ROKUS

SOCIETY

JOURNAL

DUAL REALITIES

JUNE 2026

The Illusion of Energy Independence

Free Speech: Harm, Power, and Control

Can War Ever Be Humane? The Limits of International Humanitarian Law in Armed Conflict

Beyond the Hashtag: Evaluating the Policy Impact of Digital Activism

Breaking the Silences of Memory

Villains or Heroes? Motivations Behind Atlantic and Mediterranean Piracy, 1550–1600

ROKUS SOCIETY JOURNAL
2026, Vol. 1, No. 1

Rokus Society Journal

JUNE 2026

TABLE OF CONTENTS

2	Note from a Managing Director
2	Editorial Values
3	Author Biographies
4	Editorial Policy
5	Editorial Team
7	The Illusion of Energy Independence *Article by Rodrigo Moreno Plascencia, Rokus Society Fellow*
11	The Trouble with Free Speech: Harm, Power, and Control *Article by Ruby Rolfe, Rokus Society Fellow*
16	Can War Ever Be Humane? The Limits of International Humanitarian Law in Armed Conflict *Interview with Mumtoza Kholmakhamatova, Rokus Society Fellow*
25	Beyond the Hashtag: Evaluating the Policy Impact of Digital Activism *Article by Ellie Mueller, Independent Contributor*
30	Breaking the Silences of Memory *Book by Exauce Bigue Koviko, Independent Contributor*
33	Villains or Heroes? Motivations Behind Atlantic and Mediterranean Piracy, 1550-1600 *Adapted Research Paper by Arda Yaniklar, Rokus Society Fellow*

Note from a Managing Director

"Welcome to the inaugural issue of *Rokus Society Journal.*

This first edition brings together a collection of interdisciplinary works exploring power, conflict, identity, historical memory, and systems that shape social and political life. While varied in subject matter — ranging from international humanitarian law to artistic expression — these articles share a common ambition: to move beyond surface-level explanations and engage critically with the complexities of modern reality. In doing so, they reflect the wider mission of *Rokus Society Journal* — to encourage intellectually curious, original, and forward-looking scholarship accessible to both academic and general readership.

This publication is the result of months of collaborative effort and intellectual exchange. It would not have been possible without the dedication and commitment of our contributors, to whom we extend our sincere thanks. We are equally grateful to our editorial team for the care and rigour they brought to every stage of the review and development process.

As you move through the journal, we invite you to engage with the featured contributions critically, thoughtfully, and openly. We hope this issue encourages not only reflection on the subjects explored within it, but also curiosity about the wider questions that connect them."

Anastasiia Guseva

EDITORIAL VALUES

Critical. We place contemporary issues within their broader historical, social, and political contexts.

Evidence-Based. Our arguments are grounded in timely analysis and verifiable evidence.

Forward-Looking. We encourage constructive thinking through informed projections, practical recommendations, and viable pathways forward.

Author Biographies

Rodrigo Moreno Plascencia is currently pursuing simultaneous degrees in Aerospace Engineering at the Politecnico di Milano and Chemistry at the University of Milan. He also works as a chemistry consultant and scientific writer, with a particular interest in making complex topics accessible to broader audiences. In this issue, Rodrigo explores the illusion of energy independence, analysing how modern states rely on interdependent technological and geopolitical systems that make full autonomy largely unattainable.

Ruby Rolfe is studying A Levels in Physics, History, English Literature, and Philosophy at Harris Westminster Sixth Form. Although still early in her academic journey, she actively engages in interdisciplinary inquiry across psychology, literature, and socio-political analysis. In her article, Ruby examines the complexities of free speech, considering legal frameworks, power imbalances, and cultural narratives that determine the boundaries and limits of 'free' speech in modern democracies.

Mumtoza Kholmakhamatova is a third-year LLB student at the University of Westminster. Her coursework explores the impact of ongoing global conflicts on societies, with a focus on how war and geopolitical instability affect civilian populations, legal protections, and broader social structures. In this issue, she discusses the challenges in the application of International Humanitarian Law in armed conflict, notably how legal protections are often undermined in practice.

Ellie Mueller is a BA graduate from Deakin University and a Global Citizenship Award recipient. Her work bridges academic and community-centred approaches, focusing on digital activism, online mobilisation, agenda-setting, social movements, and policy change. Mueller's academic background includes International Relations, Middle Eastern Studies, and History. In her article, Ellie brings an interdisciplinary perspective to political communication and contemporary activism in digital spaces.

Exauce Bigue Koviko is a multidisciplinary artist whose work spans painting, sculpture, music, and literature. He is the founder of KOVICOS, a cultural and artistic ecosystem dedicated to freedom, resilience, and long-term legacy building through art, education, advocacy, and investment. In this issue, Koviko seeks to reposition refugee and diaspora narratives beyond vulnerability, presenting art as a means of healing, cultural preservation, policy influence, and social transformation.

Arda Yaniklar recently graduated from the London School of Economics and Political Science, where he completed an MSc in Economic History alongside a Wills Project research internship. Prior to this, he studied History at the University of Reading. His undergraduate dissertation was recognised as the Best History Undergraduate Dissertation on a Non-British History Subject and received multiple awards, including the Martyn Bendor-Samuel Prize and the BCMH Prize for Undergraduate Achievement in Maritime History. In his research, he examines the complexity of the piracy phenomenon through economic, political, and religious lenses.

EDITORIAL POLICY

Rokus Society Journal is an online publication featuring articles, commentaries, interviews, and critical reviews. The Journal provides an accessible platform for emerging researchers, journalists, policy makers, and invited contributors to publish original work and engage in informed debate on contemporary social, political, and economic issues.

More broadly, the Journal seeks to advance the education and employability of young people by providing opportunities to participate in research, publishing, and advisory while helping contributors develop transferable writing, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary analysis skills.

The Journal accepts submissions on a quarterly basis. There are no strict age or professional background requirements for authors. All submissions are considered on their merit and reviewed in accordance with the Journal's editorial standards and values.

Only submissions that have successfully completed editorial review and meet the Journal's content, formatting, and quality requirements are approved for publication. No work is published without the author's written consent.

For submission guidelines and further information, please visit: https://rokussociety.wordpress.com/journal/

Editorial Team

SZ. Hallern specialises in both long- and short-form writing. He has worked as an editor, copywriter, proof-reader, researcher, and consultant across a range of sectors. A graduate of the University of Oxford, he also holds an MA in Philosophy and Literature from the University of East Anglia. SZ. has greatly helped connect ideas across the journal issue, refining arguments and grounding them in theory while maintaining clarity and focus.

Nupur Jill is a recent MA Journalism graduate from the University of the Arts London. She specialises in finance and fintech reporting, as well as producing content across social justice, aviation, business, and sustainability. Her work includes both technical writing and long-form features, and she was a runner-up for the Social Justice Journalism Award at UAL. Nupur contributed original ideas in the early stages of the editorial process and helped make the pieces more accessible and engaging.

Ramisha Rahman holds an MSc in Public Health from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and works across both qualitative and quantitative research methods, with particular interests in environmental, workplace, and public health policy. Drawing on her experience, Ramisha has contributed to peer review and copy-editing to ensure clarity and consistency across submissions. Just as important was the care she brought to the review process, with contributors noting that they felt both challenged and supported in equal measure.

Arnaaz Ali is a member of the GYS Policy Team at the YOUNGO constituency of the UNFCCC and the Policy Taskforce of the UNCCD Youth Caucus. She has pursued advanced academic and professional work in international security, diplomacy, development, and international affairs, contributing to a number of academic and policy publications. She was particularly effective at identifying areas that required greater precision, context, or evidential support. Her breadth of knowledge and critical judgement made her an important part of the editorial process.

ROKUS SOCIETY JOURNAL
2026, Vol. 1, No. 1

The Illusion of Energy Independence

Article by Rodrigo Moreno Plascencia, Rokus Society Fellow

It is a common practice to think of the world as a map composed of distinct states, each with its own sovereignty, borders, and interests. This seemingly innocent narrative is reinforced by the political language in our daily lives. It constantly tells us how nations can possess resources, defend frontiers, protect national interests and pursue their autonomy. It speaks as though sovereignty itself were a form of isolation from the rest of the world.

This assumption deserves scrutiny. John Muir wrote in My First Summer in the Sierra (1911)[1] that whenever we try to isolate anything, we find it 'hitched to everything else in the universe.' Today, this statement remains true.

The Myth of Autonomy

Modern power does not rest on isolated abundance, and the language of 'energy independence' obscures this fact by encouraging the belief that possession of a resource is equivalent to control and autonomy. In reality, this is rarely the case.

In 2025, US crude oil output reached 13.6 million barrels per day, whereas the country's net crude oil imports stood at 2.2 million barrels per day[2]. While the difference in sheer volume is impressive, it does not erase the logic of quality, trade flows, and industrial optimisation. Not all oil is equally useful, and not every refinery is configured for every type of crude. A country may lead in production and yet remain dependent on external supply, making it evident that mere output does not amount to superiority.

Energy security is not born at the wellhead; it is built across the entire industrial chain. This is precisely why many oil-rich countries are not necessarily rich in a broader sense. They may own the oil but not command the system that gives it value. If they still rely on foreign expertise, foreign shipping, foreign capital and foreign industrial capacity, then what

[1] *Muir's My First Summer in the Sierra (1911) recounts his 1869 season in the Sierra Nevada, where close observation of the landscape led him to articulate one of the book's central themes: the interdependence of natural forms and processes.*

[2] *U.S. Energy Information Administration. (2026, March 10). Annual U.S. crude oil exports decrease for first time since 2021. Today in Energy. https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=67324*

they possess is not full autonomy, but only one part of a larger chain.

A similar illusion appears in the case of nuclear energy, which is often seen as an elegant escape from hydrocarbons and, by extension, foreign dependence. While nuclear reactors can indeed reduce certain vulnerabilities by stabilising electricity supply and decreasing reliance on imported fossil fuels, such as oil and natural gas, this transition does not abolish dependence but rather relocates it.

In 2024, around three-quarters of the world's uranium mine production came from just three countries: Kazakhstan, Canada and Namibia. Kazakhstan alone accounting for nearly 39% of global mine supply[3]. Yet uranium does not move directly from the mine into the reactor. It must be refined, enriched, transported, used under highly specific conditions and later managed as waste. While the countries mentioned above dominate uranium mining, the vast majority of downstream fuel-cycle work takes place elsewhere: conversion services are centred in Russia, France, Canada and China, while commercial enrichment capacity is concentrated in Europe, Russia, the United States, China and Japan [4]. Similarly to oil, access to nuclear energy generation does not automatically imply autonomy. A country may control the final stage of electricity production while depending on foreign stakeholders for earlier and more material stages of the chain.

A third example is renewable energy. The sector is commonly presented as 'a liberation from geopolitics' because, as some may claim, 'the sun shines everywhere and the wind blows across borders.' It is true that nature offers, in a certain sense, equal opportunities. However, the industrial system behind renewables is anything but equal.

China accounts for more than 80% of global solar PV module manufacturing capacity and about 95% of water capacity[5]. Meanwhile, China, the United States and the European Union together comprise roughly 80% to 90% of manufacturing capacity across several major clean-energy technologies[6]. A country may harvest sunlight on its own territory and still depend on foreign electronics, materials and replacement components to make that energy usable at scale. Thus, the notion of regional equality does not reflect reality: the source may be local, but the system is not.

Finally, only a handful of companies in the world have the capacity to produce the most advanced microchips, and entire industries now depend on them. Yet those same producers, in turn, rely on imported materials, specialised machinery and their own upstream supply chains; and so, the pattern repeats.

