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Digital Media and Conflict

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Abstract- Traditional mass media have long been used to amplify and extend viewpoints and ideologies, to persuade audiences at home, and to influence opposing sides in conflict. International broadcasting on shortwave radio and, later, satellite TV has been considered a key foreign policy tool. Non-traditional media have also played a major role in conflict-prone settings since long before the Internet, from the spread of democratic ideas through samizdat in the Soviet Union, to the dissemination of revolutionary Islamist thought in Iran on cassette tape, to the fax revolution of Tiananmen Square. There is an extensive literature of analysis and history that examines the relationship of media to conflict—from propaganda to incitement, and from conflict prevention to post-conflict stabilization and peace-building. Conflict in the 20th century was often characterized by a persistent lack of access to information, for both participants directly involved in the conflict as well as observers such as reporters, rights groups, and humanitarian agencies. While many conflicts in the 21st century still occur largely out of the public eye, it is becoming more common for war to be conducted in the midst of information abundance. Conflicts in Lebanon in 2006, Pakistan in 2007, Kenya and Georgia in 2008, and Moldova and Iran in 2009 played out in the context of diverse and resilient information sources and networks. In those conflicts, digital media tools were integral to the operations of both activists and combatants, used for organizing and mobilizing forces and demonstrations, and for creating media content in attempts to influence the outcome of conflict.In addition, many 21st century wars are not only about holding territory, but about gaining public support and achieving legal status in the international arena. Governments seek to hold onto power through persuasion as much as through force. Media are increasingly essential elements of conflict, rather than just a functional tool for those fighting. Acts of violence performed in the theatre of the public eye can be used in the fight for influence. Violent groups increasingly use media to achieve their goals, and violence itself is also used as a message. New media technologies have increased communication and information dissemination in the context of conflict. The struggles for authority, support, funding, and international status that accompany conflicts are played out on the field of media. Modern terror organizations design attacks for maximum media exposure in the theatre of the real. The rise of cable and satellite TV and their 24-hour news channels, beginning in the late 1980s, ensures real-time access to international events on a global scale, now available throughout much of the world in many languages. The Internet, cell phone networks, and an abundance of media production tools such as digital cameras have expanded the ability of both professional media and citizens to produce and disseminate information in all contexts, including violent conflict.

Research Methodology: - Library Research

- ***Statistical compilations and manipulations,***
- ***Reference and abstract guides- 'Centre for International Media Assistance',***
- ***Content analysis,***
- ***Recording of notes.***

Keywords: -- Communication, Conflict, Digital, Media, Technology

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I. INTRODUCTION

The discord between citizens creating and disseminating media and governments aspiring to restrict, censor, and influence in conflict situations reflects the tension between informal, fast-moving information and community networks and the formal hierarchies of state power. New information networks link people together through non-state, citizen-oriented communities, challenging the concept of a ruling authority able to control and direct information flows amongst its citizens.

It is now clear that increased access to information and to the means to produce media has both positive and negative consequences in conflict situations. The question as to whether the presence of digital media networks will encourage violence or lead to peaceful solutions may be viewed as a contest. It is possible to build communications architectures that encourage dialogue and nonviolent political solutions. However, it is equally possible for digital media to increase polarization, strengthen biases, and foment violence.

Of course, violent acts witnessed, recorded, or documented after the fact do not automatically become available to the public. Technological change may increase information access in theory, but there are numerous ways to keep images and information from reaching wide distribution. These include:

• Legal, regulatory and extralegal restrictions of Internet, cellular, and broadcast media, including various kinds of censorship
• Control of physical space where violence is taking place
• Shutting down of communications and media infrastructure
• Cyber attacks on Web sites and Internet service providers
• Misinformation campaigns
• Physical attacks on or harassment of those seeking to gather or disseminate information–digital media may be as vulnerable as traditional media.

