and J. Turner, the social identity model of deindividuation of S. Reicher, R. Spears and T. Postmes, the theory of identity fusion of W. Swann and colleagues, E. Goffman's dramaturgical analysis, J. Suler's account of online disinhibition, C. Sunstein's law of group polarisation and A. Honneth's theory of recognition are correlated in order to establish five mechanisms of escalation and the corresponding conditions of its interruption.

Keywords: virtual social space, social identity, deindividuation, identity fusion, online disinhibition, group polarisation, recognition, audience effect, self-presentation, conflict escalation, digital environment, cross-cutting affiliations.

INTRODUCTION

The observation that disputes conducted in virtual social space escalate more rapidly, reach greater intensity and resolve less frequently than comparable disputes conducted face to face has by now acquired the status of a commonplace. The explanations advanced for it, however, remain unsatisfactory, and their inadequacy is of more than academic consequence, since the measures proposed for the mitigation of online conflict follow directly from the account of its causes that is accepted. Two such accounts dominate the discussion. The technological account holds that the medium itself produces the effect: anonymity removes accountability, physical distance removes empathy, and the written form removes the paralinguistic signals by which hostility is ordinarily moderated. The reflective account holds the opposite: that virtual space contributes nothing of its own and merely renders visible the antagonisms that a society already contains. Each account fails against evidence that the other cannot explain either. The technological account cannot accommodate the observation that platforms of identical architecture sustain communities of markedly different conflict intensity, nor the finding that anonymity does not uniformly increase hostility but in certain configurations increases conformity to prevailing group norms, including norms of restraint. The reflective account cannot accommodate the observation that conflicts beginning online frequently follow trajectories that have no offline counterpart: the recruitment of participants who have no stake in the original dispute, the rapid conversion of a

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disagreement over a particular claim into a confrontation between collective identities, and the persistence of hostility after the occasion of the dispute has been forgotten. What is required is an account that identifies what the environment changes without supposing that it determines the outcome. The analytical instrument adequate to this task is supplied by the theory of social identity. H. Tajfel and J. Turner established that an individual's self-concept comprises a personal identity, constituted by idiosyncratic attributes and relationships, and a social identity, constituted by membership of groups, and that the relative salience of the two varies with the situation; when social identity becomes salient, perception shifts towards the accentuation of differences between groups and of similarities within them, and intergroup discrimination may arise in the absence of any conflict of material interest [10, p. 33–47]. The significance of this proposition for the present inquiry lies in its implication that the determinant of intergroup hostility is not the content of group membership but the salience of the categorisation, and salience is precisely what an environment is capable of altering. The specific effect of the digital environment upon this balance was established in the course of a revision of the classical theory of deindividuation. That theory held that anonymity within a crowd suspends the internal controls that ordinarily restrain conduct, so that behaviour becomes impulsive and antinormative. S. Reicher, R. Spears and T. Postmes demonstrated that the empirical record does not support this interpretation and proposed in its place the social identity model of deindividuation, according to which the conditions of anonymity and reduced individuation do not abolish normative regulation but shift its source: the personal self becomes less salient and the social self more so, with the consequence that conduct conforms more closely to the norms of the salient group rather than departing from norms altogether [7, p. 161–175]. This correction reverses the practical implication of the classical account. Anonymity does not release the individual from regulation; it transfers him to the regulation of whichever collective is salient at the moment of action.

To this structural displacement must be added the effects described by J. Suler under the heading of the online disinhibition effect, which he attributed to the convergence of several factors — dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination and the minimisation of status and authority — and which he observed to operate in two directions, towards benign self-disclosure and towards toxic hostility alike [8, p. 321–326]. The two-directional character of the effect is frequently overlooked and is theoretically important: it indicates that disinhibition is not in itself an explanation of hostility but a condition that permits whatever disposition is salient to be expressed with diminished moderation. A third element is contributed by the conditions of visibility that distinguish virtual dispute from its oral counterpart. E. Goffman demonstrated that social conduct possesses a dramaturgical structure, that individuals present a self to an audience and that the maintenance of a line once taken becomes an obligation in proportion to the publicity of its assumption [3, p. 17–76]. In virtual space the audience is extensive, frequently unknown and effectively permanent, and a position once stated is recorded, searchable and attributable. The retraction of a claim is accordingly not a private adjustment but a public performance of defeat before an audience that includes those whose regard the speaker values, and the cost of this performance rises with the number of witnesses to the original commitment. The mechanism by which identification translates into readiness for extreme action is described by the theory of identity fusion. W. Swann and colleagues distinguished fusion from ordinary identification: where identification entails that group membership is one component of the self, fusion entails that the personal and the social self become functionally equivalent, so that a threat to the group is experienced as a threat to the person and the agentic resources of the personal self are placed at the service of the collective [5, p. 995–1011]. C. Sunstein, approaching the question from

