



**Invitation: Workshop in The Netherlands at Leiden University**

**The power of social media networks: scientific  
research on the entanglement of online and offline  
networks in times of conflict in Africa**



*Image by Luca Bruls*



**Location:** Leiden University (see the venues below)

**Date:** Thursday November 20<sup>th</sup>: 10:00-17:00

Friday November 21<sup>st</sup>: 10:00-13:00

### **Workshop theme**

The NWO-funded project *Digital warfare in the Sahel: popular networks of war and Cultural Violence*, that in short we refer to as *nomadesahel*, organizes a workshop in which we focus on the central question: How and under what conditions do the interaction and entanglement of digital and physical popular/social networks contribute to the intensification of violence and conflict? i.e. What are the ‘workings’ of social network in conflict for the popular?

The project study questions why conflicts in West and Central Africa have become more violent and widespread than in the past. A study of OECD (Trémolieres 2021) showed how conflicts in North and West Africa are increasingly networked conflicts, where complex relationships between a growing number of belligerents with diverging agendas define the conflict. In this workshop the networked aspect of conflict is further questioned with an eye on the advancement of digital communication that has boosted over the past two decades.

New ICTs and their democratizing power have opened the door to political participation to a large group of individuals, such as pastoralists, villagers, activists, or fighters. Karin Barber urged the study of the popular to understand change: ‘Popular (cultural) forms [*and networks*] not only emerge out of historical change, but also participate in it, embody it and comment upon it’ (Barber 2018: 3). A new space where information is no longer only controlled by the official but has become the terrain of the informal and popular, in that sense a ‘weapon of the weak’ (Scott 2000). Such networks can also become ‘compartmentalized’ spaces of belonging. Can these popular social networks become networks of war that, in the digital age, are at least partly (and sometimes predominantly) anchored in the digital sphere?

In research on ethnic violence, Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff (2010) place the multi-layered nature of conflict at the core of their analysis. They emphasize how local, national, regional, and global entities impact conflict. Conflict is multi-layered, with specific dynamics, actors and characteristics at these four scales. At the same time, the conflicts are entangled and



woven into the digital fabric of social media. Is the digital sphere a fifth scale, that equally has its unique dynamics in the expression of conflict, related to or entangled with realities on the ground?

Networked conflicts can take different forms: from *open* conflicts, such as in Mali where we observe a near-to rural insurrection and local wars that grow out on a vast scale to be regional wars, to *discursive* conflicts, for example dis- and misinformation campaigns on WhatsApp and Facebook in Chad and Burkina Faso, that increase polarization. The various forms of conflicts in the Sahel operate at five levels: local, national, regional, global, *and* digital. Each form of conflict is embedded in the coercive and repressive forms of local, regional, national, global, and digital rule. Digitalization has allowed multiple actors to be involved. We then would suggest that all conflicts in the Sahel are also connected: discursively, ideologically, and materially, often through the voices of unexpected groups on the battleground.

In this workshop we aim to compare different conflict regions in Africa and how conflict dynamics are (digitally) networked, discursively, ideologically, and materially, and why these dynamics help to understand the observation that conflicts over the past decades have become more violent and widespread.

In a digitally networked world the 'meaning' or understanding of 'data' is shifting. And archiving research data is a challenge. During the two day workshop a special session is devoted to the changing features of data in the digital age. We give full attention to the historicization of Data and what the archive entails in the digital age.

### **Workshop organizers**

The power of social media networks workshop is organized by nomadesahel, a research team at Leiden University. nomadesahel consists of professor Mirjam de Bruijn, assistant professor Jelena Prokic, senior research assistant and PhD Matthew Sung, PhD candidate Bruno Allahissem, and PhD candidate Luca Bruls. The research project by nomadesahel takes as its hypothesis that social networks are at the core of the present-day conflicts in the Sahel.



## Contact

For any questions, please contact Luca Bruls ([l.r.bruls@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:l.r.bruls@hum.leidenuniv.nl)),  
[sahel.project@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:sahel.project@hum.leidenuniv.nl)

## The programme of the workshop

This workshop is organized as a big roundtable discussion. We have invitees who will open discussions and give a lecture, but everybody is participant and asked to contribute.

On the first day of this workshop, we focus on network structures in conflict in Africa. We look at the network from the angle of belonging and the digital. What role does the structure of the network, as a set of relations between people, play in the expanding conflicts of different sorts? What is the definition of a network based on existing theories? How does the social network on the ground compare to online social networks platforms? What does communication mean in the networks of all sorts?

The objective of this workshop is threefold:

1. Understand the entanglement between digital and physical networks
  - Situate the networks in the context of power dynamics
  - Reflect on the idea that 'Meta recreates the world' through the discussion how digital and physical networks stir the ways in which people organize their lives.
2. To ultimately understand how digital and physical networks influence conflict dynamics
3. How to archive and historicize digital data?

We will approach these questions from different disciplinary perspectives, discuss the observed dynamics in conflict zones, and also discuss our variation in methodological approaches. Researchers with different methodological backgrounds are invited to gather around the table and have an open-ended conversation. Participants are invited to bring in their case studies and reflect on how their methodological approach influences how they tell the story of the 'working' of the network in conflict.