The political and technological questions of control and access to digital media networks exist on both national and global levels. Openness, privacy, and local control are technological and regulatory choices, not inevitable architectures. Primary concerns include:

• Who has the means to create and access information, including public access to government documents, laws about surveillance, wiretapping, and privacy of personal data?
• How do monitoring, censorship, and circumvention technologies evolve, and who uses them?
• Will there be structural changes to current communications networks that will restrict their open and generative character?

Policymakers looking to the use of media in conflict prevention and peace-building situations are only beginning to consider digital media as tools. The argument has been that many poor countries did not have a mass level of digital media access hence community radio, international and U.N. broadcasting, and poster campaigns and newsletters were more likely to have impact. While those methods are still relevant, it is also clear that the presence of Internet and cell phones, even at a low penetration rate, can have a large effect on the flow of information in many countries. There is a strong logic for integrating digital media tools into such efforts, and considering how their use differs from more traditional media technologies.

Blending the tools of traditional media with new media in the developing world is on the rise. One example is the use of FM radio to relay information from blogs and other online-only sources, linking communities with little access to elite digital media. Participatory media are proliferating in conflict zones, such as Iraq, and even exist in stateless regions. While Internet penetration remains low in much of the developing world, there is a growing movement to design Internet and telephony services for developing-world needs.

Increasingly, there is a convergence in the function of information providers, including news outlets, human rights research groups, participatory media projects, political analyses, and humanitarian organizations. Digital media technologies allow all of them to communicate directly with audiences, and thus we find bloggers providing news, humanitarian organizations providing editorials, freedom of expression groups reporting on access restrictions, human rights observers covering the front lines, and Wikipedia as both a news source and a platform for active debate over war. This convergence is especially evident in conflict zones because access to the actual conflict is still often highly restricted. Impartial, independent reporting from front lines

remains rare where fighting occurs in restricted fields of military activity, rather than in the midst of civilian populations. The challenge remains obtaining accurate, reliable, first-hand accounts of fighting, and documentation of disappearances, kidnappings, beatings, and other forms of political violence and harassment.

The technology to access information is only one part of the story—what constitutes information is it highly contested. The fight over content, spin, language, and interpretation rages across the information spectrum. Escalating from edit wars on Wikipedia, hate speech on blogs, and attacks and incitement in newspaper editorials to physical attacks, intimidation, and murder, war seems to move seamlessly from information space to the real world.

II. CHARACETRSITICS OF DIGITAL MEDIA IN CONFLICT

Recommendations to support independent, pluralistic, and sustainable media in post-conflict scenarios come at a time when the current business models that support existing media are under serious challenge around the world. Yet development strategies still often aim for an ideal media structure, as reflected in the target measures used by donors, such as Freedom House's analysis of Internet freedom and the Media Sustainability Index produced by the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX).Such top-down practices, driven by theories of political and policy role of media, increasingly do not reflect the dynamic, unstable, and disruptive nature of present-day media. This dynamic has repercussions for donors and policy-makers who consider shaping and control of media part of their mandate.

Following is a set of characteristics that are designed to help describe the relationship of digital media technologies to conflict. Together, they point to a revised framework for analysis to understand how media and conflict interact.

Each characteristic is followed by a set of recommendations for working with digital media in conflict-prone societies. These recommendations are meant to be flexible enough to be adapted as the uses of digital media technologies change. They are intended to update and expand the frameworks and approaches taken by policymakers, governments, international organizations, media assistance groups, media-focused conflict-prevention and peace-building projects, and citizen media projects.

III. COMPLEXITY, DIVERSITY AND UNPREDICTABILITY

Conflicts in the 21st century are increasingly occurring in the midst of robust, diverse, redundant, and hard-to-control information networks and devices, and an increasing diversity of voices, interest groups, monitors, and analysts.

Digital media networks and communications channels are dynamic in form and substance, with rapidly changing media technologies, shifting economic underpinnings, changes to information and communications markets, a huge increase in potential media producers and participants, and contests for control of the underlying networks. Media applications are likely to be unstable and quickly obsolete.

