

Networked Publics and Civic Participation: The Role of Citizen Media in the Israel–Gaza War

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Abstract

The expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally redefined contemporary media practices, enabling participatory media to emerge as a central force in democratic communication. This transformation has facilitated the rise of citizen journalism, where non-professional entities engage in news production, circulation, and interpretation through networked digital platforms. In contemporary political conflicts, these participatory practices increasingly intersect with grassroots civic action, positioning media participation not only as representational activity but as a form of civic engagement, resistance, and social intervention. This study examines the interconnected relationship between participatory media, citizen journalism, and grassroots civic action through the case of the Israel Gaza war (2023–2025), during which citizen-generated audiovisual content, real-time digital reporting, and transnational online mobilization shaped global political discourse. Based in Participatory Communication Theory and Civic Engagement Theory, this study conceptualizes participatory media as a communicative infrastructure enabling citizen journalism to operate as a catalyst for civic awareness, collective mobilization, and political accountability beyond institutional media frameworks.

The research examines how participatory media practices during political conflicts transform citizen journalism into tangible grassroots civic action locally and transnationally. Using the Israel Gaza war as context, it focuses on how

civilians and activists documented airstrikes, humanitarian crises, and civilian suffering through mobile videos and social media amid restricted journalistic access. It addresses a gap in scholarship by moving beyond viewing citizen journalism merely as an alternative news ecosystem. Methodologically, this research adopts a qualitative and conceptual approach, analyzing Gaza-related citizen media on social platforms. It demonstrates the impact of citizen journalism by showing how firsthand videos and posts document crises, mobilize audiences, and challenge dominant narratives. It contributes empirical insights into how participatory media boosts civic engagement and enables measurable grassroots accountability through digital documentation, transnational advocacy, and community-driven action. By foregrounding grassroots civic action as an outcome of participatory communication, this research contributes to democratic communication studies by highlighting how citizen journalism expands civic participation during political crises, despite challenges related to credibility, platform governance, and structural inequality.

Keywords: Participatory Media, Citizen Journalism, Grassroots Civic Action, Civic Engagement, Digital Political Communication.

1. Introduction

The relationship between media and democracy has undergone a profound transformation in the digital era. Traditional mass media systems, historically characterized by centralized production, institutional gatekeeping, and professional authority, are increasingly supplemented and at times disrupted by participatory media practices enabled through networked digital technologies. Social media platforms, mobile devices, and real-time connectivity have lowered barriers to entry in public communication, allowing ordinary citizens to document events, circulate narratives, and engage directly in political discourse. These transformations have produced what scholars describe as networked publics digitally mediated collectivities formed through technological affordances and shared political concerns (boyd, 2010).

Networked publics are not merely audiences but active participants in meaning-making, visibility production, and civic mobilization. In contexts of political conflict and humanitarian crisis, such publics play a crucial role in shaping global discourse and civic response.

Citizen journalism has emerged as a central practice within this transformed media ecology. Unlike professional journalism, citizen journalism is produced by non-institutional actors who document events from lived, situated perspectives. During conflicts, citizen media often fills informational voids created by censorship, restricted access, or the political economy of mainstream news organizations. The Israel–Gaza war (2023–2025) represents a critical case for examining how participatory media intersects with civic participation under conditions of violence, information control, and digital warfare. This paper argues that citizen media during the Israel–Gaza war functioned not merely as an alternative news source but as an infrastructure for civic engagement and grassroots accountability. By situating citizen journalism within participatory communication and civic engagement frameworks, the study advances an understanding of networked media as a site where witnessing, narration, and political action converge.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Despite the proliferation of citizen media during contemporary conflicts, dominant communication scholarship continues to conceptualize citizen journalism primarily as an alternative information source or a supplement to professional journalism. This framing limits analytical attention to issues of credibility, verification, and competition with institutional media, often overlooking the broader civic implications of participatory media practices. In conflict contexts such as the Israel–Gaza war, where institutional journalism faces severe restrictions and political pressures, citizen media does more than inform; it mobilizes, documents, and demands accountability. However, there remains insufficient scholarly examination of how citizen-generated content translates into tangible civic

participation, particularly across transnational networked publics.