In this sense, the phrase 'energy independence' gradually loses its meaning when every state appeals to it while participating in the same web of material interdependence that so often confuses ownership with command. It is one thing to possess reserves beneath one's territory; it is another to refine them efficiently, transport them securely, integrate them into national industry and sustain the technological base that makes industrial systems function.

By extension, what we often call *independence* is merely a rearrangement of dependence, in which one external vulnerability is visibly reduced only for another to take its place. At one moment, vulnerability centres on oil and the logistics

[3] *World Nuclear Association. (2026). World uranium mining production.* https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/nuclear-fuel-cycle/mining-of-uranium/world-uranium-mining-production

[4] *World Nuclear Association. (2025). Uranium Enrichment.* https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/nuclear-fuel-cycle/conversion-enrichment-and-fabrication/uranium-enrichment

[5] *International Energy Agency. (2024). Executive summary: Advancing clean technology manufacturing.* https://www.iea.org/reports/advancing-clean-technology-manufacturing/executive-summary

[6] *Ministry of the Environment, Energy and Climate. (2024). Hydrogen and E-fuels Roadmap for Iceland. Government of Iceland.* https://www.government.is/library/Files/240102_URN_RoadmapForIceland_V6.pdf

of transporting it; at another, it revolves around battery precursors, rare-earth elements, power electronics or grid hardware. Moving between different resources still leaves the state exposed — not necessarily to the same supplier, nor through the same infrastructure, but through a new vulnerability rooted in the geography of materials and manufacturing.

Even if a country were to attempt to concentrate every critical stage within its own borders, complete independence would remain beyond reach: the resources, industrial processes, and technological centres on which modern economies rely are too geographically dispersed and too specialised to be fully internalised. Take Iceland for example. In 2022, hydropower and geothermal energy supplied 70.5% and 29.4% of Iceland's electricity generation respectively, while fossil fuels accounted for only 0.02%[7]. This distribution granted the country control over its natural electricity sources, but the same did not apply to the broader industrial system that converted them into usable power. Indeed, machinery and equipment represented 34.1% of Iceland's imports in 2022[8]. Meanwhile, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries reported having received orders for 15 geothermal power plants in Iceland, with a combined capacity of 565 MW. The turbines, generators, and cooling equipment for these plants were, in turn, supplied by Japanese and German firms[9]. Therefore, Iceland — perhaps one of the strongest contemporary cases for energy autonomy — still remains bound by the same logic.

The Politics of Independence

So, why do governments continue to speak of energy independence even when, in practice, it is simply not feasible?

The answer is psychological and political. "Independence" is one of the most powerful words in political language, as it evokes dignity, sovereignty, control and maturity. Even when reality is far more entangled, the promise of autonomy is more attractive than the sober language of 'reduced exposure to systemic vulnerability'. The job of politicians is to win votes, and votes are won by public appeal. 'Energy independence' sounds decisive, while 'managed interdependence' sounds accurate but uninspiring. This is why the slogan survives — not because it is accurate, but because it is politically useful.

Yet beyond its usefulness lies a risk. The promise of energy independence is not merely descriptive. It can also become a political tactic — one that converts structural complexity into the language of certainty and control. When prices rise, wars begin or supply chains fracture, such promises become even more appealing. Political leaders use this momentum to raise support for their parties. In the fight for votes, they draw the public towards absolutes, not nuance. This is when the narrative takes on a distinctly populist form, and states collectively pursue a myth instead of a strategy.

Absolute independence is not a real measure of strength in a technologically dense and globally integrated world;

[7] *World Trade Organization. (2024). Trade Policy Review: Iceland. Report by the Secretariat (p.79).* https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/tpr_e/s454_e.pdf
[8] *World Trade Organization. (2024). Trade Policy Review: Iceland. Report by the Secretariat (p.79).* https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/tpr_e/s454_e.pdf
[9] *Mitsubishi Heavy Industries. (2008, June 10). MHI Wins Order from Iceland for Five Geothermal Power Generation Plants, 225 MW in Total.* https://www.mhi.com/news/0806101241.html

resilience, diversification and adaptive capacity are. The intelligent state understands where its dependencies lie, which are dangerous, which are tolerable and how they can be managed without self-deception. Instead of asking if the nation can become fully independent, one should ask how it can diversify its suppliers, build buffers against disruptions and preserve room for political and industrial manoeuvre.

Understanding Systemic Vulnerability

This shift in perspective is essential to understanding how durability and sustainability are achieved in practice. As Isaac Asimov[10] observed in one of his best-known works, Foundation, large systems rarely fail because of a single weakness. Rather, they decay when their intrinsic complexity outgrows command — when the web of functions, dependencies and moving parts becomes too dense for a single entity to govern with clarity. This intuitively applies to modern systems. Their fragility does not usually lie in one isolated shortage, but rather in the accumulation of vulnerabilities across the chain of extraction, transport, processing and distribution. When a modern state resorts to the fantasy of separation, it appears strong at the level of rhetoric, and while our attention is diverted towards comforting slogans, we neglect the discipline of governing overwhelming complexity. Chokepoints go unnoticed; vulnerabilities remain unmapped. It is here that the language of energy independence becomes a tangible threat: the invitation to think less in terms of resilience and more in terms of symbolic escape leaves a state weak at the level of system management. This is precisely why there is a need for a more critical approach and a different political vocabulary. Owning oil without refining capacity is not a ‘strength’. Accessing nuclear power without control of the earlier stages of the fuel cycle is not ‘autonomy’. Harvesting sunlight or wind without the industrial or technological base that makes them usable is not ‘security’.

One does not need to fully understand energy systems to grasp the underlying point: the rhetoric of independence often conceals more than it reveals. When such language is used, the question is not whether it sounds reassuring, but what dependencies remain hidden beneath it, which vulnerabilities are being reduced and which are merely being moved elsewhere. The civic task, then, is not to demand the impossible, but to demand honesty about how systems actually function.

A mature electorate — one that sees through grand promises and seeks a clear understanding of vulnerability and constraint — comes to distinguish possession from sovereignty and output from security; it recognises that the most resilient societies are not those that pretend to stand apart, but those that learn to navigate the interdependence they cannot escape.

---

[10] Asimov (1920–1992) was an American writer and biochemist best known for his science-fiction works. His novel Foundation (1951) explores how large, complex societies become vulnerable when their systems outgrow the capacity of any single authority to manage them.

The Trouble with Free Speech: Harm, Power, and Control

Article by Ruby Rolfe, Rokus Society Fellow

Free speech can be defined as the right to express one's opinions publicly. If we define it in this sense, we may also wish to clarify that it includes both offline expression as well as any form of media, whether comedy, art, music, literature or social media. Yet freedom is never absolute, and most societies draw a line when speech becomes harmful, discriminatory, or incites violence. So, when is this distinction made? To what extent is our free speech free in a world where information is pre-filtered, curated and controlled? And finally, why do we need it, and to what extent should we uphold it? These are questions worth contemplating when we ask whether, and when, the state should intervene in what we can say.

When does *free* speech become *hate* speech?

In March, Queensland announced new legislation which bans the use of specific phrases under certain circumstances. The law states that any public display, distribution, or recitation of such when they 'menace, harass or offend' the public carries a penalty of up to two years'

imprisonment. The intention is to prevent targeted hostility. But terms such as 'offence' and 'harassment' are broad and subjective. What one group experiences as threatening, another may see as a necessary challenge to power.

The slogan ACAB ('all cops are bastards'), which resurfaced after the murder of George Floyd[11], is an example thereof. While it is provocative, its purpose

[11] *George Floyd was an African American man murdered by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin on 25 May 2020, an event that sparked global protests against police brutality and systemic racism. BBC News 2020, 'George Floyd: What happened in the final moments of his life'. Retrieved 30 April 2026.*

is not to vilify individual officers. Rather, it is a critique of systemic injustice and the historical treatment of marginalised communities by people of a certain profession. The target is a structure, not its individual parts.

This distinction — institutions versus units — matters; so, too, does the intent and expectation behind a statement. Protesters outside Parliament aim their speech at legislation and public policy. They hope to raise awareness. Anti-abortion activists confronting patients outside clinics direct their speech at individuals, often with the intention of shaming or intimidating them. The former challenges power; the latter exerts it.

Political figures complicate the debate further. Public office by its nature turns individuals into symbols of ideas and policies. Thus, criticism of a politician is usually understood as criticism of what they represent, not their private identity. Yet they *are* people, and the line between condemning their actions and dehumanising them is thin. A reasonable assumption is that public criticism concerns their public role, but this is not guaranteed.

Hostility towards a private citizen carries no such ambiguity. Declaring hatred for a stranger is not a critique of their actions or beliefs; it is a judgement ostensibly rooted in prejudice. The difference lies in power, visibility, and the nature of the target. Once again, however, the boundary is not always distinct, as private citizens who are loyal to — and vocal enough about — a cause can, too, be said to embody an idea beyond the bounds of individuality.

Context also shapes meaning. A reclaimed slur used within a marginalised community carries a different significance from the same term used by an outsider. The same logic extends to phrases such as 'from the river to the sea'[12]. The slogan has been used by both Zionist and Palestinian groups, yet its connotations shift depending on who uses it and in what context. Identical words can express liberation, nationalism, fear, or threat.

These examples suggest that hate speech cannot be defined by lists of prohibited words alone. It requires attention to who is speaking, who is being spoken about, the intention behind the speech, the historical and political context, and the likely impact on those targeted. Speech operates within systems of power, and identical phrases can produce different effects depending on speaker and audience.

To what extent *do* we have free speech?

Information reaches us through newspapers, radio, television and, increasingly, social media. It shapes our conversations and beliefs. We often see our opinions as independent, but platforms are one step ahead: they decide what becomes news, what is amplified and what is side-lined before we get the chance to process, weigh, and draw a conclusion.

Few examples illustrate this entangled influence more clearly than Rupert Murdoch's media empire. After his father, Keith Murdoch, died in 1952, Rupert inherited *The News*, a small Adelaide newspaper. Over time, he built an international multimedia portfolio, with tabloids stretching across the UK and the US. Here is what The New York Times [13] reports on Murdoch's network:

"Fox News has long exerted a gravitational pull on the Republican Party in the United States, where it most recently amplified the nativist revolt that has fuelled the rise of the far right and the election of President Trump.

[12] *This phrase refers to the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, encompassing Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. It has been used by a wide range of groups since the 1960s and is open to multiple interpretations, from calls for Palestinian national liberation to assertions of Israeli territorial claims. Its meaning depends heavily on who uses it and in what political context. (Beaumont, P & Holmes, O (31 October 2023). "'From the river to the sea': where does the slogan come from and what does it mean?". The Guardian. Archived from the original on 5 November 2023. Retrieved 30 April 2026.)*

[13] *(Stack, Liam (3 April 2019). "6 Takeaways From The Times's Investigation Into Rupert Murdoch and His Family". The New York Times. Archived from the original on 12 August 2020. Retrieved 12 September 2020.)*

Mr. Murdoch's newspaper The Sun spent years demonizing the European Union to its readers in Britain, where it helped lead the Brexit campaign that persuaded a slim majority of voters in a 2016 referendum to endorse pulling out of the bloc. Political havoc has reigned in Britain ever since.

And in Australia, where his hold over the media is most extensive, Mr. Murdoch's outlets pushed for the repeal of the country's carbon tax and helped topple a series of prime ministers whose agenda he disliked, including Malcolm Turnbull last year."