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the study of deliberation, established the law of group polarisation, according to which the members of a deliberating group predictably move towards a more extreme point in the direction already favoured by their predeliberation tendency [9, p. 175–186]. The problem possesses a particular configuration in societies in which the digital environment has expanded rapidly while the institutions of mediation have not. In Uzbekistan the formation of the worldview through which young people interpret group membership proceeds within the system of continuous education [1, p. 314–316; 2, p. 10–13], and the renewal of the models of university preparation determines whether this formation equips them to participate in public dispute as individuals or as representatives of collectives [6, p. 325–328]. The aim of the present article consists in determining the role of individual and collective identification in the escalation of conflicts in virtual social space and in establishing the conditions under which escalation may be interrupted. The novelty of the work lies in the representation of the digital environment not as a cause of hostility but as a systematic amplifier of the salience of social identity, and in the identification of the five mechanisms through which this amplification operates.

The study relies upon the theoretical analysis and synthesis of research in the social psychology of intergroup relations, the sociology of self-presentation and the study of computer-mediated communication. The comparative method has been applied in order to correlate conceptions formed within distinct research traditions and to establish the points at which their explanatory schemes converge upon a single mechanism. The systemic approach has made it possible to represent escalation not as the outcome of any single factor but as the product of several mechanisms operating simultaneously and reinforcing one another. The logical-methodological analysis of the two prevailing accounts of online conflict has served to identify the evidence that each is unable to accommodate. The material of the investigation comprises the classical works of social identity theory, the revised model of deindividuation phenomena, the theory of identity fusion, the dramaturgical analysis of self-presentation and the research literature on group polarisation.

The first result establishes the general form of the contribution made by the digital environment. That contribution is neither the production of hostility nor the passive transmission of hostility formed elsewhere, but a systematic displacement of the balance between personal and social identity in favour of the latter. In face-to-face interaction a participant is continuously individuated: he is perceived as a particular person with a biography, a manner and a set of relationships that exceed the category under which he is currently being addressed, and this individuation operates as a brake upon categorical perception. In virtual interaction the individuating information is sparse and the categorical information is abundant, since a profile displays affiliations, positions and markers of belonging while disclosing comparatively little of the person. The environment therefore does not make people hostile; it makes them representatives, and hostility between representatives follows a different dynamic from hostility between persons. The second result specifies the first mechanism of escalation, which is the categorisation cascade. A dispute begins as a disagreement over a particular claim, in which the participants are individuals holding positions. At some point one participant attributes his opponent’s position to the opponent’s category rather than to his reasoning, and the reply is made in kind. From that moment the exchange ceases to concern the original claim, since the claim has become a token of membership, and concessions upon it would constitute a betrayal of those on whose behalf the participant now speaks. The cascade is difficult to reverse because its reversal requires a participant to abandon a position for which he has acquired collective support, and the practical implication is that the decisive moment of an online dispute occurs early, before the categorical framing has been established, rather than at the point of greatest intensity.The third result concerns the mechanism of normative transfer,

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which follows from the revision of the theory of deindividuation and which contradicts the expectation most commonly held. Where anonymity is supposed to release the individual from all constraint, the evidence indicates that it transfers him from the constraint of personal standards to the constraint of the norms prevailing in the salient collective. The consequence for escalation is that the moderating influence of an individual's own disposition is weakened precisely where the group norm is one of hostility, and that participants of mild personal temperament may conduct themselves with severity when acting as members. It follows that interventions directed at individual restraint — appeals to civility, reminders of the humanity of the opponent — are addressed to a self that is not currently in control, and that the effective point of intervention is the group norm rather than the individual conscience. The fourth result concerns the mechanism of public commitment. The visibility that characterises virtual dispute converts the taking of a position into a performance before an audience, and the permanence of the record converts the performance into a commitment. Two consequences follow. The first is the asymmetric cost of retraction: a participant who has been supported, quoted and reproduced by others cannot withdraw without imposing a loss upon those who extended their support, so that his freedom to revise his view diminishes as his success in expressing it increases. The second is the recruitment of witnesses into parties: those who have publicly endorsed a position acquire a stake in its vindication, and a dispute between two persons becomes a dispute between two collectives without any additional provocation. The dramaturgical structure of the environment thus performs an escalatory function independently of the content of what is said.