The problem this study addresses is the lack of an integrated framework that connects citizen journalism, participatory communication, and grassroots civic action within digital conflict environments.

2. Objective

The study seeks to develop a nuanced understanding of how citizen media functions as a crucial communicative force during moments of geopolitical crisis, with particular reference to the Israel–Gaza war. It examines the ways in which citizen-generated content reshapes civic participation by enabling ordinary individuals to move beyond passive media consumption and engage actively in political discourse, public debate, and collective moral positioning. By foregrounding voices that are often absent or marginalized in mainstream news narratives, citizen media becomes a space where civic agency is performed, negotiated, and amplified. Central to this inquiry is an analysis of participatory media practices as forms of mediated witnessing. Through images, videos, testimonies, and real-time digital storytelling, citizen journalists bear witness to violence, displacement, and humanitarian crises, while simultaneously challenging dominant narratives circulated by state and corporate media. The study explores how these practices foster narrative contestation, allowing multiple, often conflicting, interpretations of the conflict to coexist and compete in the public sphere.

The research further investigates how mediated visibility generated through citizen journalism translates into tangible forms of grassroots civic action. It explores the ways digital witnessing inspires offline mobilization, solidarity campaigns, protests, humanitarian aid initiatives, and transnational advocacy networks, thereby linking symbolic representation with material civic engagement. The study also situates citizen media within broader theoretical frameworks of participatory communication and civic engagement, emphasizing its role in democratizing communication, redistributing symbolic

power, and reconfiguring the relationship between media producers and audiences. In doing so, it highlights citizen media as both a communicative practice and a political act embedded within contemporary digital public spheres. Finally, the research critically engages with the limitations and contradictions of citizen media, particularly concerns related to credibility, misinformation, algorithmic visibility, platform governance, and structural inequalities that shape who gets seen and heard. By addressing these constraints, the study aims to present a balanced assessment of citizen media as a contested yet vital arena of civic participation in times of conflict.

3. Literature Review

Participatory media has become central to understanding contemporary communication practices, particularly in situations of political crisis and armed conflict. Jenkins et al. (2013) conceptualize participatory culture as one characterized by “low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and a sense that members’ contributions matter.” This framework challenges the traditional producer–consumer hierarchy of mass media and positions audiences as active participants in meaning-making processes. In conflict contexts, participatory media enables affected populations to narrate their own realities, often bypassing institutional filters imposed by state, military, or corporate media systems.

The emergence of participatory media has facilitated the formation of *networked publics*, a concept that explains how publics are constructed through digital infrastructures rather than physical co-presence. boyd (2010) argues that networked publics are shaped by technological affordances such as persistence, scalability, visibility, and searchability, which fundamentally alter how discourse circulates and accumulates over time. These affordances allow localized experiences to achieve global reach, transforming individual acts of documentation into collective political narratives. In the context of the Israel–Gaza war, citizen-generated videos,

images, and testimonies circulated rapidly across platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, Telegram, and TikTok, enabling civilians in Gaza to address global audiences directly. As Castells (2012) notes, power in the network society increasingly lies in “the capacity to shape the construction of meaning,” a process now deeply embedded in networked communication environments. Citizen journalism occupies a critical position within these participatory and networked media ecologies, particularly in conflict reporting. Allan (2013) conceptualizes citizen journalism as a form of *citizen witnessing*, arguing that it disrupts institutional control over war narratives by foregrounding civilian perspectives and lived experiences. In situations where professional journalists face restricted access, surveillance, or expulsion as seen repeatedly during the Gaza conflict citizen journalists often become primary sources of real-time information. Studies on the 2023–2024 Israel–Gaza war indicate that international news organizations frequently relied on citizen-produced visuals from Gaza due to limited on-ground reporting access (Zelizer, 2024). This reliance underscores how citizen media not only supplements but at times substitutes professional journalism in contemporary war coverage.

