



Influencer, gamer, soldier, spy: the online era of child recruitment and its implications in international law (Part I)

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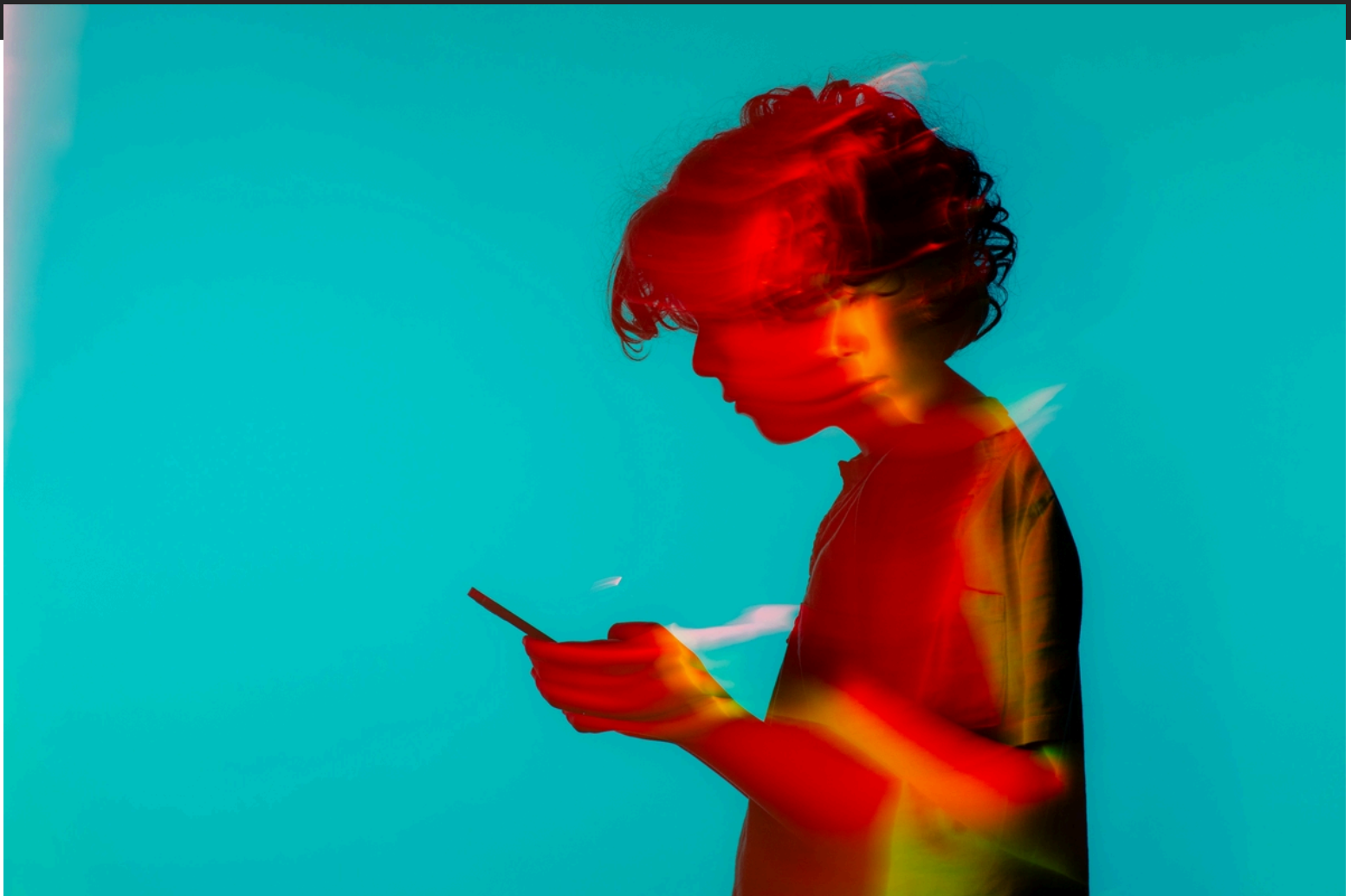


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As social media and gaming platforms create new interfaces between tech-savvy children and armed actors, new questions should be asked regarding how the law prohibiting child recruitment and use in hostilities can be promoted and enforced online.