According to a six-month investigation by the newspaper, his outlets have repeatedly influenced electoral outcomes and public sentiment across continents. In truth, to anyone with even a passing glance at front pages, Murdoch's presence has long been difficult to ignore — with holdings across local, national and international media outlets, and Tony Blair at his daughter's birthday party.

Yet, however unsettling, the phenomenon is not new. Alexander Meiklejohn (1872–1964)[14] explored this issue in detail, as have many others before him. His main takeaway was that democracy cannot function if those in power manipulate public opinion by withholding information or suppressing criticism. Even when such manipulation stems from a desire to serve the public good, it is unjustifiable, as it undermines democratic ideals by restricting the electorate's ability to form independent judgements [15].

The value of democracy and the free flow of ideas extends well beyond theory. Early copyright laws in Europe emerged partly from the Church and the state's desire to control the output of the printing press. Regulation was framed as protection, but it also constrained the circulation of ideas deemed 'radical'. Intellectual progress — be it in science, medicine, law or politics — depends on dialogue with existing knowledge; restrictions on such dialogue therefore restrict innovation and carry tangible consequences. Those enjoying clean water systems and electoral rights should remember that.

Today, the internet has transformed the landscape. Information is abundant, but attention is limited. Social media platforms prioritise content that is sensational or polarising. As Jo Glanville[16] notes, the internet has been 'a revolution for censorship as much as for free speech': it enables expression while also enabling manipulation, distortion and the rapid spread of misinformation.

For this reason, the extent to which we *do* have free speech cannot be reduced

[14] *Meiklejohn (1872–1964) was an American philosopher and First Amendment theorist who argued that free speech is essential for democratic self-government, as citizens require unrestricted access to information to make informed political decisions. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2021, 'Freedom of Speech'. Retrieved 30 April 2026.* [*https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/freedom-speech/*](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/freedom-speech/)

[15] *Based on (Marlin, Randal (2002). Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion. Broadview Press. pp. 226–7. ISBN 978-1-55111-376-0.)*

[16] *Jo Glanville is a British writer, editor and campaigner whose work focuses on freedom of expression, media policy and civil liberties. She has served as director of English PEN and editor of Index on Censorship, and has written widely on censorship, public debate and the politics of free speech. (Lit Across Frontiers (2024). "Jo Glanville". Lit Across Frontiers – Author Profile. Archived from the original on 15 March 2024. Retrieved 30 April 2026.)*

to a single measure or definition. It is not static, nor can it be captured through precise statistics. Rather, it is shaped by the power that the state and other actors hold in framing and filtering the narratives we are exposed to, which in turn influences how opinions are formed. It is also shaped by control over a key commodity in modern society: attention. In this sense, individuals can resist and reclaim a degree of agency by being intentional about what they choose to engage with. This makes it essential to critically evaluate the language used in media, the sources of information, and — where relevant — who funds or produces the content consumed. It also involves engaging with multiple sources of news and actively considering the perspectives of those directly affected by the issues discussed.

To what extent *should* we have free speech?

This is by far the most interesting question to ponder. It is reasonable to expect the state to act against the deliberate dissemination of falsehoods, particularly when such falsehoods undermine public trust or democratic processes. Beyond intentional deception, the problem becomes more complex.

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873)[17] argued that much of what we once considered true may, in fact, be false. Therefore, views should not be prohibited on the basis of their apparent falsity. This links to the argument above about innovation across scientific fields: once surgery was prohibited, once the solar system was considered heretical. However, he also argued that speech should be restricted when it risks causing direct harm to others. In this sense, censorship assumes either a scarcity of factual information or an individual inability to interpret it correctly. This is when censorship can become a means of preventing perceived misinterpretation and its potential consequences.

Yet interpretations of harm vary across cultures and political systems. Russia's use of 'harm' to justify restrictions on LGBT expression, with laws introduced in 2013 and expanded in 2022[18], shows how easily this principle can be misused. Such laws demonstrate how a government can frame ordinary expression as a threat to public welfare, not because the speech itself is inherently harmful, but because it challenges the state's preferred social order. This illustrates the risk of granting authorities a broad discretion to determine which ideas are considered dangerous. It also returns us to Alexander Meiklejohn's argument about the complexity — and illegitimacy — of restricting democratic participation in the name of the public good.

In the modern world, this debate is not straightforward, as the boundary between speech and action becomes increasingly blurred. Influencers promoting harmful beauty standards, online communities encouraging misogyny, or agitators calling for revolution all raise questions about whether certain forms of expression indirectly cause harm by shaping behaviour. The risk is amplified by the fact that access to the internet is not necessarily matched by levels of literacy, and audiences are exposed to content at an increasingly young age, when cognitive capacities are not yet fully developed. It is also important to note that, whilst social media has historically functioned primarily as a source of entertainment, it becomes

---

[17] *Mill argued in On Liberty (1859) that suppressing opinion harms society by depriving it of the chance to test ideas, correct errors and refine truth through open debate, a foundational defence of freedom of expression in liberal thought. (Mill, J S (1859). On Liberty. London: John W. Parker and Son. Retrieved 30 April 2026.)*

[18] *Russia introduced its federal law banning the dissemination of information about "non-traditional sexual relations" to minors in 2013. In 2022, the law was expanded to prohibit positive or neutral depictions of LGBT identities for all ages. (Amnesty International (25 January 2013). "Russia's anti-gay 'propaganda law' assault on freedom of expression". Amnesty International. Archived PDF. Retrieved 30 April 2026. ; (Slovo Editorial Team (2022). "Russia expands LGBT 'propaganda' law to all ages". Slovo: Journal of Russian, East European and Eurasian Affairs. Archived from the original on 24 November 2022. Retrieved 30 April 2026.)*

increasingly recognised as a stream of factual information, as exemplified by the rise of X (formerly, Twitter).

Thus, while striving for progress, careful judgement is required in a digital environment where speech can have rapid, large-scale effects. In light of this debate, we arrive at the conclusion that the extent to which we *should* have free speech depends not only on law, but also on social norms, media ecosystems, economic incentives, and technological design within specific communities and societies, and therefore is unlikely to be universal.

How do we reconcile free speech, power and responsibility?

Debates about *free* speech and *hate* speech cannot be resolved through simple binaries. Speech exists within networks of power, identity and influence. The same phrase can challenge injustice or perpetuate harm depending on who speaks it and why. Legal restrictions must therefore be sensitive to context, intent and impact, not merely vocabulary.

At the same time, the landscape in which speech circulates is shaped by media ownership, platform design and political interests. Free speech is not only a legal right but a cultural and structural condition. Protecting it requires vigilance against censorship, manipulation, distortion and the concentration of narrative power. A society may formally guarantee freedom of expression while still limiting which voices are amplified and which are quietly pushed to the margins.

The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis[19] offers a useful lens here: if language shapes the categories through which people understand the world, then narrowing the range of permissible language risks narrowing the range of permissible thought. This does not mean that all restrictions are inherently oppressive, but it does suggest that any attempt to regulate speech must be aware of the intellectual terrain it alters. Limiting words can, intentionally or otherwise, limit the ideas that become thinkable.

Frantz Fanon's[20] observation adds a further dimension: to speak is not only to communicate, but to participate in a culture, to inherit its assumptions and contribute to its evolution. Speech is therefore both an individual act and a collective one. When societies debate the boundaries of free expression, they are also debating the kind of culture they wish to sustain: one that tolerates dissent and discomfort, or one that prioritises order and cohesion at the risk of silencing necessary critique.

The challenge is to cultivate a society where speech is both free and responsible, where expression is protected, harm is minimised, and the public sphere remains open to genuine debate. Achieving this balance requires more than legislation. It requires an informed public, transparent institutions, and a willingness to recognise that the freedom to speak is inseparable from the conditions that allow speech to be heard, interpreted and contested.

---

[19] *The hypothesis, developed in the early 20th century by linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, proposes that the structure of a language influences how its speakers perceive and think about the world. (Encyclopaedia Britannica (2024). "Whorfian hypothesis". Encyclopaedia Britannica. Retrieved 30 April 2026.)*

[20] *Fanon (1925–1961) was a psychiatrist, philosopher and anti-colonial theorist whose work examined the psychological effects of racism and colonial domination, particularly in Black Skin, White Masks and The Wretched of the Earth. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2022). "Frantz Fanon". Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved 30 April 2026.)*

Can War Ever Be Humane? The Limits of International Humanitarian Law in Armed Conflict

Interview with Mumtoza Kholmakhamatova, Rokus Society Fellow

"An enduring tension between civilian protection and military objectives has persisted throughout the history of warfare. Since the emergence of modern states, individuals seeking justice have sought ways to hold governments accountable for violations committed during armed conflict. Yet the legal frameworks developed for this purpose are complex and intertwined, often leaving both civil society groups and states with as many questions as answers. As part of RSJ's Open Dialogue series, we invited Ms Mumtoza Kholmakhamatova, a third-year LLB student at the University of Westminster and a Rokus Society fellow, to elaborate on the limits and possibilities of international humanitarian law in a short interview.

Her LLB project examines recent conflicts through the lens of legal accountability. Focusing on case studies including the Russia–Ukraine war, it argues that while states routinely claim adherence to established rules of *jus in bello*, compliance is often shaped and constrained by political interests, asymmetric warfare, and weak enforcement mechanisms.

Rather than providing a comprehensive account of the topic, this interview is intended as an accessible introduction. It aims to stimulate further discussion and inquiry into the legal and ethical dimensions of armed conflict. We therefore invite readers to engage with the discussion critically, recognising both the significance of the issues raised and the limitations of any single discussion in addressing such a broad and contested subject."

RSJ Editorial Team

RSJ: Wars are inherently violent. Many people view armed conflict as a realm where victory is central and rules are inapplicable. How accurate is that perception?

Ms Kholmakhamatova: It would be misleading to assume that wars do not follow any order. Normative thinking about warfare, in less and more definite forms, has existed for centuries — evident in works such as *History of the Peloponnesian War* (~ 431-411 BC) by Thucydides and *On the Law of War and Peace* (1625) by Hugo Grotius. In the present day, the conduct of hostilities in both international and non-international armed conflicts is governed by International Humanitarian Law (IHL), also known as the law of armed conflict or *jus in bello*. Unlike *jus ad bellum*, which concerns the legality of going to war, IHL applies regardless of the conflict's cause and focuses solely on how military operations are conducted. Its core purpose is to reduce human suffering during war by protecting civilians and those no longer involved in combat.

RSJ: During many periods of warfare, there have been issues highlighted with respect to International Human Rights Law. Do International Human Rights Law (IHRL) and International Humanitarian Law (IHL) relate to one another?

Ms Kholmakhamatova: Partially, but these should not be confused. While recent treaties contain provisions drawn from both bodies of law — such as the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict — the two frameworks originate from different legal traditions and serve distinct purposes. IHRL governs broader aspects of human life, including freedom of expression, the right to assembly, and the right to life. It upholds fundamental entitlements inherent to every individual by virtue of being human and applies at all times, during both peace and war. It is possible to wonder why, in this case, these universal laws cannot be the sole point of reference. The reason IHRL is supplemented by IHL is that, during public emergencies, including armed conflict, the application and interpretation of certain human rights may shift. For instance, the right to life comes to be interpreted through the prohibition of arbitrary deprivation of life. The three core principles of international humanitarian law — distinction, proportionality, and precaution — however, are constant and cannot be suspended under any circumstances, functioning as an irreducible minimum floor of protection. In other words, IHRL and IHL are not exclusionary, nor contradictory, but complementary.