The sources of information about conflict have diversified beyond traditional news outlets and press offices. Humanitarian organizations, advocacy and rights groups, research institutes, non-profit organizations, citizens' initiatives, and individual observers all produce and distribute information that increasingly takes on some of the roles of traditional news media, although often with different objectives and varying evidentiary standards.

Parties to conflict, whether developed-world militaries or small insurgencies, also increasingly act as direct providers of information, whether through military-run news services or psychological operations. They regard both the architecture of information production and distribution, and information itself, as part of their operational toolkit in fighting wars.

Recommendations:

• The norm of digital media is new tools, new terms, disruptive technology, experimentation, and redundancy that supplement and mesh with traditional media. Strategies should regard the dynamism of change in media technologies and resulting disruptions as a core element in planning.

• Models of engagement with the media that are based on experience may not be the most useful guidelines for approaching present and future conflicts. Frameworks and tools of analysis need to take into account the dynamic and shifting nature of media; those that do not are likely to lose their relevance.
• At the same time, predictions about the shape of future media should be approached with caution. Few of the changes that occurred in social and participatory media in the past 10 years were foreseen. In three years, the discussion may be about entirely new tools and networks.

• Currently, traditional media have at best tentative business models for the new media environment. While traditional media will likely continue to have a great deal of influence in news and information, they will only succeed by adapting new digital media technologies and network practices to their models, through a process of innovation and experimentation. The conflict prevention and peace-building field should adopt the same approach of experimentation, innovation, and flexibility with approaches to media.
• Complicated problems can require complicated solutions. Simple formulas that attempt to deal with all conflicts with a rigid framework or set of prescribed ideas are likely to fail. At the same time, digital media projects may not have established audiences and participants, and a higher rate of failure should be expected.

IV. CONTROL & OPENENESS

Contests for control of information will be critical in the context of conflict. As the world becomes more information rich, it will be increasingly difficult for states, insurgencies, and other contenders for power in conflicts to dominate information content for populations under their authority and maintain closed, isolated societies.

The future design of developed-world information networks and their underlying regulatory structures, including issues such as new Web technologies, network neutrality, and mobile access to the Internet will greatly influence network design and tools for information access in weak and fragile states.

In active conflict, digital media applications will have more success in escaping control than old media, in the short term. However, digital media can be shut down too and also provide states with powerful tools for surveillance and monitoring. These same applications provide states with tools to propagate their own discourse virally.

Recent attempts to restrict information flows in conflict, such as in Kenya in 2008 or Pakistan in 2007, simply encourage people to find alternative paths. Digital media information communities will not wait for states and international actors to determine political positions and stabilization strategies in conflict. While restrictions on media will continue to be possible in isolated pockets of the world, such strategies will increasingly be the exception. This is true even in most poor and fragile states.

Efforts to punitively bar hate speech by shutting live broadcasts, restricting ethnic media, shutting media outlets, or otherwise controlling access to media end up hurting civil discourse as much as, if not more than, violent discourse. Closing down entire cellular networks or Internet access affects not just mass media but also commerce, governance, and systems vital for the functioning of complex technology-based societies. Additionally, people violently resisting government control—especially weak governments—will be persistent in ignoring such regulations, especially in dynamic conflict and media environments. They are likely to have the resources and the ability to find information and communications solutions and overcome attempts to restrict. Off-the grid networks, encrypted and proxy servers, and other tools available in the cat-and-mouse game of privacy versus surveillance allow the anonymity and flexibility to evade control.

Recommendations:
• Command-and-control approaches to media are likely to fail in a networked, participatory media environment. Attempts to either restrict or dominate media flows are counterproductive in many cases, as people everywhere increasingly have diverse options for creating, receiving, and sharing information. Policy should focus on ensuring quality information and a plurality of perspectives rather than on restriction.

• Debates over whether to allow more or less media in conflict and post-conflict environments should be refocused.