In this two-part post, ICRC Advisers Vanessa Murphy, Siobhan Sparkes McNamara, and Tilman Rodenhäuser consider how the digital environment is transforming more traditional forms of child recruitment, give a rough typology of related trends in the information and communications (ICT) environment, identify the relevant international law, and propose recommendations to improve compliance with these laws in the digital age.

ICRC Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog · Influencer, gamer, soldier, spy: the online era of child recruitment and its implications in international law (Part I)

The kids are online, and war is too, ushering in new twists on the old tale of child recruitment in armed conflict. In recent years, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has observed incidents of online child recruitment or use in hostilities in Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East. [UNICEF](#), [UNODC](#), [UNICRI](#), and the [UN University Centre for Policy Research](#) have documented further examples.

There has long been international consensus that children below a certain age must be kept out of the fight, and today there is agreement that these rules apply [online](#) as well as [offline](#). Yet, the digitalization of societies and conflicts now poses new challenges for governments and parties to armed conflicts with obligations to prevent unlawful child recruitment and use in armed conflict. A deeper understanding of what is happening, and how existing international law addresses new trends, is a good place to start.

Child recruitment and use in hostilities: an old dog up to new tricks online

International law deals with the recruitment of children and their use in hostilities as two separate harms. “Child recruitment” refers to the incorporation of a child into an armed force or group, whether by compulsion (“conscription” or “forced recruitment”) or on an alleged voluntary basis (“enlistment”) (*Ntaganda Judgment, para. 1105; Lubanga Judgment, para. 607*). It is prohibited before a certain age, set anywhere between 15 and 18 years old, depending on the treaties in force (set out in greater detail below). Unlawful “use of a child in hostilities” refers to unlawful direct, active, or indirect use in hostilities, depending on the applicable treaty obligation.

Recruitment and use are therefore two distinct, standalone violations (Customary International Humanitarian Law (IHL) [Rules 136](#) and [137](#) respectively); children might be recruited by an armed force or armed group without being used in hostilities, or might be used in hostilities without being recruited into ranks. In this post, we use the shorthand “recruitment” and “use” to refer to the host of more specific prohibitions that vary in scope.

More remote, with less training

The unlawful recruitment and use of children in hostilities have evolved in the half century since they were first outlawed by the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions in 1977 (*Art. 77(2) Additional Protocol I, Art. 4(3)(c) Additional Protocol II*). Typically, “traditional” offline recruitment has entailed armed forces or groups securing physical control of children and a period of kinetic training or participation in kinetic acts of hostility. The *Lubanga*, *Ntaganda* and *Ongwen* cases at the International Criminal Court (ICC) documented such recruitment. Dominic Ongwen was convicted for the physical abduction of children in Northern Uganda, and their subsequent training including in “how to march and parade, how to disassemble and reassemble a gun, how to clean a gun and a limited shooting practice” (*Ongwen Judgment, paras 223 and 2380*). Thomas Lubanga was convicted on the basis of facts that included men wearing uniforms and carrying Kalashnikovs taking children from the streets by brute force or the threat of it (*Lubanga Appeal Judgment, paras 289 and 290*).

The digitalization of armed conflict has transformed this need for physical proximity with the child and periods of in-person training. [Macak](#) explains that digital forms of involvement in hostilities have a much lower threshold; in his words, “with some degree of exaggeration, anyone with a smartphone is capable of joining in.” While children may be physically remote from the theatre of hostilities, they are only a few clicks away from the digital battlefield.

Greater scale

Digitalization also expands the pool of children within reach of parties to armed conflict via online communities. Children are very present online – just ask any parent – and in these spaces can be approached privately by recruiters via social networking platforms or chat services in online games. The global nature of such platforms means that the modern reach of child recruitment is transnational ([UNODC, 2024, p. 52-53; UNU, 2018, p. 114](#)). Recruitment campaigns no longer move from village to village, but from Instagram to Telegram.