Recent empirical studies further highlight the political significance of citizen media during the Gazawar. Digital media researchers have observed that platforms such as Telegram functioned as high-intensity spaces for documentation and archival practices, while X and Instagram amplified emotionally charged content to global audiences (Antonakaki & Ioannidis, 2024). These studies demonstrate that platform affordances shape not only visibility but also emotional tone and narrative framing. Visual documentation of civilian casualties, destroyed infrastructure, and everyday survival became central to global discourse, reinforcing Allan’s claim that citizen witnessing reorients attention away from military strategy toward humanitarian suffering. However, much of the existing literature on citizen journalism remains focused on epistemic concerns such as credibility, verification, and misinformation. While these issues are significant, scholars

such as Couldry (2012) argue that an exclusive focus on epistemology risks overlooking the civic value of voice. He asserts that “voice is a value because it represents the capacity of individuals to give an account of themselves and their conditions.” From this perspective, citizen journalism in Gaza should be understood not merely as information transmission but as a civic act asserting visibility, dignity, and political presence in a context of structural marginalization. The civic implications of citizen media become particularly evident when examined through the lens of digital activism and civic engagement. Papacharissi’s (2015) concept of *affective publics* describes networked formations mobilized through shared emotions rather than formal political organization. Emotions such as grief, outrage, empathy, and solidarity play a central role in sustaining participation within digital publics. Recent studies on the Gaza war show that citizen-generated content acted as a powerful emotional trigger, catalyzing transnational protests, online campaigns, fundraising initiatives, and advocacy for ceasefire and humanitarian intervention (Milan & Treré, 2024). These affect-driven engagements illustrate how mediated witnessing translates into tangible civic action across borders.

At the same time, scholars caution against romanticizing participatory media. Research on the Gaza conflict also points to algorithmic bias, uneven visibility, platform governance, and geopolitical power asymmetries that shape whose voices are amplified and whose are suppressed (Poell, Nieborg & van Dijck, 2022; Zuboff, 2019). Thus, participatory media emerges as a contested civic space simultaneously enabling democratic expression and reproducing structural inequalities. However, existing scholarship reveals a significant gap in systematically connecting mediated witnessing to sustained civic outcomes. While emotional mobilization is frequently acknowledged, the processes through which citizen media translates visibility into grassroots civic action remain under-theorized. Moreover, participatory media studies often analyze citizen journalism, digital activism, and civic engagement as separate domains, without adequately situating them within

participatory communication frameworks or traditions of communication for social change. This fragmentation limits a holistic understanding of citizen media as a participatory civic practice rather than an episodic digital response. Additionally, although recent research acknowledges the role of platform governance and algorithmic visibility, there is limited critical engagement with how structural inequalities shape whose voices are amplified and whose suffering remains invisible. The Gaza conflict underscores how participatory media spaces are deeply contested, influenced by platform policies, geopolitical power, and uneven access to visibility. In light of these gaps, the present study is necessary to move beyond descriptive and credibility-focused analyses and to foreground the civic role of citizen media during the Israel-Gaza war. By integrating participatory media theory, citizen journalism scholarship, and civic engagement frameworks, this study seeks to examine how mediated witnessing enables narrative contestation and translates into grassroots civic action. At the same time, it critically addresses the limitations of citizen media related to credibility, platform governance, and structural inequality. In doing so, the study contributes a more comprehensive and context-sensitive understanding of citizen media as a vital yet contested arena of civic participation in contemporary conflict settings.

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in two complementary yet distinct theoretical perspectives: Participatory Communication Theory and Civic Engagement Theory. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for analyzing citizen media as both a communicative practice and a mode of civic participation during the Israel-Gaza war. While Participatory Communication Theory explains how marginalized voices reclaim narrative agency through dialogic communication, Civic Engagement Theory helps conceptualize how such mediated expression translates into political and civic action within networked publics.

3.2. Participatory Communication Theory

Participatory Communication Theory conceptualizes communication as a dialogic, inclusive, and community-centered process rather than a top-down transmission of information. Emerging from development communication and communication for social change traditions, this theory challenges modernization and diffusion models that position audiences as passive recipients of expert knowledge. Scholars such as Paulo Freire emphasize dialogue as a process of empowerment, arguing that communication should enable marginalized communities to reflect upon, articulate, and transform their social realities. In this framework, communication is understood as a collaborative practice that fosters collective meaning-making and social change. Within participatory communication, voice and agency are central analytical concerns. Scholars argue that the ability to narrate one's own experience is intrinsically political, particularly for communities that have historically been silenced or misrepresented. Participatory communication thus prioritizes horizontal communication structures, local knowledge, and community ownership over media processes. Applied to digital environments, this theory recognizes participatory media as an extension of grassroots communication, where digital platforms become spaces for dialogic exchange and narrative contestation.