## Keynote

Keynote: *From Platform Brutality to Organized Networks*, Prof. Dr. Geert Lovink



The extractivist platform logic has rendered the possibility to create and maintain federated, decentralized networks impossible. Users are increasingly subjected to the politics of American and Chinese Big Tech firms. What does it mean in the sub-Saharan African context to get stuck on the platform? The existential revolt of Gen Z that is unfolding everywhere has an unresolved love-hate dynamic with social media at its core. Is there a universal human right on a mental breakdown of the online self? How can free spaces for alternative communication channels and image production be created?

Keynote: *The Head of Orpheus: Tear-Line Forensics, Black Box Evidence, and the Death of Provenance*, Dr. Michael Innes

I'll discuss: 1) how conflict today is recorded or documented; 2) how the prevalence of human rights and international humanitarian law violations in conflicts means that documentation efforts have been increasingly done to forensic standards; and, 3) how more recently we've seen a shift from forensic standards in research to contentious views on the implications and consequences of such standards.

### **Outcome**

We aim to document the workshop and publish this documentation on the nomadesahel website. The documentation of the workshop shows the talks, panels, and discussion sessions, including summaries / extended abstracts from each speaker and their slides. References and citations to presentations can be added to the extended abstracts. The summaries/extended abstracts (1000 words) have to be submitted to us after the workshop, so that they can be reviewed and published on the website. We will record the main take-aways and points during discussions and organize these in a presentable way as part of the documentation.

### **Target audience**

This workshop (~25 persons) brings together researchers from various disciplines (anthropology, sociology, political science, computational sciences, security studies). Hence those researchers with an interest in social network analysis, anthropology, social media-, conflict-, and African networks in relation to conflict. The languages of the conference will be English and French.



### Online attendance

Online remote attendance is available by invitation to a limited number of colleagues.

### Zoom link for online attendees

<https://universiteitleiden.zoom.us/j/68642988854>  
[pwd=ZICGqZW2ZqUjZQbYobUOTqEU3d1JYO.1](https://universiteitleiden.zoom.us/j/68642988854?pwd=ZICGqZW2ZqUjZQbYobUOTqEU3d1JYO.1)

Meeting ID: 686 4298 8854

Passcode: c&3qL#zf

### Programme

**Day 1:** Thursday November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2025

**Location:** Conference Room (2.60), Johan Huizinga Building

|       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 09:30 | Coffee & tea                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 10:00 | Welcome Social Media Networks Workshop with Luca Bruls ( <i>LU, nomadesahel</i> ), Bruno Allahissem ( <i>LU, nomadesahel</i> )                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 10:15 | <b>Session I</b> – Panel: Understanding entangled networks with speakers Dr. Corinna Jentzsch ( <i>LU, Institute of Political Science</i> ), Dr. Jelena Prokic ( <i>LU, nomadesahel</i> ) & Prof. Dr. Mirjam de Bruijn ( <i>LU, nomadesahel</i> ), discussant Dr. Matthew Ford ( <i>Swedish Defence University</i> ) |
| 11:45 | Coffee & tea                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 12:00 | <b>Session II</b> – Short pitches: Online conflict networks. Participants respond to statements in relation to their research.                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 13:00 | Lunch                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |



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|-------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 14:00 | <b>Session III</b> - Panel: "Entangled networks of belonging in conflict or insecurity", with Dr. Sylvie Ayimpam ( <i>Aix-Marseille Université</i> ), Dr. Lidewyde Berckmoes ( <i>LU, ASCL</i> ), Dr. Jethro Norman ( <i>DIIS Denmark</i> ), discussant Prof. Dr. Bruce Mutsvairo ( <i>AUC, UU</i> ) |
| 15:30 | Coffee & tea                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 15:45 | <b>Session IV</b> - Key note: "From Platform Brutality to Organized Networks" with Prof. Dr. Geert Lovink ( <i>HvA</i> )                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 16:45 | <b>Session V</b> - Plenary discussion                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 17:30 | End                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |

**Day 2:** Friday November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2025

**Location:** ASCL Seminar Room (0.31), Herta Mohr Building

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| 09:30 | Coffee & tea                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 10:00 | <b>Session VI</b> - Key note: "The Head of Orpheus: Tear-Line Forensics, Black Box Evidence, and the Death of Provenance", with Dr. Michael Innes (Visiting Senior Research Fellow in the <i>Dept of War Studies, King's College London</i> ) |
| 11:00 | Coffee & tea                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 11:15 | <b>Session VII</b> - Panel: "How to historicize and archive ephemeral data?" with Dr. Michael Innes ( <i>King's College London</i> ) and Prof. Dr. Mirjam van Reisen ( <i>LUMC</i> )                                                          |
| 12:30 | Closing remarks by <i>nomadesahel</i> team with Jelena Prokic ( <i>LU, nomadesahel</i> ), Mirjam de Bruijn ( <i>LU, nomadesahel</i> )                                                                                                         |
| 13:00 | Lunch                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |