Social Media and Peacebuilding

Introduction
At the time of finalizing this entry, the New York Times published an article Where Countries Are Tinderboxes and Facebook Is a Match on how Facebook has become a platform that facilitates sectarian violence in Sri Lanka, fueled by a newsfeed of misinformation of the rapidly growing social media platform (Taub and Fisher 2018). Discussions about the power of the corporations behind these platforms, for example, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, or messaging applications, indicate that there is no singular, universal, or unilateral way in which social media have been contributing to peacebuilding.

An entry on social media and peacebuilding can provide a snapshot of some of these discussions that have been taking place in the ICT4D or media and communication fields. They show that enthusiasm about digital opportunities has been met with new realities of platform power, multifaceted political interference, and general concerns of how citizens and communities can harness the power of these global platforms for creating societies the mirror values of liberal peace paradigms. Therefore, this entry must discuss unfulfilled opportunities, an often naïve belief in digital tools, but also outline a future vision for digital peacebuilding beyond Twitter or Facebook “revolutions.”

The entry outlines four areas for social media and peacebuilding that roughly follow a historical trajectory: from initial “add Internet and stir” extensions of traditional peacebuilding approaches into the digital realm and the enthusiasm of social media “revolutions” and from a backlash from various powerful regimes and actors to a future where issues such as online privacy, data ownership, and the decolonization of tools have become new arenas for conflict prevention, building peace, and contributing to positive social change.

Mediatized Publics, Networked Societies, and the Promise of Peaceful Social Change
“Understanding social media critically means (...) to engage with the different forms of sociality on the Internet in the context of society” (Fuchs 2014, p. 6). Fuchs’ broad definition of what social media comprise also guides this entry; the underlying sentiment that has also been driving much of the digital peacebuilding agenda is outlined well by Clay Shirky: “As the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action. In the political arena (...) these increased freedoms can help loosely coordinated publics demand change” (Shirky 2011, p. 29).

The transformative potential of this Internet-powered networked society can be envisioned in similar ways to other parts of society that have also been digitally disrupted: “New media accelerates and reinforces various facets of peacebuilding and protest activities, from effective counter knowledge production to coordinating protest” (Firchow et al. 2017, p. 18). But as Tellidis and Kappler point out, this disruption and amplification may not provide equitable, just, and positive results by itself, an important point that is guiding this entry: “ICTs have the potential to serve as mediators, transforming hegemonic input into resistive practices, while at the same time also implying the risk of promoting hegemonic practices in
new channels. In the context of peacebuilding, this seems to be particularly problematic, given that the authority to build peace is usually not democratically given, but tends to derive its legitimacy from global top-down structures” (Tellidis and Kappler 2016, p.87).

Embedding liberal peacebuilding paradigms in critical frameworks of the power of digital platform capitalism has only emerged recently as a line of critical enquiry. The speed, comprehensiveness, and double-edged nature of this data-driven social change have caught the peace research community by surprise, and more inter- and multidisciplinary research including digital humanities or media and communication studies will have to question these new realities.

**Social Media Between Facilitating Social Change and Building Peace**

Kahl and Puig Larrauri (2013) focus their review of peacebuilding initiatives more generally on technology. The four key areas of engagement, i.e., early warning, collaboration, peaceful attitudes, and policy change, have also been core areas of how social media tools contributed to peacebuilding. One of the important aspects they conclude is technology’s supportive function of most of the case studies they analyzed: Digital technology, including social media, can support existing projects, amplify participation and engagement – but very little is known yet about long-term contributions of social media on supporting various stages of post-conflict, peaceful social transformation. The United States Institute of Peace’s (USIP) *Blogs and Bullets* project published a number of case studies on the connection between social media and various aspects of its contributions in violent conflicts, social change, and peacebuilding. The recommendations from their first report on new media and contentious politics remain relevant for critical engagement with broad-sweeping, positive claims about the power of social media: “1. Be skeptical of sweeping claims about the democratizing power of new media. 2. Acknowledge the good and bad effects of new media. 3. Beware of backlash. 4. Do not mistake information for influence” (Aday et al. 2010, pp. 26–27). Rohwerder’s summary on social media and conflict management reflects the state of the art of the field well for the “first generation” of initiatives, from around the mid-2000s to the early 2010s: “Although empirical evidence is thin, there is positive anecdotal evidence that social media can contribute to peacebuilding by improving knowledge for conflict prevention and increasing contact and understanding between opposing groups. (...) Social media has been used to crowsource information (for) conflict prevention measures (and) enables people to engage in their own initiatives for peace and allows for interactive dialogue” (2015, p. 2). USIP’s second report (Aday et al. 2012) focused on new media after the *Arab Spring*. It underlined the importance of analyzing the potential of social media in the context of mediatized societies and conflicts, rather than simply looking for tools that “do” things on their own. Media development as one key area of building trust emerged as an area of increased importance; social media’s peacebuilding potential is changing as traditional newspapers, linear television, or radio have transformed under the power of data, algorithms, and new funding or revenue models. Put simply, using (social) media to create provocative, contentious or divisive content can be more lucrative than working toward traditional values of dialogue and consensus often associated with the initiatives supported through peacebuilding efforts. So the “second generation” of social media and peacebuilding is marked less by optimism but by a backlash from authoritarian regimes as well as realizing the limits of platforms to (un)willingly engage with the negative consequences of their data-driven power.
Censorship, Surveillance, and Spreading False Information: How Authorities Counter the Power of the Networked Society