RSJ: Can you expand on what gives international humanitarian law its legal force?

Ms Kholmakhamatova: IHL derives from treaties — legally binding written agreements between sovereign states or international organisations — such as the Geneva Conventions, but also from customary international law. Customary IHL refers to universally accepted rules that develop through consistent state practice accompanied by *opinio juris* — the belief by states that such practices are legally required. These customary rules are binding on all parties to a conflict, regardless of whether they have ratified specific treaties.

RSJ: You mentioned the three fundamental principles of IHL. Could you tell us more about the principle of distinction?

Ms Kholmakhamatova: The principle of distinction requires conflicting parties to differentiate between military and civilian objects, as well as between combatants and civilians. Its purpose is to limit attacks strictly to legitimate targets while protecting non-combatants from harm.

Given the complexity of these categories, it might be useful to briefly clarify the difference between these domains for those without a legal background. By definition, military targets — or more precisely, military objectives — are objects that, by their nature, location, purpose, or use, make an effective contribution to military action, meaning their partial or total destruction, capture, or neutralisation would offer a definite military advantage. These may include weapons, military bases, ammunition depots, or military vehicles. In contrast, civilian objects — such as homes, schools, and hospitals — do not make an effective contribution to military operations and are therefore protected from attack under IHL. The same logic broadly applies to the distinction between combatants and civilians.

Armed forces attempt to distinguish between these categories through a targeting process that involves gathering intelligence, using drones and surveillance technologies, and assessing whether an object or individual is connected to military activity. They also rely on visible indicators, including uniforms, weapons, insignia, or other signs of military affiliation. Taken together, these measures are intended to reduce the risk of misidentification, but in practice the distinction is often difficult to draw, particularly in contemporary conflicts.

RSJ: What constitutes the key challenges in distinguishing military objectives from civilian objects, and combatants from civilians?

Ms Kholmakhamatova: One major issue is the existence of dual-use objects. These are civilian objects that also serve military purposes. Examples include power grids, bridges, ports, digital infrastructure, railways, and fuel depots. A power station, for instance, may provide electricity to hospitals and homes while also supplying energy to military bases or weapons factories. Under IHL, such objects may become lawful military targets if they effectively contribute to military action. However, attacks on these remain highly controversial because they can seriously affect civilians by disrupting water supplies, healthcare systems, electricity, communications, and heating. This relates directly to the principle of proportionality, which we will discuss shortly.

A further challenge arises in the context of asymmetric warfare — situations in which opposing sides possess significantly different levels of military power, resources, technology, or organisational structure. In such instances, weaker groups often rely on unconventional tactics because they cannot confront stronger armies through traditional warfare. Unlike conflicts between organised state militaries, asymmetric warfare often involves *militias* (armed forces composed primarily of trained civilians rather than full-time professional soldiers), *guerrilla organisations* (typically small, irregular armed groups that rely on tactics such as ambushes, sabotage, and hit-and-run attacks), or *insurgent groups* (those that seek to challenge state authority through armed rebellion). When such groups are formally incorporated into a state's armed forces, their members are generally considered lawful military targets under IHL. It is non-state armed groups that create greater legal difficulties. First, it is important to distinguish between civilians who perform isolated hostile acts and members of organised armed groups with a continuous combat function. Civilians may only be targeted for such time as they directly participate in hostilities, after which they regain protection. By contrast, members of organised armed groups with a continuous combat function may be targeted on a more sustained basis. Drawing this distinction is not always easy. Secondly, such groups often avoid wearing uniforms and deliberately blend into civilian populations. In fact, both state and non-state actors may operate within residential areas, store weapons in civilian infrastructure, or position military activity near protected sites such as schools or hospitals. Militant and terrorist organisations may also employ such tactics. As a result, distinguishing between civilians and combatants becomes significantly more difficult, particularly when targeting decisions rely on surveillance data, algorithmic assessments, or incomplete intelligence.

In densely populated environments — such as in urbanised conflict zones — these issues become even more acute. Urban centres have traditionally developed around transport networks and strategic infrastructure, meaning military headquarters, supply depots, railways, communication hubs, and air defence systems may be located within or close to civilian spaces. In such situations, preventing harm can be extremely difficult, even when the intended target is clearly military. This means that even 'lawful' strikes may result in civilian casualties. Moreover, military forces may deliberately position personnel or military assets within or near civilian populations in order to deter attack. This practice is commonly referred to as the use of human shields. IHL explicitly prohibits this; the use of civilians or prisoners of war for shielding purposes constitutes a war crime. However, even if one party unlawfully uses human shields, the attacking party remains bound by the other principles of IHL. Thus, while the principle of distinction is feasible in theory, it is difficult to uphold in practice.

RSJ: From the challenges you described above, are there any visible in contemporary conflicts?

Ms Kholmakhamatova: The Russia–Ukraine war brings many of these issues into sharp focus. Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, both sides have faced accusations of violating IHL. The United Nations reports that tens of thousands of people have been killed or wounded since 2022, with confirmed civilian casualties continuing to rise. Allegations of attacks on dual-use infrastructure have been frequent throughout the conflict. At the same time, humanitarian organisations such as the United Nations and Amnesty International have documented alleged abuses including indiscriminate bombardment, attacks on schools and hospitals, unlawful detention, torture, forced deportations, and the killing of civilians and prisoners.

But allegations alone are not sufficient to establish a breach of IHL. In principle, attacks on non-military infrastructure are more readily considered violations if civilians and combatants are not mixed nor intentionally co-located through unlawful methods such as human shields. When such attacks occur, they are interpreted as deliberate or indiscriminate attempts to terrorise civilian populations, undermine morale, or compel surrender through excessive suffering — all of which are prohibited under IHL. However, in more complex situations, such as those we have discussed, proving this intent is far more difficult, and legal accountability therefore does not always follow.

RSJ: Considering the violation is proven, what consequences are there for parties that fail to uphold the principle of distinction?

Ms Kholmakhamatova: In response to alleged violations of IHL, international legal mechanisms such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the United Nations Human Rights Council have previously launched investigations into potential war crimes. If the violation is established, state responsibility enforced through UN mechanisms may lead to a range of consequences. These may include reparations, sanctions, arms embargoes, and diplomatic isolation, including suspension from international organisations. In some cases, universal jurisdiction may also apply, allowing national courts to prosecute particularly serious crimes such as genocide or torture, regardless of where they were committed or the nationality of the alleged perpetrators. Individuals can also be held accountable. For example, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia convicted several military and political leaders for attacks on civilians during the Yugoslav conflicts, while the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda prosecuted individuals responsible for atrocities during the Rwandan genocide.

However, enforcement and accountability remain significant challenges in this context. Although the ICC can prosecute individuals for war crimes, some major military powers have not ratified the Rome Statute, reject the Court's jurisdiction, or decline to cooperate with investigations and arrest warrants.

Political considerations within international institutions may also obstruct legal proceedings and limit enforcement measures. Accountability frequently depends on the United Nations Security Council, where the five permanent members — China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States — hold veto power. This can allow them to block sanctions, investigations, tribunal creation, or stronger international action where their own strategic interests, or those of close allies, are involved. Delivering justice in international law is a complex and widely debated issue. Given the scope and time constraints of this interview, I believe I may only say as much.

RSJ: Since the second principle has come up earlier in the conversation, let's discuss it – how is it different to the principle of distinction?

Ms Kholmakhamatova: The principle of proportionality prohibits attacks where civilian harm is excessive in relation to the direct military advantage anticipated. Unlike the principle of distinction, which mandates separating civilian from military targets, proportionality acknowledges that some civilian harm may be inevitable, including where civilians and combatants are intermingled, whether organically or deliberately, but seeks to limit such harm through a balancing test, or in simpler terms, a form of cost–benefit analysis.

RSJ: While it does seem rather inhumane to measure advantage against casualties, the origins of that notion are understood – but can this proportionality ever be measured with precision?

Ms Kholmakhamatova: There are indeed many difficulties in upholding the principle of proportionality. First, the assessment must be made before an attack, based on what is known or should reasonably be known at the time. This "ex ante" standard complicates post-strike accountability, as the outcome alone is insufficient to prove a violation. Military planners often make decisions under severe time pressure and based on incomplete intelligence.

NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya comes to mind as an example, carried out under Operation Unified Protector. It was authorised by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, with the stated aim of protecting civilians during the country's civil war. At one point during the mission, an airstrike on Majer, near Zliten, reportedly killed 34 civilians, including women and children[21]. The decision to attack the area was based on NATO's intelligence suggesting that the buildings targeted were being used for military purposes. However, on-the-ground investigations by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reported that the locations were primarily civilian homes, with no evidence of military activity[22].

Whether this constitutes a war crime depends on several factors. The fact that a military advantage was anticipated means it is not the same as violating the principle of distinction by deliberately targeting solely non-combatants. Nor does it automatically constitute a violation of the principle of proportionality. Again, legality is assessed on an ex ante basis, according to what commanders knew or could reasonably have known at the time, not with the benefit of hindsight. NATO therefore argued that the strike was lawful, claiming that its targeting was precise and that the proportionality assessment had been conducted accordingly. In such cases, while an intelligence failure can represent a serious breach of the duty of care, it does not amount to an intentional war crime. To date, the incident remains the subject of ongoing debate.

But more generally, the principle itself is inherently interpretative. What constitutes 'excessive civilian harm — the point at which collateral damage may amount to a war crime — is not defined numerically under International Humanitarian Law, leaving room for differing legal and military interpretations. In many cases, the anticipated military advantage is also vaguely defined or classified. For example, a strike on a communications centre may be justified on the basis that it disrupts enemy command operations, but the underlying intelligence and strategic value may remain inaccessible to external observers. As a result, evaluating the proportionality calculus with precision is often extremely difficult, making the application of this principle in modern warfare highly contentious.

RSJ: It does seem complicated. Have there been any attempts to bring clarity?

Ms Kholmakhamatova: Clarity is desirable but not easily achievable. In asymmetric warfare and urban combat, military objectives are often located near or within civilian areas. This complicates targeting decisions, blurs the line between

[21] *Amnesty International (2012). Libya: The Forgotten Victims of NATO Strikes* https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde19/003/2012/en/

[22] *Human Rights Watch (2012). Unacknowledged Deaths: Civilian Casualties in NATO's Air Campaign in Libya* https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/05/13/unacknowledged-deaths/civilian-casualties-natos-air-campaign-libya

legitimate and illegitimate targets, and increases the potential for disproportionate harm. For instance, Russia's attacks on densely populated areas — such as Kharkiv, Kyiv, and Mariupol — have caused widespread civilian casualties and destruction of non-military infrastructure[23]. In October 2022, when a missile strike hit a residential apartment block in Zaporizhzhia, it killed at least 13 civilians[24]. As mentioned in the previous example, investigations by the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission found no evidence of military objectives[25], yet Russia claimed it was targeting command posts nearby.

In addition to questioning the accuracy of intelligence and the robustness of proportionality assessments, this case highlights the choice of weapons deployed. Where the target is located nearby, the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in urban settings increases the risk of disproportionate harm. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have documented multiple incidents when the civilian casualties appeared excessive relative to any tangible military gain[26]. Yet in such cases, states and military coalitions have often justified their actions by invoking military necessity, which can overshadow proportionality concerns. It is also worth noting that political considerations and military doctrines generally prioritise strategic advantage over humanitarian imperatives. That is why, to this day, the principle of proportionality is widely accepted in legal theory, but its practical application remains inconsistent.