In the context of citizen media, Participatory Communication Theory highlights how ordinary individuals engage in acts of mediated self-representation that challenge dominant media narratives. During the Israel-Gaza war, civilians in Gaza used mobile phones and social media platforms to document everyday experiences of violence, displacement, and survival. These acts of documentation function as participatory communication practices that reclaim narrative agency from institutional media and state-controlled information systems. Rather than being spoken for, citizens speak for themselves, transforming communication into an act of resistance and empowerment. This theoretical lens allows the study to examine citizen journalism as a form of dialogic expression

rooted in lived experience and community-centered storytelling.

3.3. Civic Engagement Theory

Civic Engagement Theory offers a broader understanding of political participation that extends beyond formal institutional processes such as voting, party affiliation, or legislative involvement. Contemporary civic engagement scholarship recognizes participation as encompassing protest, advocacy, public discourse, volunteerism, and digitally mediated collective action. This expanded view reflects transformations in civic life brought about by digital technologies, which enable decentralized, issue-based, and transnational forms of engagement. Central to Civic Engagement Theory is the idea that civic participation is not limited to state-centered politics but includes everyday practices through which citizens express political identities, moral positions, and collective concerns. Scholars such as Dahlgren argue that civic engagement is shaped by cultural and emotional dimensions, including identity, trust, and belonging. In digital contexts, civic engagement often emerges through networked communication, where publics mobilize around shared narratives and affective connections rather than formal organizational structures. Applied to citizen media, Civic Engagement Theory conceptualizes citizen journalism as a hybrid civic practice that combines representation with action. Citizen-generated content does not merely inform audiences; it invites participation, debate, and mobilization. In the Gaza war, citizen media acted as a catalyst for civic engagement by generating emotional responses such as empathy and outrage, which fueled protests, online advocacy campaigns, humanitarian fundraising, and transnational solidarity movements. Civic Engagement Theory thus enables the study to analyze how mediated witnessing translates into concrete civic outcomes, linking visibility and storytelling to collective action. By employing Civic Engagement Theory, the study examines how citizen media contributes to the formation of networked civic publics and sustains engagement beyond episodic moments of crisis. It also allows for critical analysis

of how digital platforms, algorithmic visibility, and power asymmetries shape opportunities for participation and influence.

3.4. Integrating the Two Theories

While Participatory Communication Theory explains how citizen media enables narrative agency and dialogic expression, Civic Engagement Theory elucidates how such expression becomes embedded within broader practices of civic participation. Together, these theories provide a holistic framework for understanding citizen journalism during the Israel–Gaza war as both a communicative intervention and a civic act. This integrated approach allows the present study to examine not only how citizens communicate during conflict but also how such communication shapes civic consciousness, collective action, and contemporary digital public life.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and conceptual research design to examine how citizen media functions as mediated witnessing and a catalyst for civic engagement during the Israel–Gaza war. A qualitative approach is appropriate for this inquiry as it allows for an in-depth interpretation of narratives, emotions, and civic meanings embedded within citizen-generated media, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative metrics alone. The study prioritizes meaning-making processes, narrative framing, and civic implications over measurement of reach or engagement statistics. The unit of analysis consists of citizen-generated audiovisual and textual content circulated on digital platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, TikTok, Telegram, and YouTube between October 2023 and early 2025. These platforms were selected due to their central role in hosting real-time citizen journalism during the Gaza conflict. The dataset includes mobile phone videos, photographs, first-person testimonies, captions, hashtags, reels, livestream recordings, and public posts created by civilians, independent journalists, and activists operating outside formal media institutions. Data collection followed

a purposive and theoretically informed sampling strategy. Content was selected based on its relevance to citizen witnessing, narrative intervention, emotional expression, and civic orientation. Both high-visibility content that circulated widely across global networks and low-visibility, everyday documentation were included to capture the diversity of citizen media practices. To deepen analytical rigor, the study incorporates four illustrative case studies that function as focused analytical units within the broader thematic analysis. The first case study examines citizen documentation during communication blackouts in Gaza, focusing on short mobile videos and text updates circulated via Telegram channels. These posts documented everyday survival, shortages of food and medical supplies, and moments of fear and waiting. This case highlights mediated witnessing under conditions of infrastructural collapse and restricted journalistic access, illustrating how citizens assume the role of primary narrators in the absence of institutional media.