Online child recruitment and use in hostilities: types of acts

This section addresses how acts that precede or comprise child recruitment or use in hostilities can manifest when they occur online. Such acts may be paired with in-person relationships, and will certainly be influenced by offline factors in a child’s life, including economic, social and political context, family environment, and armed conflict’s impact on these.

Online promotion of recruitment or use in hostilities

The creation of a desirable, seemingly like-minded community has long pulled children towards armed forces and armed groups. Social media platforms – such as Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, TikTok, and Youtube – can be gateways to such communities. Information-exchange and socialization on social media has been documented to feature “extensive online content designed to appeal specifically to children” by armed groups in Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria (*UNODC, 2024, p. 124*).

Recruitment hooks range from ideology-based chat messages, to the circulation of aspirational content portraying the group as affluent or technologically skilled, to direct outreach to children with interests in video games, software, or drone technology. State militaries promote (lawful) recruitment online, too: social media popular with children is awash in *military “influencers”*, some with millions of followers (though whether military promotion of recruitment is prohibited depends on the applicable law).

Online gaming platforms are another hot spot, due to the social spaces they create. On the one hand, multiplayer games, in-game chat and private messaging can facilitate interaction, friendship and a sense of community. A UNICEF study found that “for many children across the world, online games are a critical modality of socialization” (*UNICEF, 2025, p. 5*). However, the social features of gaming platforms are being increasingly exploited by violent organizations, including non-state armed groups, to spread harmful information, build relationships with children, recruit them, and organize activities. The question of whether exposure to violent video games contributes to aggression or desensitization to violence, and whether this might in turn increase susceptibility to recruitment, remains contested (*Miles-Novelo and Anderson, 2025; Lacko, Macháčková and Šmahel, 2024*). At the same time, there are *reports* of armed groups focusing on violent multi-player gaming platforms because they perceive them as providing access to a particularly attractive pool of potential recruits.

The speed and scale of recruitment campaigns now also risk being accelerated by artificial intelligence combined with data-profiling. *UNICEF* has raised an alarm about the way in which AI combined with online surveillance amplifies the ease with which armed actors message children: “In conflict-ridden and fragile settings, vulnerable children and youth can be traced through cell phones provided by potential recruiters and can then be subjected to constant digital harassment.”

Online recruitment

Beyond promotion, actual child recruitment, i.e. their incorporation into an armed force or group, can also occur online. Initial engagement might be framed as playing, learning, experimenting with technology, or chatting about ideas, resulting in the child being drawn into armed structures and affiliation with the group being normalized. Of four Jordanian children charged with acts involving association with a non-state armed group interviewed for the UN’s milestone “Cradled by Conflict” research, three had engaged with the group initially online (*UNU, 2018, p. 128*).

But where is the legal line that constitutes unlawful child “recruitment”? On the one hand, for state armed forces, the line is comparatively clear: enrolment in the military is typically a formal act, defined in national law, involving documentation and administration. On the other hand, recruitment of a child by an armed group can be more difficult to distinguish: it is rarely formalized through an act of integration other than taking up a certain function for the group, and it is not always consistently expressed through uniforms, fixed distinctive signs, or identification cards (ICRC, *Interpretive Guidance on Direct Participation in Hostilities under IHL, p. 32-33*). In jurisprudence, factors such as physical presence in an armed group’s camp, receipt of food, obeying orders, teaching of military skills and discipline have been considered indicative (*Ntaganda, paras 1123-1124*) – but these factors may need adaptation when applied to online dynamics, given the relative ease of involvement facilitated by digitalization.

While online communication might be an important step towards incorporation into an armed group, in order to amount to “recruitment”, it will be important to consider how sustained online communication between a recruiter and a child is, how the child is integrated into online communities, whether rules of conduct and disciplinary mechanisms exist in such community or group, whether remuneration or benefits are provided, and whether the child receives training, tools, or instructions on how to engage in hostilities.

Is “training” becoming less important? The “Uber-ification” of child

In conflicts new and old, children are performing the same functions: gathering intelligence, carrying out acts of sabotage, at times conducting attacks. But while traditional forms of offline child recruitment have usually entailed in-person kinetic training to prepare children to conduct intelligence gathering and/or acts of hostilities, a feature characterizing the digitalization of conflicts is that children engaged online sometimes receive much simpler instructions from a person the child never meets. Telegram accounts give instructions that can be as brief as, for example, “pour petrol inside or use Molotov cocktails”.