RSJ: Could you now tell us more about the principle of precaution? Is it any easier enforce?

Ms Kholmakhamatova: By definition, the principle of precaution requires all parties to a conflict to take feasible measures to avoid or minimise incidental harm to civilians and civilian objects. This obligation applies during the planning and execution of attacks, including verifying targets, selecting means and methods of warfare that minimise harm, and, where possible, providing effective warnings.

At first glance, the requirement to provide warnings may appear easier to enforce because it seems like a simple yes-or-no question: either a warning was given or it was not. However, the issue is far more complex. A warning alone does not automatically absolve a military force of responsibility. Its purpose is to give civilians a genuine opportunity to evacuate. If civilians cannot realistically escape, serious legal concerns remain, particularly in densely populated urban conflicts where residents may have nowhere safe to flee. For instance, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) has stated that it issues advance warnings through leaflets, phone calls, text messages, and "roof-knocking" techniques before conducting strikes in densely populated areas of the Gaza Strip[27]. However, organisations such as Human Rights Watch have argued that, in some cases, these warnings were insufficient or unrealistic because civilians had limited access to safe evacuation routes, fuel, transportation, shelter, or humanitarian corridors[28]. As already mentioned, from the legal perspective, in order to satisfy the precaution requirement, warnings must be

[23] *Human Rights Watch. (2022). Russia/Ukraine: Attacks on Mariupol Theater a War Crime.* *https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/16/ukraine-mariupol-theater-hit-russian-attack-sheltered-hundreds*
[24] *BBC. (2022). Ukraine war: 'Russian attack' on city claimed by Moscow kills 13.* *https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-63190844*
[25] *United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMMU). Reports on Civilian Casualties and Infrastructure Damage.* *https://www.ohchr.org/en/countries/ukraine*
[26] *Amnesty International. (2022). "Anyone Can Die at Any Time": Indiscriminate Attacks by Russian Forces in Kharkiv.* *https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur50/5656/2022/en/*
[27] *Kadosh, A. S. (2021). The Practice of "Roof Knocking" from the Perspective of International Law. The Institute for National Security Studies.* *https://www.inss.org.il/strategic_assessment/the-practice-of-roof-knocking-from-the-perspective-of-i*
[28] *Rovner, D. (2023). Legal Analysis of the Pillay Commission's 2023 Report to UNGA. UN Watch.* *https://unwatch.org/legal-analysis-of-pillay-commissions-2023-report-to-unga/*

effective, not merely issued. Yet establishing whether this requirement has been breached is often a highly complex task.

RSJ: What are the principal obstacles to proving that a violation of this principle has occurred?

Ms Kholmakhamatova: The effectiveness and sincerity of these measures have been widely debated. First, the requirement to take 'all feasible precautions' is inherently flexible and context-dependent, making enforcement difficult. What is deemed 'feasible' may vary depending on the resources available, the immediacy of military objectives, and battlefield conditions. Second, non-compliance is hard to verify in real time, and failures are often only scrutinised retrospectively, by which point evidence may be lost or manipulated. Moreover, even when precautionary measures are formally adopted, their practical impact may be undermined by poor intelligence, inadequate planning, or failures in implementation by field commanders.

In some instances, the issuance of warnings is treated more as a formality than a genuine effort to safeguard civilians: without meaningful accountability, there is little deterrent against inadequate implementation. Notably, concerns regarding inadequate precautionary measures have been raised in relation to Russia's conduct during the Ukraine conflict. Numerous attacks have been carried out with little to no warning in populated areas. One such example is the 2022 missile strikes on Vinnytsia and Kramatorsk railway station, which killed scores of civilians. Investigations found little evidence of efforts to minimise civilian casualties or verify the presence of legitimate military targets. In this respect, the principle of precaution faces many of the same practical, evidentiary, and accountability-related challenges as the other two principles.

RSJ: Does this mean that International Humanitarian Law ultimately fails to meaningfully constrain warfare?

Ms Kholmakhamatova: It is important to acknowledge that limitations persist. Violations of the principle of distinction remain evident, often resulting from difficulties in identifying combatants, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, or the deliberate targeting of civilians. The proportionality principle, while theoretically intended to balance military advantage with humanitarian concerns, is complicated by subjective interpretation, indeterminate standards, and limited post-strike accountability. Likewise, precautionary measures designed to prevent or minimise civilian harm are not always implemented effectively and may sometimes serve more as a means of demonstrating compliance than of providing substantive protection.

Yet I would not go so far as to claim that International Humanitarian Law has failed to meaningfully constrain warfare. While the effectiveness of its principles remains contested, their existence reflects an attempt — however limited — to mitigate risks. Fundamentally, IHL establishes a framework that states are expected to follow and against which their conduct can be evaluated. Even where compliance is imperfect, that framework provides a basis for scrutiny and legal challenge that would otherwise be absent.

RSJ: Given that customary IHL faces constraints, yet remains a vital framework in an increasingly volatile global security environment, how can it be more effectively enforced?

Ms Kholmakhamatova: Ultimately, the effective enforcement of IHL depends on the clarity of legal terms, sustained international pressure, and operational capability.

Indeed, recent conflicts show that the main weakness of customary International Humanitarian Law lies not in the rules themselves, but in their lack of enforcement. Accordingly, strengthening compliance would require clearer legal guidance alongside stronger institutional cooperation. Organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, the UN, and international courts could develop more detailed interpretations of concepts such as ‘military advantage’ and ‘feasible precautions’ to reduce inconsistent application by states. At the same time, states could strengthen cooperation with ICC investigations, tighten sanctions for serious violations, and expand the use of independent fact-finding missions.

In this respect, as suggested earlier, political will adds a further layer of complexity. Mechanisms such as the International Criminal Court and UN investigations exist, yet political interests and lack of cooperation often prevent accountability, particularly where major powers are involved. So far, this challenge has prompted several proposals. The French–Mexican initiative, first advanced in 2013, calls on permanent members to voluntarily refrain from using the veto in situations involving genocide, war crimes, or crimes against humanity. More recently, UN General Assembly Resolution 76/262, adopted in 2022, introduced greater scrutiny by requiring the General Assembly to meet whenever a veto is cast. However, accountability still often depends less on legal principle than on geopolitical considerations and the readiness of major powers to act.

One possible reform would be the establishment of an independent investigative body to examine alleged crimes committed by permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (P5). Based on its findings, the Security Council and relevant international courts could initiate legal proceedings and ensure accountability for violations of IHL and international human rights law. Further reforms could include expanding Security Council representation to better reflect developing regions, including small island states, thereby improving balance in global governance. This would also strengthen independent investigative mechanisms and improve transparency and data-sharing across UN bodies.

Operationally, armed forces would benefit from being reformed to adopt stricter target-verification procedures, improve civilian casualty assessments, and ensure that humanitarian corridors and evacuation warnings are independently monitored by neutral actors. Greater investment in IHL training, civilian harm mitigation policies, and precision technologies is also essential.

Overall, while international law cannot eliminate war, clearer legal standards, stronger accountability mechanisms, and improved operational safeguards can help reduce civilian suffering and narrow the gap between legal obligation and battlefield reality.

Beyond the Hashtag: Evaluating the Policy Impact of Digital Activism

Article by Ellie Mueller, Independent Contributor

The rise of digital activism, also known as ‘clicktivism’, which involves using the internet and social media to support a social or political issue, has significantly transformed the landscape of contemporary advocacy and modern lobbying[29]. From viral hashtags to online petitions, movements have amassed support at a scale and speed previously unattainable through conventional means, as the barriers to civic participation have been dramatically lowered. However, a crucial question remains to be answered: do online mobilisations result in substantive policy outcomes, or do they primarily remain symbolic? This article interrogates the foundations of digital activism and evaluates whether its rapid mobilisation capacity translates into meaningful institutional and legislative outcomes. Although many of the initial insights discussed in it originate from the Australian context, the broader analytical framework can be extended to different political systems and geographical settings.

Origins of Advocacy

Advocacy can be defined as the act of speaking or acting on behalf of individuals or groups to defend rights, address injustice, or influence decision-making processes[30]. Historically, its origins can be traced back to elite-mediated forms of persuasion in ancient societies, where petitions, oratory, and appeals to authority were the primary means of seeking redress. Over time, advocacy evolved into more

[29] *Shulman, S.W. (2009) 'The case against mass e-mails: Perverse incentives and low-quality public participation in US federal rulemaking', Policy and Internet, 1(1), pp. 23–53.*

[30] *Pasons, I. (1994). Oliver Twist has asked for more - The politics and practice of getting justice for people with disabilities. Geelong: Villamanta Publishing Service.*

organised and collective practices, particularly during the abolitionist and suffrage movements, which used pamphleteering, public demonstrations, and coordinated campaigns to challenge existing systems of inequality. In the contemporary era, advocacy has expanded further through digital technologies, enabling decentralised, grassroots mobilisation on a global scale and allowing campaigns to reach and engage vast audiences almost instantaneously. Despite this transformation, traditional forms of advocacy remain central to political and legal processes, including institutional lobbying, legal representation, and structured policy engagement, all of which continue to shape how rights are defended and interests are advanced within formal systems.

The Hidden Challenges of Clicktivism

Digital platforms have significantly democratised the ability to define agendas, allowing non-institutional actors to quickly and affordably introduce problems into mainstream political conversation[31]. An initially local injustice can become a hotly debated political issue on a global scale within hours through a viral hashtag. However, there is a fundamental distinction between agenda-setting and policy reform. Organised use of material resources, such as legal expertise, financial capacity, coalition networks, and legislative access, is equally important to the long-term viability of social movements as public attention[32]. Online petitions may generate signatures, but they cannot independently create the institutional connections required for legislative formulation.

In Australia, before a bill passes Parliament to become law, it is subject to debate in the House of Representatives (the lower house) before undergoing scrutiny in the Senate (the upper house). This process typically involves input from industry and civil society through consultation, revision procedures, institutional lobbying by sector organisations and charities, and commissioned research conducted for government departments. These formal mechanisms illustrate why visibility alone rarely translates directly into legal reform.

Performative activism is a breed of its own. Its engagement is driven more by social identity and self-presentation than by strategic political goals[33]. Those who rely on it predominantly hope to cultivate public sympathy rather than address the issue. Notably, some critics[34] have argued that parliamentary Question Time has become a performative exercise, whereby politicians use speeches to raise awareness of polarising issues rather than directly advancing legislation for citizens. Institutions governed by established procedures and funding priorities may therefore respond superficially, or not at all, to surges in online sentiment that prove fleeting. This is often the case when individuals offer symbolic support through reposts and likes rather than advancing campaigns through formal legal and political procedures.

#BringBackOurGirls

Perhaps this issue is best illustrated through the #BringBackOurGirls campaign. In April 2014, after Boko Haram kidnapped 276 schoolgirls in Nigeria, the hashtag gained remarkable international traction within days. Then-US First Lady Michelle Obama and UK Prime Minister David Cameron publicly endorsed the campaign through social media, using their global

[31] *Chadwick, A. (2013) The hybrid media system: Politics and power. Oxford: Oxford University Press.*

[32] *McCarthy, J.D. and Zald, M.N. (1977) 'Resource mobilization and social movements: A partial theory', American Journal of Sociology, 82(6), pp. 1212–1241.*

[33] *Cabrera, N.L., Matias, C., and Montoya, R. (2017) 'Activism or slacktivism? The potential and pitfalls of social media in contemporary student activism', Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 10(4), pp. 400–415.*

[34] *House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure (2021) A window on the House: practices and procedures relating to Question Time — Chapter 4: Improving Question Time: Better accountability. Parliament of Australia, Canberra.* https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Procedure/Questiontime/Report/section?id=committees%2Freportrep%2F024667%2F76257

platforms to amplify awareness[35]. Following the virality of the hashtag, several states offered intelligence-sharing and logistical support to Nigerian authorities[36]. In what Keck and Sikkink[37] refer to as the 'boomerang effect', the effort was successful in elevating what could have remained a regional security issue to the international level.