Increasingly, less is not an option. While there are many tools for monitoring, censoring, and removing Web-based information sources, they are not generally successful in stopping all online speech.

• Good policy will ensure that there are multiple diverse paths for civil discourse. If openness is a value that supports greater access to civic discourse and accurate information, then good policy will support the creation of open networks. Such networks will facilitate projects that concentrate on accuracy and transparency of information, that build secure, resilient and trusted networks of participants over time, and that focus on the physical security of those trying to preserve space for accurate information and civil discourse. It may be difficult to stop speech inciting violence or hate, but it is possible to provide alternatives.

• Parties to conflict, influential states, and the international community may find digital media threatening, especially in contexts of conflict mediation, peacekeeping, and post-conflict stabilization. States have great power to set ground rules for access, infrastructure, tariffs, and regulations, and to apply censorship, surveillance, and monitoring. They have the potential to restrict use and access to digital media on a large scale, by shutting Internet and cellular access. These strategies may dampen networked media use, but they do not conclusively stop it. Their application also has serious negative policy repercussions for freedom of expression, and interrupts commerce, development and governance, as the Internet and telecommunications are so intertwined with all aspects of modern life.

V. DIGITAL SOLUTIONS AND HUMAN PROBLEMS

Technological change is moving faster than human and social organization. Digital media technologies are disruptive and present challenges to more traditional organizational forms that have great resilience. Existing social organizations retain power, even though new media technologies offer opportunities to conceive of different bases for social relations. Pakistani political parties and the Tamil ethnic Diaspora use digital media to strengthen their networks, even as individuals within those groups take on polymorphous identities and use the Internet to represent themselves as something different.Social norms may be changing, but even with increased ties and contacts outside of traditional information sources (community, school, vocation, religion, etc.), contextual, local news and information remain vital. What we want to know is frequently a function of where we live, what we do, what we need, which we know.

Media outlets covering conflict have new tools and distribution routes for their journalism, but they face the same physical threats in attempting to cover conflict, as well as increased surveillance by parties to conflict. Journalists working for new media distribution face the same challenges in gathering accurate, well-sourced information. Increasing sources of information does not automatically mean a more diverse news frame.

Participatory media values are not the same as mass media values. Mass media have prized closed hierarchies of information gathering and ownership, brands, expertise, professionalism, and access to information sources. Participatory media prize congruence, accuracy, passion, community, and citizen or amateur participation. These values overlap and merge as mass media build participatory approaches into their portals and products to stay relevant, and some online media take on legacy approaches. Whether such distinctions will remain valid as media systems converge is an open question.

More access to information does not necessarily guarantee trust in alternative information sources, or increase dialogue between communities in conflict. New media applications may also be used to reinforce existing perceptions and harden political positions, recruit combatants and resources. And information access and dialogue does not necessarily address the root causes of conflict, such as disputes over resources, sovereignty, and rights.

Recommendations:

• Policies that articulate digital media networks as either starkly polarizing or as unifying ignore the ambiguous and often multifaceted nature of online and networked communications. The key is to identify projects that respond to specific problems with a focus on media content, resources, relevance to the real world, and relationships within a given network.

• Existing media should not be ignored. In many places, traditional media will be relevant for many years. Rather, how to integrate different media platforms, and pay attention to

technical developments that facilitate convergence should be considered.

• Media literacy in a networked digital environment includes the ability to both consume and create content online. Communities of use may be largely self-generating; projects that seek to engage communities with digital media tools should be aware of existing technological capacities and work with local communities to define their interests and motivations.

VI. PROJECT DESIGN

Media assistance efforts that focus on conflict present an opportunity to design projects with digital media applications that could encourage more open communities and states, provide alternative viewpoints and venues for dialogue, and reduce control of information. For them to be effective, they need to be perceived as benevolent, impartial, transparent, and trustworthy. Ideally, they would focus on long-term relationships and on information communities that perceive a common value in facts, evidence, commentary, relationships, and accountability—precisely the elements that have driven the success of cooperative online projects such as Wikipedia.