The second case study focuses on viral visual content shared on Instagram and X that depicted civilian casualties and destroyed neighborhoods. This case analyzes how such imagery contributed to narrative contestation by challenging official military framings and foregrounding humanitarian perspectives. Attention is given to captions, hashtags, and audience responses to understand how visual witnessing generated moral claims and political debate within networked publics.

The third case study examines TikTok-based storytelling by young Gazan creators who used short-form videos to narrate everyday life amid conflict, combining personal testimony with humor, irony, or silence. This case explores affective mobilization, showing how intimacy and relatability fostered empathy and transnational solidarity, particularly among younger global audiences. The fourth case study analyzes citizen media linked directly to civic action, such as posts that circulated alongside calls for protests, fundraising campaigns, or humanitarian aid initiatives. This case traces how mediated visibility translated into offline and online civic engagement,

including demonstrations, donation drives, and advocacy efforts across different national contexts. Analytically, the study employs a thematic coding approach grounded in qualitative content analysis. Initial open coding identified recurring communicative patterns, which were refined through axial coding into core themes: mediated witnessing, narrative contestation, affective mobilization, and civic action. The case studies were then analyzed within these thematic categories to illustrate how abstract patterns materialize in specific media practices. Ethical considerations guided all stages of analysis. Graphic imagery was avoided, dignity and anonymity were prioritized, and content was examined only in its publicly available form without interaction with creators. The study adheres to ethical standards for digital conflict research, acknowledging the risks faced by citizen journalists. Overall, this methodological approach enables a nuanced, ethically grounded understanding of citizen media as a participatory and civic practice during the Israel-Gaza war, combining thematic analysis with case-based depth to illuminate the link between communication, emotion, and civic engagement.

5. Analysis and Discussion

Citizen media emerged as a crucial communicative force during the Israel-Gaza war, particularly in a context marked by restricted access for professional journalists and severe information controls. Civilians on the ground used mobile phones and social media platforms to document airstrikes, displacement, shortages, and everyday survival, producing a continuous stream of audiovisual testimony. These practices functioned as acts of *mediated witnessing*, transforming private suffering into public claims for recognition. As Couldry (2012) argues, witnessing is not merely observational but inherently civic, as it asserts the right of individuals to have their experiences acknowledged within the public sphere. In the Gaza context, citizen media thus became a means of asserting civic presence in conditions of extreme precarity and silencing.

Beyond documentation, citizen journalism played a significant role in contesting dominant and institutional narratives surrounding the conflict. Mainstream media coverage often relied on official military briefings, geopolitical framing, and episodic reporting, which tended to distance audiences from civilian experiences. In contrast, citizen-generated content offered immediacy, spatial proximity, and emotional intimacy, foregrounding everyday life under bombardment rather than abstract strategic discourse. Tufekci (2017) notes that networked counter-narratives gain power not only through factual correction but through speed, visibility, and emotional resonance. Citizen media during the Israel Gaza war exemplified this dynamic, as real-time visuals and first-person testimonies circulated faster than institutional reporting, challenging official framings and reframing the conflict through humanitarian and moral lenses. These counter-narratives were sustained through networked platforms that enabled what Bennett and Segerberg (2013) describe as *connective action*. Rather than relying on centralized leadership or formal organizations, citizen media facilitated personalized engagement, where individuals shared, remixed, and commented on content in ways aligned with their own values and identities. Hashtags, captions, and short videos functioned as connective tissue linking dispersed audiences into loosely coordinated publics. This form of engagement allowed diverse actors—activists, students, artists, and ordinary users—to participate in the conflict discourse without requiring organizational membership, thereby broadening the scope of civic participation.