The fifth result concerns the quantification of recognition, which constitutes the mechanism most specific to the contemporary digital environment and the one least addressed in the literature on conflict. A. Honneth established that the experiences motivating social struggle are experiences of disrespect and that claims to recognition constitute the moral grammar of social conflict [4, p. 131–139]. The digital environment renders recognition measurable, public and comparable: it is expressed in counts of endorsement, circulation and following, and these counts are visible to the recipient and to everyone else. The effect upon conflict is twofold. Recognition becomes a scarce and competable resource rather than a quality of a relationship, so that its pursuit acquires a rivalrous character; and since content expressing categorical hostility reliably attracts higher counts than content expressing qualification, the measurement system rewards precisely the conduct that escalates. Participants are not required to be hostile in order for hostility to be selected. The sixth result concerns the mechanism of fusion and the threshold at which escalation changes in kind. So long as group membership remains one component of the self among others, a threat to the group is a serious matter but a bounded one, and the person retains resources of judgement that are not at the group's disposal. Where the personal and the collective self have become functionally equivalent, the threat is experienced as directed at the person himself, the ordinary calculations of cost and proportion cease to apply, and conduct that would otherwise appear excessive becomes intelligible to the actor as self-defence. The digital environment contributes to the attainment of this threshold through the density and continuity of group contact it permits: a person may now spend the greater part of his discretionary attention within a single categorical community, encountering its members and its grievances without interruption, which no earlier form of association made possible. The seventh result concerns the conditions of interruption, which follow from the mechanisms identified and which differ from the measures ordinarily proposed. Since the proximate cause of escalation is the salience of a single categorical identity, the effective counter-condition is the maintenance of multiple identifications that do not coincide. A participant who belongs simultaneously to communities whose boundaries cross one another encounters, within his own affiliations, persons who

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are opponents in one dimension and allies in another, and this experience restores the individuating information that the environment otherwise removes. It must be acknowledged, however, that the simple exposure of participants to opposing views is not sufficient and may be counterproductive, since an opposing view encountered without a shared affiliation is received as a threat and strengthens the identification it was intended to loosen. What interrupts escalation is not contact with opponents but shared membership with them — which indicates why institutions of the cross-cutting type, including the mahalla and educational establishments recruiting across regions and strata, retain a function that no measure of content moderation can replace.

CONCLUSION

The analysis undertaken permits the following conclusions. First, neither the technological nor the reflective account of conflict in virtual social space is adequate, since the first cannot explain the divergent conflict dynamics of communities inhabiting identical platforms and the second cannot explain the trajectories that online disputes follow and their offline counterparts do not. The contribution of the environment is real but is neither the production of hostility nor its mere transmission. Second, that contribution consists in a systematic displacement of the balance between personal and social identity. The digital environment supplies sparse individuating information and abundant categorical information, and it thereby converts participants in a dispute from persons into representatives. Hostility between representatives obeys a different dynamic from hostility between persons, and the whole of the escalatory sequence follows from this displacement. Third, the displacement operates through five identifiable mechanisms: the categorisation cascade, which converts a disagreement over a claim into a confrontation between memberships; normative transfer, which replaces the regulation of conduct by personal standards with regulation by group norms; public commitment, which raises the cost of retraction in proportion to the success of the original statement; the quantification of recognition, which renders recognition rivalrous and rewards categorical hostility; and identity fusion, which removes the ordinary calculations of proportion. Fourth, the practical implication of normative transfer deserves particular emphasis, since it contradicts the assumption underlying most proposed remedies. Appeals to individual restraint are addressed to a self that is not in control at the moment of action, and measures that succeed are therefore those directed at the norms of the collective that is salient rather than at the conscience of the individual participant. Fifth, the condition of interruption is the maintenance of multiple non-coinciding identifications rather than exposure to opposing views, since an opposing view encountered in the absence of shared affiliation is received as a threat and strengthens the identification it was intended to loosen. In the conditions of Uzbekistan this places a function of direct public significance upon institutions whose membership cross-cuts the principal lines of division. The prospect of further research consists in the empirical measurement of the salience displacement across platforms of differing architecture.

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