The civil war in Syria has become a focal point for the complexities around social media use to instigate conflict as well as to support information from the frontlines or advocacy. The communication of the so-called Islamic State relied heavily on social media, creating new media platforms diametrically opposed to liberal peacebuilding ideals and practices. As Lynch et al. conclude in their report for USIP: “The growth and complexity of the Arabic language Twitterverse highlight the importance of avoiding research designs that look only at English language social media; a more sophisticated understanding of the structural biases in social media and the difficult challenges posed by activist curation” (2014, pp. 28–29). Each stakeholder involved in the conflict is able to communicate, amplify, or mobilize through social media, creating a complex web of (mis)information that will persist for a long time after the war is officially declared over.

Some of the initial gains of social media to contribute to social change have been pulled bad, and a “ICT4Bad,” rather than ICT4D, infrastructure has been built up by various governments, organizations, and regimes to protect itself against the power of Internet-based transformations. In terms of building peace and democracy, new areas of “politicizing surveillance” will once again change the landscape of social media use as a “whole system of exploitation and oppression” (Duncan 2018, p. 173) and challenge previous approaches to use digital tools for social change. Currently the potential of social media to support peacebuilding is under tremendous pressure from global corporations, governments investing in surveillance technologies and societal trends to communicate that are often opposed to foundations of building peace, achieving compromises, or creating cohesive visions for future development.

The final part of the entry will outline some future challenges for social media activism – but also opportunities for activists to achieve new forms of justice, equity, and empowerment outside the traditional spheres of first-generation digital peacebuilding.

Conclusion: New Challenges for Peacebuilding Including Digital Privacy and the Decolonization of Knowledge, Methodologies, and Tools

This entry started by linking the enthusiasm that digital innovations and “the Internet” promised to the evolution of social media and peacebuilding. From a simple extension into the digital sphere and expansion by digital tools, peacebuilding initiatives focused on traditional approaches with new tools and platforms. The promise of social media-enabled “revolutions” that led to peaceful social change was eventually met with the realities of governments, elites, and powerful groups not only suppressing and blocking social media but using them against activists, ordinary citizens, or marginalized groups. Similar to developments at the end of the twentieth century when “civil society” was seen as the panacea for peacebuilding, ICT, social media, and digital platforms face similar political or economic constraints that fall short of building positive peace.

“While technology opens up apparently new opportunities it is worth bearing in mind old questions of epistemology and positionality (...). A key part of the equation is editorial intervention and the decision to filter, parse and phrase information in particular ways – all subjective activities involving judgement calls” (Mac Ginty 2017, p. 9). At the same time, it

It becomes more and more clear that conflict, oppression, or violence have specific digital facets that expand the theoretical, methodological, and policy lens beyond “add social media and stir” to build sustainable peace. Current debates outside peace and conflict research, e.g., about online privacy, Internet governance, digital work, or big data, all address core questions that peace studies have been grappling with for decades: How can we build a fair, transparent, democratic, and just society with empowered communities, engaged citizens, and a vision to work toward peaceful societies? As Read et al. point out: “Data technology is less than emancipatory – it becomes a system of replication that reinforces existing power holders and reifies technical advances rather than more fundamental ones related to power and agency” (2016, p. 1325). To move toward a more participatory process, those interested in peacebuilding should cooperate with new allies, from open-source activists to geographers and from IT experts to media and communication scholars. However, only now are we beginning to understand the power of algorithms and the data that fuel social media, what is trending or what is visible in newsfeeds. Read et al. conclude that “data mining and the shaping of the algorithms will become more contentious with time and will, like all statistical accounts of the past, form the basis of profoundly political controversies” (ibid., p. 1326). These questions go beyond the next Twitter hashtag, the role of social media in instigating or curbing electoral violence or digital communication that promotes rapid and positive social, cultural, or economic developments on the African continent.

Wasserman’s call for African media research that includes social media “as forms of technology-in-relation; that is technology as already embedded in the everyday lives of people” (2018, p. 222) is also very relevant for peace and conflict research. The speed, vastness, and often shallowness of social media call for “actively seeking out lesser-heard voices and hearing people rather than merely protesters, media users or even citizens” (ibid.).

Across academic disciplines, the concept of decolonizing theory, knowledge, and methodologies is discussed. Many assumptions underpinning peace and media research of how social media can influence peacebuilding processes have been developed in the Global North and Western institutions. The global corporations behind social media platforms and applications have entered emerging markets in the Global South without localizing disruptive content in a responsible way as the example from Sri Lanka highlighted. For those involved in peacebuilding, it means that people- or community-centered approaches not only employ social media to take traditional approaches into the digital age but need to inquire critically of how these tools work, how they may be circumvented by authorities, and what alternatives are available for sustainable communication, collaboration, and conflict management.

From the beginning of modern peace research to the promises of liberal peacebuilding in the 1990s to debates in 2018 where black, indigenous, or sexual rights activist use social media in their struggles, the challenges remain to work toward diverse, participatory, and inclusive societies that can live up to the promise and potential of digital tools and social media.

**References**


Institute of Peace.