Responsiveness and flexibility from a policy perspective are more easily achieved through the conceptualization of conflict as an ongoing process rather than as a series of discrete stages. Planning for the possibility of future conflict, especially in states where it is endemic, means proactively building networks of both professional journalists and citizen media, designing early warning and incident verification systems, monitoring projects, and making a long-term investment in supporting technical networks, education and media literacy. It also means continued support for the improvement of local media coverage, and resources to support what is most valuable and relevant in traditional journalism—investigative reporting, access to elite opinion-makers, and time and resources for focused beat reporting.

Top-down development of community and user-driven content rarely works. Particular attention should be paid to what is happening at grass-roots, local level, as a great deal of innovation in the use of digital media tools is driven by users and citizen media projects. Some of the most interesting and innovative projects are coming out of the developing world, as people adopt networks and software applications for their own ends, as in the case of Ushahidi and Ground views.

Given that non-profit think tanks, humanitarian groups, and others have become information providers, they should supplement social marketing, public relations campaigns, and media relations with a focus on journalistic standards, reliability, transparency of sourcing, presentation and writing, and timeliness. These organizations need to think in terms of multiple audiences, and as primary, unmediated sources of information for different groups. There is a also a need for targeted, specific digital media interventions that build systems of verification and trust, take advantage of the technical capacities, and find ways to mesh them with participatory media tactics for creating and sharing information.

VII. CONCLUSION

The complex relationship between media and conflict is longstanding. Traditional mass media have been used to amplify and extend viewpoints and ideologies, to persuade audiences at home, and to influence opposing sides in conflict. However, both media and conflict have changed markedly in recent years. Many 21st-century wars are not only about holding territory, but about gaining public support and achieving legal status in the international arena. Governments seek to hold onto power through persuasion as much as through force. Media are increasingly essential elements of conflict, rather than just functional tools for those fighting. At the same time, newer media technologies have increased communication and information dissemination in the context of conflict. In particular, the growth of citizen media has changed the information space around conflict, providing more people with the tools to record and share their experiences with the rest of the world.

At present, the policy community that considers the role and use of media in conflict-prone settings is just beginning to formulate methodologies and strategies to consider how changes in media technology could affect fundamental issues of political participation and conflict. As a result, many

existing media assistance projects in conflict-prone settings reflect a traditional understanding of the relationship between media and conflict. These projects are often viewed through the prisms of state stabilization, sovereignty, rule of law, the creation of modern administrative structures of state control, and civil society support that complements state stabilization efforts.

The shift to digital media and the attendant rise of networked, participatory media is the culmination of a process that has only in the past decade reached a form that we recognize, name, and consciously construct. The rapid spread of digital-based communications and information networks is likely to have an effect on 21st-century wars, which increasingly centre on internal conflict, disputed borders of new states, and separatist movements. However, those effects have yet to be seriously analyzed; at present we have mostly anecdotal evidence about the relationship of digital media and modern conflict.

Much violent conflict today takes place in or near civilian populations with access to global information networks, so the information gathered by various parties to conflict may potentially be distributed in real time around the globe.
The ability to communicate, and to produce and receive diverse information through participatory media, is part of a struggle within conflict-prone societies between allowing for non-coercive debates and dialogue that focus on endemic weak-state problems and enabling those seeking power to organize for political influence, recruitment, demonstrations, political violence, and terror. The U.S. Air Force has noted that in future wars, "Influence increasingly will be exerted by information more than by bombs."

It is now clear that increased access to information and to the means to produce media has both positive and negative consequences in conflict situations. The question of whether the presence of digital media networks will encourage violence or lead to peaceful solutions may be viewed as a contest between the two possible outcomes. It is possible to build communications architectures that encourage dialogue and nonviolent political solutions. However, it is equally possible for digital media to increase polarization, strengthen biases, and foment violence.

Research Methodology: - Library Research

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- Reference and abstract guides- 'Centre for International Media Assistance',
- Content analysis,
- Recording of notes.