Yet a deeper examination reveals important limitations. After only a few weeks, public attention sharply declined. This reflects what Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheafer[38] have described as the structural "half-life" of digital attention: online engagement peaks rapidly before dissipating as audiences shift their focus elsewhere. Meanwhile, the structural factors that made the kidnapping possible, including poverty, regional instability, and governance failures, remained largely unaddressed. More than a decade later, a significant number of the kidnapped girls remained missing, even though some were eventually freed through negotiated settlements[39].

This case highlights a fundamental limitation of digital activism operating in isolation: it is highly effective at attracting rapid, widespread attention but often ill-equipped to sustain the concentrated, long-term pressure required for structural policy change.

From Attention to Action

Placing traditional advocacy and clicktivism as rivals would be reductive. They serve as complementary modes within a larger advocacy ecosystem, which is a more helpful conceptualisation backed by an increasing amount of empirical research[40]. Illustratively, the US Civil Rights Movement, the anti-apartheid coalition, and the global campaign to outlaw landmines are examples of historical movements with clearly lasting impact that combined widespread public mobilisation with ongoing institutional engagement, including coalition building, legal action, and legislative lobbying[41]. None relied on public attention alone; rather, public pressure was translated into formal political and legal processes capable of achieving structural reform.

In the modern era, Cancer Research UK offers a compelling illustration of what digital mobilisation can achieve when integrated with established institutional frameworks. The organisation has used social media and digital outreach for Patient and Public Involvement (PPI), directly engaging patients and members of the public in both the conduct and dissemination of research. At the same time, the organisation has continued to build upon decades of academic evidence identifying smoking as a leading cause of cancer, while simultaneously lobbying Parliament in cooperation with campaign ambassador volunteers for stronger tobacco control legislation. This dual strategy has increased public awareness of smoking-

[35] *Chiluwa, I. and Ifukor, P. (2015) 'War against our children: Stance and evaluation in #BringBackOurGirls campaign discourse on Twitter and Facebook', Discourse and Society, 26(3), pp. 267–296.*
[36] *Zenn, J. (2014) 'Boko Haram's international connections', CTC Sentinel, 7(1), pp. 1–6.*
[37] *Keck, M. and Sikkink, K. (1998) Activists beyond borders: Advocacy networks in international politics. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.*
[38] *Wolfsfeld, G., Segev, E., and Sheafer, T. (2013) 'Social media and the Arab Spring: Politics comes first', The International Journal of Press/Politics, 18(2), pp. 115–137.*
[39] *Amnesty International (2021) Nigeria: Seven years on, Chibok girls still await justice. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org*
[40] *Earl, J. and Kimport, K. (2011) Digitally enabled social change: Activism in the internet age. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.*
[41] *Tarrow, S. (2011) Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics. 3rd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.*

related harms while contributing to legislative progress, precisely the Tobacco and Vapes Act 2026, demonstrating that digital engagement, when deliberately connected to institutional mechanisms, can move from visibility to measurable policy change.

The Women's March provides another powerful example. One of the largest single-day protests in recorded history, it began as a reaction to President Trump's inauguration. The march was motivated by concerns surrounding his policy positions and rhetoric, which many participants viewed as threatening to women's rights, and rapidly expanded across 168 countries through social media coordination. Millions participated globally. Crucially, however, the momentum extended beyond the march itself. Digital networks were redirected towards sustained civic engagement, channelling participants into voter registration drives, local organising initiatives, and broader activist infrastructures such as online training and campaign coordination networks. The movement also inspired subsequent demonstrations and collective action, showing that online organising can translate into measurable democratic participation when effectively sustained beyond the initial moment of mobilisation.

For practitioners, the analytical takeaway is clear: conventional approaches offer durability, depth, and institutional access, whereas digital campaigns lower participation barriers and reach wider audiences at unprecedented speed and scale. Each compensates for the structural limitations of the other[42]. The most effective advocacy strategies therefore treat digital and traditional methods not as competing alternatives, but as mutually reinforcing mechanisms within a broader process of social and political change.

Designing for Impact

From the analysis above, digital campaigns that result in significant policy gains are distinguished from those that remain symbolic by a few enabling factors. When campaigns are linked to organisations that can convert public attention into institutional pressure, they have a stronger impact. Direct political lobbying and policy briefing, combined with digital mobilisation, can also meaningfully affect legislative outcomes. Platforms such as Avaaz, a US-based non-profit organisation, exemplify this model by combining online mobilisation with targeted policy advocacy on issues such as climate change and poverty[43].

Additionally, campaigns must be designed with clear strategies for sustaining engagement beyond the initial viral moment[44]. Objectives must be focused on precise, achievable, and time-bound demands because unclear goals allow institutions to respond with symbolic gestures rather than structural change[45].

Platform designers, such as Meta, also bear responsibility and must be held accountable. Platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) have in the past deplatformed activists and covertly adjusted algorithms to shadow-ban users, limiting the visibility of protest-related content without their knowledge[46]. Integrating civic infrastructure, such as legislative contact tools, constituency mapping, and deliberative forums, can create stronger connections between digital participation and institutional action[47].

[42] *Fisher, D.R. (2019) American resistance: From the Women's March to the Blue Wave. New York: Columbia University Press.*
[43] *Chadwick, A. (2013) The hybrid media system: Politics and power. Oxford: Oxford University Press.*
[44] *Earl, J. and Kimport, K. (2011) Digitally enabled social change: Activism in the internet age. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.*
[45] *Morozov, E. (2011) The net delusion: The dark side of internet freedom. New York: PublicAffairs.*
[46] *Earl, J., Maher, T.V. and Pan, J. (2022) 'The digital repression of social movements, protest, and activism: A synthetic review', Science Advances, 8(10), p. eabl8198. doi: 10.1126/sciadv.abl8198.*
[47] *Loader, B.D. and Mercea, D. (2011) 'Networking democracy? Social media innovations and participatory politics', Information, Communication and Society, 14(6), pp. 757–769.*

Conclusion

Clicktivism is neither inherently superficial nor inherently transformational. Its effectiveness depends on its integration within a broader advocacy ecosystem. Understanding its structural advantages and limitations is essential for determining when and why it is effective, and how it can be leveraged to achieve meaningful outcomes.

Digital mobilisation holds immense potential to amplify the voices of marginalised groups, increase participation, and accelerate awareness of injustice. Yet awareness alone is insufficient to produce meaningful change. Digital activism follows cycles of attention, and unless campaigns are channelled into institutional processes at the right moment, they risk dissolving into the noise of online discourse. Ultimately, the true power of digital activism lies not in the hashtag itself, but in what follows after it.

ROKUS SOCIETY JOURNAL
2026, Vol. 1, No. 1

Breaking the Silences of Memory

Book by Exauce Bigue Koviko,
Independent Contributor

“Exauce Bigue Koviko is a Congolese-born multidisciplinary artist. Drawing upon his experiences of refuge and diasporic life shaped by conflict and resettlement, he uses art to inform wider audiences, challenge societal narratives, and contribute to discussions surrounding displacement, memory, and cultural preservation. Though primarily known for painting and sculpture, his practice also extends into music and literature.

For the first issue of the Rokus Society Journal, Koviko introduces *Breaking the Silences of Memory*, a work concerned with freedom, dignity, remembrance, and the preservation of cultural identity. The book is not only a record of lived experience but also an attempt to define a new philosophical and creative space through the framework of Dotism. Across his practice, he seeks to challenge the silence surrounding inherited trauma, while highlighting the importance of maintaining historical records.”

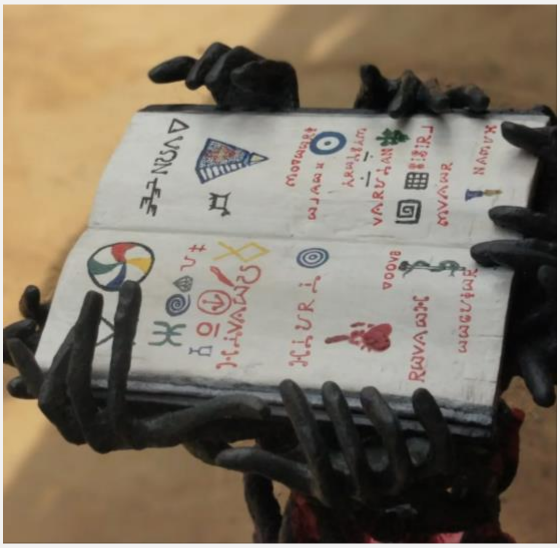
RSJ Editorial Team

About the Author

Exauce Bigue Koviko was born in 2005 in Bukavu, South Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. From an early age, he showed an interest in sculpting figures from mud and clay, recreating characters from films and experimenting with form driven more by curiosity than instruction.

His artistic development was interrupted when conflict in eastern Congo — a region destabilised in the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide and decades of competition over mineral resources — forced his family to flee to Uganda, where they lived in a refugee camp. The abrupt loss of home, language, and continuity would later become central to both his identity and artistic vision.

Life in the camp exposed him to communities learning to survive in unfamiliar environments, often through silence. People adapted to new systems and uncertain futures while carrying memories they rarely voiced. Beneath the surface of muted resilience, Koviko observed exhaustion, grief, and unresolved trauma. He also recognised the danger of memory disappearing altogether: stories shaped by war and displacement risked becoming undocumented, distorted, or retold by those who had not lived them.



Art, for him, therefore became a necessity rather than a luxury — a means of reclaiming agency over stories vulnerable

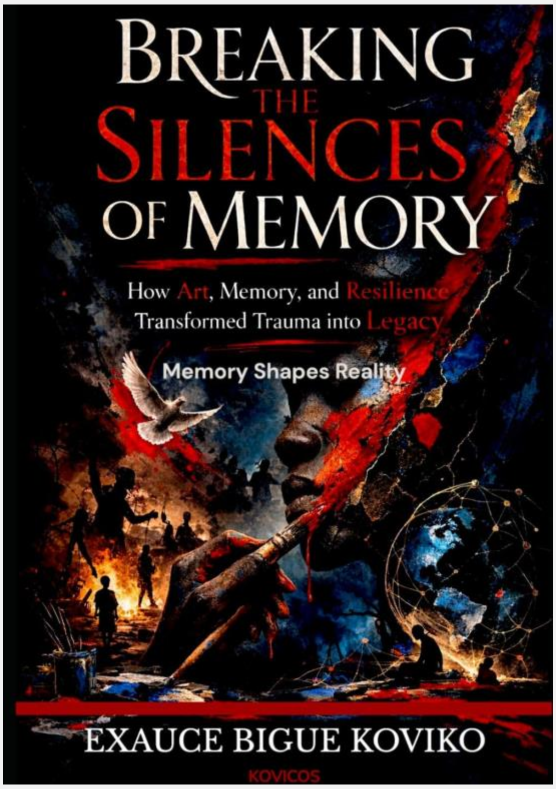
THE LABOR-MARE SCANDAL

Dry & Wet Acrylic on Canvas / 60×45 cm

to erasure. Through circles, symbols, and layered patterns, he began translating memory into visual form, seeking not only to express personal experience but also to preserve fragments of collective history that might otherwise disappear.