This means that the factors characterizing in-person kinetic training that were used in *The Prosecutor v. Bosco Ntaganda* to denote the crime of child recruitment – physical presence in a camp, receipt of food, obeying orders, teaching of military skills and discipline (*Ntaganda, paras 1123-1124*) – may need adaptation when applied to online dynamics. Children tend to be given more basic instructions through remote and potentially anonymous exchanges online. Yet the children commit acts of intelligence-gathering, sabotage, and/or acts of hostilities comparable to those of children recruited and trained more traditionally.

As a result, using “training” as a key indicator to deduce unlawful child recruitment is unlikely to always give a comprehensive picture of when a child has been *de facto* incorporated into an armed group online. Other factors will need to be considered more carefully. In cases where children are receiving financial compensation via online platforms in return for acts, they may be fulfilling roles more akin to “private contractors” (ICRC, *Interpretive Guidance on Direct Participation in Hostilities under IHL*, p. 37–40) – the “Uber-ification” of child recruitment. Such digital transformations should not be permitted to rob a child of erstwhile protective norms.

Use in hostilities involving online acts

Whether or not they are recruited by armed forces or groups, children are also indirectly and directly participating in hostilities in a manner facilitated by ICTs. Several examples from recent conflicts illustrate the issue.

In some cases, children have been solicited to conduct cell-phone surveillance of adversary military positions or operations. Such engagement can be structured through “gamification” techniques, with tasks (like taking pictures or videos) framed as challenges or points, with rewards for completion. The information transmitted from the child’s cell phone may have military value and be used for reconnaissance, operational planning, or targeting. While many forms of information recorded by a child might be too general or insignificant to constitute “direct participation in hostilities” (which would render the child a lawful target of attack; see [further discussion here](#)) such activity is likely to be prohibited by broader applicable prohibitions of the use of children in hostilities. For example, under the Rome Statute, the ICC held in *Lubanga Appeals* that it is criminal to use children in hostilities not only for combat, but also for “combat-related activities such as scouting, spying, sabotage and the use of children as decoys, couriers or at military check-points” (*paras 330, 335, 340*).

Beyond surveillance, parties to armed conflict issue online instructions for offline acts of sabotage and attack. Such “*do it yourself*” instructions are at times designed to resonate especially with young people, even motivating them to engage in violent conduct in support of a party to the conflict without necessarily being in direct contact with that party. Experts warn that such information is also picked up by AI chatbots (large language models), which then provide such content to users in an easy-to-understand manner: “*It’s one thing to find a bomb-making manual, it is quite another to have a bomb-making coach.*”

Finally, children have also been used to participate in cyber operations. In practice, few obstacles exist for children to provide some form of support to *civilian hacker groups*. Tech-savvy children might join operations, while others might simply add devices or cloud instances to hacker groups’ networks used on distributed denial of service (DDoS) operations. *UNICEF* has warned “that cyber proxies and mercenaries might not have the ability to conduct age verification or may not be concerned about it and may involve hackers under the age of 18”, particularly concerning due to “the increase in young, cyber-skilled populations available for deployment”.

All of these uses of children in hostilities can be facilitated via online exchanges. It has also long been the case that children may “voluntarily” engage with weapons bearers when they have lost family members, are hungry, or other living conditions create a “push” factor towards an armed force or armed group (*UNU, 2018, p. 123–125; Lubanga Appeals, 295*). Online, “pull” factors range from transactional offers of cash (certain Telegram groups offer “easy money” to children), to blackmail – for example, the threat of the online publication of explicit photos – to appeals to cultural affinity. It’s worth observing that such factors point to a likelihood that both boys and girls are at risk – it can’t be assumed that blackmail or cash offers mostly ensnare boys.

Author’s note: In part I of the post, we have explained how the digitalization of armed conflict is transforming the ways that parties to armed conflict can recruit and use children in hostilities. In part II, we will set out the applicable international law, and recommendations to improve compliance with it in view of digital dynamics.

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