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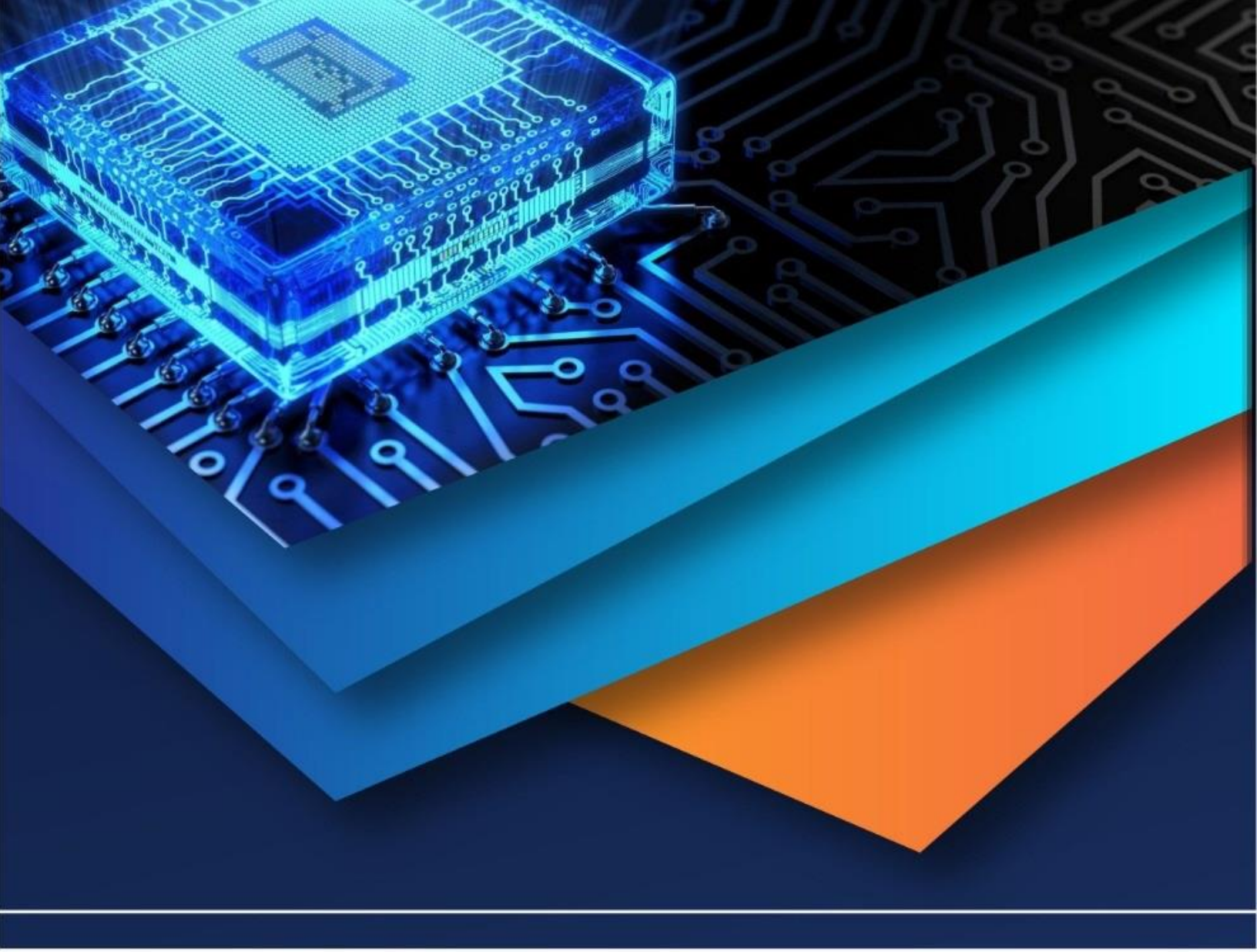

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