In 2023, he began *The World of Circles*, an ongoing series of paintings and sculptures examining cycles of violence, displacement, resilience, and healing across generations. Central to this work is Dotism, a distinctive artistic philosophy and visual style characterised by intricate dot patterns used to create texture, symbolism, and layered meaning. Through this approach, Koviko explores how individual memories — often fragmented — contribute to wider cultural narratives.

His recent work stretches into sound and language as additional spaces of reflection, positioning art as a site of encounter where viewers are invited into empathy, introspection and internal dialogue. These themes are thoroughly explored in the book *Breaking the Silences of Memory.*



Book Review

Breaking the Silences of Memory is an interdisciplinary exploration of how memory, identity, and displacement shape the human experience. Drawing from both personal history and wider collective realities, the book examines how unspoken experiences influence emotional life and how creative expression can transform silence into understanding.

A central question running through the work concerns the role of art during periods of conflict and post-displacement recovery. Art is often dismissed as secondary to material survival, yet Koviko challenges this assumption. He argues that when memory remains unexpressed, it does not fade; instead, it becomes trauma, resurfacing across time and shaping perception, behaviour, and social interactions. Through creative expression, individuals can begin to bridge the distance between past experiences and present realities, allowing memories to be processed rather than endured. In a world where suffering is frequently reduced to statistics or headlines, the act of attentive listening — and of giving form to lived experience — becomes culturally and politically significant. In this context, it is often the only means to ensure history does not repeat itself.

This argument is closely tied to Dotism, the artistic philosophy at the heart of Koviko's practice. "*From something comes everything, and from everything comes something*," he writes. Dotism reflects the cyclical nature of human experience, proposing that life unfolds through interconnected points — dots, marks, and symbols — that each carry echoes of memory, presence, and absence. For Koviko, creative expression becomes a means of restoring continuity between different timeframes. It allows individuals to confront unresolved trauma, reconstruct fractured identities, and "*break the silence of memory*." Dotism also emphasises the importance of collective remembrance: while no single story can carry the full weight of history, many interconnected narratives together form a resilient cultural archive.

Structured across twenty chapters, the book blends personal reflection, philosophical inquiry, and social commentary. Its language is accessible and contemplative, making complex ideas legible without sacrificing depth. This interdisciplinary approach allows the book to function simultaneously as memoir, artistic manifesto, and a reflection on history, identity, and cultural preservation. Readers interested in fine art, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy will find the work particularly valuable.

ROKUS SOCIETY JOURNAL
2026, Vol. 1, No. 1

Villains or Heroes? Motivations Behind Atlantic and Mediterranean Piracy, 1550-1600

Adapted Research Paper by Arda Yaniklar, Rokus Society Fellow

“Piracy is often portrayed as little more than isolated criminality and greed. Indeed, much pirate activity was fundamentally driven by economic gain, but these interpretations obscure a far more complex reality. In the second half of the sixteenth century, piracy was not merely a matter of maritime theft but a multifaceted phenomenon, often understood as an ideological enterprise. This is mainly attributable to the fact that pirates had to disguise their actual intentions and present them on more acceptable grounds, predominantly religious and political, in order to justify their violent actions and economic motivations, for the latter were generally disapproved of. This blurred the line between official narratives and underlying motivations, making historical interpretation more difficult.

As Joshua White argues, Ottoman government records offer little insight into the motivations of pirates[48]. Likewise, British government sources fail to present a clear picture of pirates’ primary and secondary intentions.

In search of clearer answers, I compared the Atlantic and Mediterranean regions, examining pirate activity alongside broader socio-economic and geopolitical factors so that a more nuanced understanding of piracy could emerge. Additionally, I used unofficial contemporary sources, such as letters and memoirs, to gain valuable insights into the motivations of Atlantic and Mediterranean pirates, which official records often fail to provide, as outlined above.

My efforts culminated in a dissertation which was awarded the BCMH Prize for Undergraduate Achievement in Maritime History by the British Commission for Maritime History. When I joined the Rokus Society as a Fellow, I saw it as a valuable opportunity to share my findings with a broader audience. Below, you will find an abridged version of my research that introduces the subject in broader terms while adopting a lighter and less detailed approach so as not to overwhelm a general readership.

Those interested in politics, conflict, and economic competition will, I hope, find the piece particularly engaging. It seeks to prompt reflection not only on piracy itself, but also on how historical narratives are shaped and contested, and how actions are framed to justify certain interpretations while obscuring others. Towards the end, it raises the question of whose interests such narratives ultimately serve. In offering this analysis, I aim to encourage readers to consider piracy not simply as criminal activity, but as a historical problem that invites a more critical reading of motives, moral claims, and state power.”

Arda Yaniklar

[48] *J. White, ‘Holy Warriors, Rebels, and Thieves: Defining Maritime Violence in the Ottoman Mediterranean’, in Amirell, S., Buchan, B. and Hagerdal, H., eds., Piracy in World History (Amsterdam, 2021), p. 165.*

Introduction

To address the question of piracy, one must first define what is meant by piracy and who the pirates were in the second half of the sixteenth century. According to the Oxford Dictionary, a pirate is defined as 'a person who attacks and robs ships at sea'. However, the definition of a pirate was more complex during the second half of the sixteenth century. For instance, in the Atlantic, there was a distinction between pirates authorised by a legal authority to conduct seaborne raids and those who were not. The term 'privateer' referred to the former, whereas 'pirate' described a sea raider operating outside a legal framework. Notably, the term 'privateer' emerged slightly after the sixteenth century, so contemporaries would not yet have used it in the same way. To maintain the needed simplicity, this article uses the term 'pirate' to refer to those engaged in maritime and coastal raiding, rather than employing the wide range of names and legal classifications assigned to them at the time.

Order Beyond the Law

Evidence from both the Atlantic and Mediterranean regions suggests marginalisation as a primary driving force behind piracy[49]. In the Mediterranean, its rise in the late sixteenth century can be linked to economic hardship and exclusion from maritime trade. As Emrah Safa Gürkan argues, many Muslim pirates originated from regions with limited economic resources and production capacity[50], which naturally restricted their opportunities for participation in legitimate commerce and for social mobility. The redirection of global trade routes following European expansion further marginalised North African ports: overseas discoveries altered trade routes in ways that were unfavourable to Muslim merchants[51], while intense competition for trade at Christian-controlled ports compounded this disadvantage[52]. During this period, Christian piracy in the Mediterranean was similarly driven by economic necessity. In Malta, recurring famine pushed Christian corsairs to intercept grain ships, ostensibly to sustain the island[53].

In the Atlantic region, marginalisation likewise prevailed. Spain's monopoly over American trade, formalised by the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), restricted access for other European powers and effectively forced foreign merchants to operate through Spanish-controlled commercial channels at considerable cost[54]. Therefore, in seaborne raiding, excluded powers did not see mere criminality, but an alternative means of accessing and redistributing transatlantic wealth. Yet such actions also promised considerable profit, blurring the line between survival and opportunism.

Notably, Cassar argues that although the Knights of St John's maritime strategy was initially framed as a response to Malta's recurring scarcity, many of those involved became notably wealthy[55]. Antonio de Sosa, a Portuguese priest captured by Mediterranean Muslim pirates, recorded the scale of their economic gains, describing how considerable booty was acquired and divided among crews, typically including commodities, jewellery, garments, and, perhaps most significantly, captives[56].

In the Atlantic, the lure of material gain well beyond economic necessity was equally evident. The English privateer John Hawkins engaged in illicit slave trading in order to bypass Spanish regulations

[49] *E. S. Gürkan, Sultanın Korsanları: Osmanlı Akdenizi'nde Gazâ, Yağma ve Esaret, 1500-1700 (Istanbul, 2018), pp. 369-370.*
[50] *Antonio de Sosa, Life among the Corsairs of Algiers (c.1581), in K. Lane and A. Bialuschewski, eds. and trans., Piracy in the Early Modern Era: An Anthology of Sources (Indianapolis, 2019), pp. 39-43.*
[51] *Gürkan, Sultanın Korsanları, pp. 371-374.*
[52] *Ibid.*
[53] *P. Cassar, 'The Maltese Corsairs and the Order of St. John of Jerusalem', The Catholic Historical Review, vol. 46 (1960), pp. 153-154.*
[54] *D. Childs, Pirate Nation: Elizabeth I and Her Royal Sea Rovers (Barnsley, 2014), pp. 6-7.*
[55] *Ibid, p. 151.*
[56] *Ibid.*

requiring merchants to trade through the guild in Seville[57]. He reportedly threatened violence if colonial authorities refused to purchase his cargo in the Spanish Caribbean, including enslaved people valued at approximately 100,000 pesos[58]. Similarly, in 1572, Francis Drake attacked Nombre de Dios in pursuit of substantial quantities of gold, pearls, and, above all, silver[59]. Dutch and French incursions followed similar patterns of coercive trade and plunder, prompting frequent complaints from Spanish colonial officials[60]. As a result, piracy increasingly evolved beyond a means of survival into a profitable and organised system of wealth acquisition.

However, the most interesting development was yet to come: as piracy became deeply ingrained in maritime life, states were increasingly compelled not only to tolerate it, but also to utilise it for broader strategic objectives.

The Great Cause

In the Mediterranean, piracy was later frequently placed on an explicitly religious footing by both practitioners and the authorities that supported them. Contemporary sources often described Muslim corsairs as *gâzis*, or holy warriors engaged in a struggle against non-believers[61]. The concept of *gazâ*, also meaning holy war, has long been associated with Ottoman expansion. Paul Wittek's influential thesis framed the early success of the Ottoman state as driven by the ideology of *gazâ*, whereby Muslim warriors pursued campaigns against Christian enemies[62]. This framework has also been applied to Mediterranean piracy. As İdris Bostan argues, pirates operating in Ottoman waters resembled akıncı (frontier raiders) and acted with the dual motivation of religious zeal and the desire for booty[63]. Indeed, references to *gazâ* are also present in Ottoman administrative records[64], where pirate activity was sometimes explicitly framed in religious terms. This pattern of conversion is also noted by Antonio de Sosa, as many pirates of Christian origin converted to Islam and subsequently joined Muslim corsair groups[65]. Conversion provided both ideological justification and practical benefits, including protection within the Ottoman political framework. In this sense, the language of *gazâ* offered a legitimising structure that integrated piracy into the broader ideological system of the empire.