A key finding of this analysis is that mediated visibility generated by citizen media did not remain confined to symbolic expression but translated into tangible civic action. Citizen-generated content acted as a catalyst for protests, fundraising campaigns, humanitarian aid initiatives, and advocacy efforts across different national contexts. Visual testimonies of civilian suffering circulated alongside calls for ceasefire demonstrations, donation links, and political petitions, effectively collapsing the distance between witnessing

and acting. This supports the argument that participatory media enables a continuum between representation and action, where emotional engagement becomes a driver of civic mobilization. At the same time, the analysis reveals the ambivalent nature of citizen media as a civic force. While it amplifies marginalized voices, its visibility is uneven and shaped by platform algorithms, moderation policies, and geopolitical power asymmetries. Certain narratives achieved viral circulation, while others remained obscured, raising questions about selective recognition within networked publics. Nevertheless, the Israel-Gaza case demonstrates that citizen media operates as a critical arena of contemporary civic life, where witnessing, narrative contestation, and civic engagement intersect. Overall, the findings suggest that citizen media during the Israel-Gaza war functioned not only as an alternative information source but as a participatory civic practice. By enabling mediated witnessing, disrupting dominant narratives, and mobilizing global civic action, citizen journalism reshaped how conflict was seen, felt, and acted upon within digital public spheres.

6. Challenges and Limitations

Despite its transformative potential, citizen media operates within a range of structural and ethical constraints that limit its effectiveness as a civic tool. One of the most persistent challenges concerns misinformation and verification. Citizen-generated content, produced in conditions of urgency and danger, often lacks the institutional mechanisms of fact-checking and editorial oversight associated with professional journalism. This creates vulnerabilities to misinterpretation, decontextualization, and the circulation of unverified or misleading content, which can undermine public trust and weaken the civic impact of citizen media.

Platform governance further shapes the visibility and circulation of citizen journalism. As Gillespie (2018) argues, digital platforms act as powerful intermediaries that govern speech through algorithmic moderation, content policies, and opaque decision-making processes. In the context of the

Israel–Gaza war, platform moderation practices, content takedowns, and shadow-banning influenced which narratives gained prominence and which were suppressed. These dynamics reflect broader geopolitical power asymmetries, where dominant actors often benefit from greater legitimacy and reach within global media ecosystems. Additionally, structural inequalities related to access, digital literacy, and language significantly constrain participation. Uneven access to stable internet connectivity, electricity, and devices limits who can document and circulate content, particularly in conflict zones. Language barriers further restrict global visibility, as content produced in local languages may receive less algorithmic amplification. Together, these challenges underscore that citizen media, while empowering, remains embedded within unequal digital and political structures.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that citizen media during the Israel–Gaza war functioned not merely as an alternative source of news but as a form of civic infrastructure embedded within networked communication systems. In contexts where professional journalism faced severe restrictions, citizen-generated media enabled mediated witnessing by transforming lived experiences of violence, loss, and resistance into public testimony. These practices asserted the right to be seen and heard, reinforcing the civic dimension of communication under conditions of political crisis and informational control. Beyond documentation, citizen media played a critical role in narrative contestation. By circulating real-time audiovisual evidence and personal testimonies, citizen journalists challenged dominant state-centric and institutional framings of the conflict. This contestation did not operate in isolation but through networked publics, where visibility, affect, and connectivity amplified marginalized perspectives. As a result, citizen media reshaped the symbolic struggle over meaning, legitimacy, and moral accountability in the global public sphere. Importantly, the study highlights how mediated visibility translated into civic action. Citizen media content catalyzed transnational solidarity, protest mobilization, humanitarian fundraising, and advocacy

campaigns. This collapse of distance between witnessing and acting underscores the shift from passive media consumption to participatory civic engagement. Citizen journalism thus functioned as connective tissue linking individual experiences to collective political response.

At the same time, recognizing citizen media as civic infrastructure requires attention to its embedded limitations. Platform governance, algorithmic control, and structural inequalities shape whose voices are amplified and whose are marginalized. Nevertheless, these constraints do not diminish the civic significance of citizen media; rather, they call for more nuanced frameworks that integrate power, technology, and ethics into analyses of participatory communication. Overall, this research contributes to democratic communication and conflict studies by reframing citizen journalism as a sustained civic practice. It suggests that future scholarship and policy must move beyond binary distinctions between professional and amateur media, and instead focus on how participatory media practices enable democratic engagement, accountability, and civic imagination in times of conflict.

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