Notably, evidence indicates that many converts possessed only a superficial understanding of Islam and continued to practise elements of their former faith. Sosa recounts, for instance, that two Corsican converts swore on the Bible during marriage ceremonies[66]. Similarly, the Catalan convert Guillen Cerda expressed views that diverged significantly from orthodox Islamic doctrine, suggesting a syncretic or instrumental approach to religion[67]. These examples indicate that conversion was frequently a strategic choice rather than purely an ideological commitment. Further, the notion of *gazâ* as a sole motivation for piracy is questionable due to evidence of attacks on Muslims. Ottoman documents record instances of Muslim pirates collaborating with local populations to raid Ottoman-controlled settlements, such as those in Mytilene in

[57] *Ibid, pp. 29-50.*
[58] *John Hawkins to Licentiate Alonso Bernaldez, petition, Borburata, April 16, 1565, in I. A. Wright, ed. and trans., Spanish Documents Concerning English Voyages to the Caribbean 1527-1568: Selected from the Archives of the Indies at Seville (London, 1929), pp. 82-83.*
[59] *Francis Drake Attacks Nombre de Dios, Panama (1572), Lane and Bialuschewski, Piracy in the Early Modern Era, pp. 19-21.*
60 Miguel de Castellanos to the crown, Rio de la Hacha, January I, 1568, in Wright, Spanish Documents Concerning English Voyages to the Caribbean 1527-1568, pp.107- 108.
[61] *4 September 1578, Ankara, Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi, A_{DVNSMHM, 35, no. 475.*
[62] *P. Wittek, The Rise of the Ottoman Empire (London, 1938), cited in Gürkan, Sultanın Korsanlar, p. 53.*
[63] *İ, Bostan, Adriyatik'te Korsanlık Osmanlılar, Uskoklar, Venedikliler, 1575,1620 (İstanbul, 2009), pp. 19-21.*
[64] *11 April 1571, Ankara, Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi, A_{DVNSMHM, 12, no. 375.*
[65] *Antonio de Sosa, Life among the Corsairs of Algiers (c.1581).*
[66] *Gürkan, Sultanın Korsanları, pp. 76-77.*
[67] *Ibid.*

1575[68]. These actions are difficult to reconcile with the principles of holy war. Moreover, as Mustafa Âli notes, prominent figures such as Hayreddin Barbarossa and Turgut Reis were only retrospectively framed as gâzis after entering Ottoman service and restricting their activities to enemies of the state[69]. This too suggests that the religious framing of piracy was often imposed after the fact, rather than constituting its primary cause.

Christian piracy in the Mediterranean was similarly embedded within a religious framework. Groups such as the Knights of St. John explicitly presented their actions as a continuation of the Crusading tradition. Founded on principles of defending Christendom, the Order justified its attacks on Muslim shipping as part of a broader struggle against Islamic expansion[70]. Likewise, the Uskoks portrayed themselves as defenders of the Christian faith, targeting Muslim vessels and coastal settlements which are documented in Ottoman *hükms* and *nişân-ı şerîfs*, including a decree from Murad III describing a raid on Bosnian merchants[71].

Yet, as with Muslim corsairs, the religious justification of Christian piracy often obscured economic motives. The Knights of St. John, for example, relied heavily on the proceeds of piracy to sustain the economy of Malta and the Order itself [72]. Their frequent attacks on Venetian ships, despite Venice being a Catholic power, demonstrate their confessional identity did not prevent opportunistic predation. As Stanley Lane-Poole and J. D. Jerrold Kelley observe, the Knights "*lived by plunder as much as any Corsair*," even if they cloaked their actions in the language of piety.[73] Similarly, the Uskoks targeted Christian shipping when profitable opportunities arose, including collaborations with Ottoman officials against Venetian interests. [74]

In Atlantic piracy, religion also played a role but it was generally less prominent than in the Mediterranean region. The sixteenth century was marked by intense conflict between Protestant and Catholic powers and this ideological divide influenced contemporary representations of piracy. Matthew Dimmock argues that piracy can be understood as part of a broader confessional struggle, with Protestant actors framing their attacks on Spanish targets as resistance to Catholic oppression. [75] Contemporary literature reinforces this interpretation as *The Honourable Actions of that most Famous and Valiant Englishman* depict English pirates as heroic figures engaged in a righteous struggle against Spain and the Catholic Church.[76] Likewise, Ralph Lane characterised colonial expeditions as "most Christian" actions directed against "Papists."[77] Similarly, as in the Mediterranean, religious rhetoric often served to legitimise actions driven primarily by economic and political considerations. Even acts that appeared to carry religious significance, such as Francis Drake's destruction of churches during the sack of Cartagena de Indias, can be interpreted as tactical measures intended to intimidate populations and secure ransom

[68] *15 December 1575, Ankara, Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi, A_{DVNSMHM, 27, no. 368.*
[69] *Mustafa Alî, Mevaidü'n-Nefais Fi Kavâdi'l-Mecalis, ed., M. Şeker (Ankara, 1997) p. 288, cited in White, 'Holy Warriors, Rebels, and Thieves', pp. 149-150.*
[70] *A. D. Atauz, 'Haçlı Korsanlar: Saint Jean Şövalyeleri ve Akdeniz'de Haydutluk', Kebikeç (2012), p. 206.*
[71] *Mumcu, Venedik Baylosu'nun Defterleri the Venetian Baylo's Registers (1589-1684), pp. 42-43.*
[72] *Mumcu, Venedik Baylosu'nun Defterleri the Venetian Baylo's Registers (1589-1684), pp. 42-43.*
[73] *S. Lane-Poole, and J. D. J. Kelley, The Story of the Barbary Corsairs (New York, 1890), p. 142.*
[74] *Mumcu, Venedik Baylosu'nun Defterleri the Venetian Baylo's Registers (1589-1684), pp. 42-43.*
[75] *Anonymous, The Honourable Actions of that most Famous and Valiant Englishman, Edward Glemham Esquire, latelie obtained against the Spaniards, and the Holy League, in Foure Sundrie Fightes (London, 1591).*
[76] *M. Dimmock, 'Crusading piracy? The Curious Case of the Spanish in the Channel, 1590-95', in C. Jowitt, ed, Pirates? the Politics of Plunder, 1550-1650 (Basingstoke, 2007), pp. 74-89.*
[77] *'America and West Indies: August 1585', in Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies: Volume 1, 1574-1660, ed. W. N. Sainsbury (London, 1860), pp. 2-3. British History Online https://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol1/pp2-3>*

payments rather than expressions of ideological zeal.[78]

Pirates as Political Agents

Political considerations likewise shaped piracy. Pirate activity in the Mediterranean was often regulated in accordance with the diplomatic priorities of the Ottoman state. Muslim corsairs were prohibited from attacking vessels belonging to allied powers or states with which the empire had maintained treaties, regardless of religious affiliation. This indicates that political interests could override religious considerations. Indeed, Ottoman decrees from the late sixteenth century frequently condemned attacks on Venetian shipping and ordered local authorities to suppress such actions.[79] Similarly, Süleyman I issued orders to prevent attacks on French vessels, reflecting the Franco-Ottoman alliance.[80] These examples demonstrate that piracy operated within a broader political framework, even when framed in religious terms. Nevertheless, such political constraints were often justified through religious authority, as the *şeyhülislam* issued *fetvas* regulating pirate activity.[81]

In contrast, Atlantic piracy was more commonly justified in explicitly political context. The emergence of piracy in this region was closely tied to interstate rivalry, particularly between England, the Dutch Republic, and Spain. Therefore, rather than operating solely as independent actors, many pirates functioned as instruments of state policy. English authorities, for example, issued commissions authorising private individuals to attack enemy shipping. In 1595, Elizabeth I granted the Earl of Cumberland a commission to wage maritime warfare against Spain, thereby legitimising his activities within the framework of the Anglo-Spanish War.[82] Such commissions transformed piracy into a form of sanctioned violence, blurring the distinction between piracy and legally authorised seaborne raids ('privateering'). Dutch piracy followed a similar pattern. The Sea Beggars, for instance, framed their actions within the context of the Dutch Revolt against Spanish rule. Their attacks on Spanish shipping were justified as part of a broader struggle for independence.[83] Illustratively, Prince William of Orange issued commissions to individuals such as Willem Bloys van Treslong, explicitly linking piracy to the political objectives of the rebellion.[84] Instructions accompanying these commissions emphasised the importance of returning captured prizes to designated ports in order to support the "general cause", thereby integrating piracy into a wider political discourse.

Atlantic piracy was also closely connected to imperial expansion. English expeditions often combined plunder with efforts at colonisation, reflecting broader ambitions to establish a foothold in the Americas. Figures such as Richard Grenville played a key role in early colonial ventures, as evidenced by correspondence from Ralph Lane describing attempts to establish settlements.[85] Grenville himself reported success in claiming and developing new territories.[86] Spanish sources likewise interpreted these activities

[78] *The city of Santo Domingo to the Crown, February 26, 1586, in Wright, Further English Voyages to Spanish America, 1583-1594, pp. 38-41.*

[79] *5 August 1585, Ankara, Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi, A_{DVNSMHM, 58, no. 510.*

[80] *8 September 1566, Ankara, Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi, A_{DVNSMHM, 5, no. 215.*

[81] *White, 'Holy Warriors, Rebels, and Thieves', pp. 157-158.*

[82] *'Queen Elizabeth - Volume 251: March 1595', in Calendar of State Papers Domestic: Elizabeth, 1595-1597, ed. M. A. E. Green (London, 1869), pp. 14-25, British History Online <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/domestic/edw-eliz/1595-7/pp14-25>*

[83] *C. Goslinga, The Dutch in the Caribbean and on the Wild Coast 1580-1680 (Gainesville, 2017), pp. 16-29.*

[84] *'Elizabeth: January 1582, 21-31', in Calendar of State Papers Foreign: Elizabeth, Volume 15, 1581-1582, ed. A. J. Butler (London, 1907), pp. 459-478. British History Online [website] <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/foreign/vol15/pp459-478>*

85 'America and West Indies: August 1585', in Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies: Volume 1, 1574-1660, ed. W. N. Sainsbury (London, 1860), pp. 2-3. British History Online [website]

86 'America and West Indies: October 1585', in Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies: Volume 1, 1574-1660, ed. W. N. Sainsbury (London, 1860), p. 4. British History Online [website] <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol1/p4> (last accessed 11 April 2024).

as evidence of long-term intentions to occupy and colonise the region.[87] Such efforts reveal how piracy could be framed as part of a larger imperial project, providing an additional layer of justification for violent activity. What had once been a limited set of raiding practices acquired broader political and imperial significance.

Conclusion

The topic of piracy is complex and multifaceted, meaning it cannot be fully addressed within this format. For now, in closing this brief exploration, there are several key takeaways I wish to highlight.

Firstly, while this article focuses on the past, its interpretation is also applicable to modern realities. It helps us reflect on the broader political and economic conditions that shape how violence emerges, evolves, and becomes normalised within society. Rather than placing blame solely on individuals, this piece encourages consideration of the wider systemic pressures and inequalities that often underpin such phenomena.

Secondly, I wish to stress the dual nature of piracy and its justifications. In the second half of the sixteenth century, piracy in the Atlantic and Mediterranean was framed through distinct religious and political logics depending on regional contexts. While Mediterranean piracy was often justified through gazâ, or holy war, Atlantic piracy was more frequently framed in political terms, particularly in relation to national interests, anti-Spanish warfare, and maritime expansion. However, these differences did not alter the primary motivation behind piracy, which remained economic. Piracy served as a means through which marginalised individuals, merchants, and states sought to obtain a share of maritime trade and accumulate wealth. This evolution demonstrates how a phenomenon that emerged from material pressures became increasingly complex once states, empires, and religious authorities learned to interpret and utilise it for their own purposes. Economic violence could therefore be presented as holy war or national service, depending on the political and religious language available. For this reason, there is a need for a more critical reading of the narratives constructed around coercion and power. The justifications attached to particular actions should not be accepted at face value, but examined alongside the interests they often conceal.

Ultimately, the history of piracy is not merely a story of crime at sea, but a reflection of how power, exclusion, and opportunity interact within wider political and economic systems. Understanding these dynamics allows us not only to interpret the past more critically, but also to recognise similar patterns in the present.

---

87 Diego Menendez de Valdes to Sanjuan de Puerto Rico, June 7, 1585, in I. A. Wright, ed. and trans, Further English Voyages to Spanish America, 1583-1594: Documents from the Archives of the Indies at Seville Illustrating English Voyages to the Caribbean, the Spanish Main, Florida, and Virginia (London, 1951), pp. 9-10.