
AN EXAMINATION OF THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PEACEBUILDING AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract

Digital technology has made it possible for people to get information in real-time and social media has been used to dramatically alter and change the relationship between people globally. Non-violent movements, conflict intensification campaigns and post conflict peacebuilding have taken a new turn with the advent of social media. The world is now a cosmopolitan society with different cultures and people virtually connected through the internet. Peace is a relevant factor for social economic development, and conflict on the other hand undermines development efforts and policies. Thus preventing the outburst of armed conflict should be high on the agenda of international organizations, regional organizations and governments or states. The successive evolution in information communication technology has significantly altered the conduct of conflicts, warfare, and conflict resolution. Social media helps people achieve shared awareness about various perceptions and helps people to take action. Social media is modern tool for communication, which spreads information and connects people very rapidly. Meanwhile, its role in the conflict and post-conflict situations is not properly appreciated. Social media can be a powerful tool used in shaping conflict narration and situations. This article seeks to highlight the opportunity social media presents for conflict resolution in a digital world.

Keywords: Social Media, Conflict Resolution, Peacebuilding, Communication, Peace

1.0 Introduction

There are millions of global news networks that broadcast live from all corners of the world and via the internet, hence providing immediate access to unfolding events and, under certain conditions, influencing the way those events develop and end. Social media is modern tool for communication, which spreads information and connects people very rapidly.

A social media platform displays a social network site's user-specific and technological characteristic. It offers the capacity to create social media websites and services with complete social media network functionality. People around the world today know much more and much sooner about major developments in international issues including conflict (Gilboa, 2009).

Currently, the common man is able to contribute to the news flow as opposed to the past where a journalist was the initiator of communication messages in a traditional media house. Social media helps people achieve shared awareness about various perceptions and helps people to take action (Barrs, 2006)

The role of social media in the conflict and post-conflict situations is not properly appreciated. During last decade civil societies, activists, representatives of the governments and political parties actively use it as a communication means with their audiences. Social media is a powerful tool and presents a new opportunity for conflict resolution.

2.0 Social Media

Social media are internet-powered communication channels that enable users to continuously exchange information (Schirch, 2019). Social media utilises electronic communication and allows users to follow and share content. Summarily, social media platforms are online sites and services that host, organize and circulate user's content without having produced or commissioned it (Poletti & Michieli, 2018).

LeFebvre (2017) posited that although social media are often used for keeping in touch with friends, it is increasingly common for people to use social media to get news and stay informed. Social media has unique characteristics of massive information, rapid transmission and openness of communication which allows interaction and quick information release. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp, among others, provide a space in which society can communicate freely and cheaply, articulating their divergent viewpoints.

Currently social media is more decentralized and distributed than traditional media (Aho, 2004; de Graaf & Meijer, 2019). The reason for their popularity has been attributed to the easy access from cell phones. Today with a smart phone one can access and share a lot of information including information that can promote conflict. There is a Short Message Service SMS to Facebook for instance, that sends a text to the users on every time something happens on Facebook. More importantly there is an application called Facebook zero, a text only free version of Facebook launched in 2010 in collaboration with mobile providers.

It is argued that social media has introduced positive effects such as allowing the democratization of the internet while also allowing individuals to advertise and form friendships. Much of the criticism of social media has been that it has decreased face-to-face interactions, there have been issues of trustworthiness and reliability of information presented, concentration, ownership of media content, and the meaning of interactions created by social media.

The use of mobile phones, social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, and user-generated content (UGC) like blogs and YouTube videos in the protests in Tunisia and Egypt, as well as throughout the wider middle-east and North Africa (MENA) region have shown how ICTs can complement and augment the exercise of our rights to freedom of expression, freedom of association, and freedom of peaceful assembly.

Today, there is a tremendous variety of social networking sites, and many of them can be linked to allow cross-posting. This creates an environment where users can reach the maximum number of people without sacrificing the intimacy of person-to-person communication (Hendricks, 2013).

With the advent of social media apps that could run on smart phones, end users could take their communities with them wherever they went. What began as a desktop or laptop experience shifted to mobile phones and tablets. The capabilities of cellular phones expanded, turning them into “smart phones”; and high-speed wireless internet became more readily available in homes, businesses, and public spaces (Maryville, 2020).

2.1 Peacebuilding

According to Fisher et al. (2000), peacebuilding is not primarily concerned with conflict behaviour but addresses the underlying context and attitudes that give rise to violence such as unequal access to employment, discrimination, unacknowledged and unforgiven responsibility for past crimes, prejudice, mistrust, fear (and) hostility between groups. In line with Fishers’ thought, I adduce that Peacebuilding initiatives creates trust, builds bridges and creates a platform where various groups and individual are free to express themselves over issues which are known to give rise to conflict.

Peacebuilding lays the foundations that serve the welfare of the people. Peace should be built on social, political, economic and ecological foundations should be laid for durable peace to serve the test of time. Peacebuilding involves undertaking programmes designed to address the causes of conflict and the grievances of the past and to promote long-term stability and justice (Fisher et al., 2000). Peacebuilding also aims at a reduction of violence while trying to improve the living conditions of the population. The concept of peacebuilding generally includes projects contributing both directly and indirectly to building peace (Költzow, 2013).

3.0 Social Media and Conflict Transformation

In order to objectively understand the nature and the role of media in peace and conflict management, it is important to understand the various ways through which media influence conflict and conflict management. Newbold (1995) points out that majority of scholars and researchers have concentrated on the role of media in economic, social and political issues affecting states with little attention being given to conflicts. Further, he posed that media impact on conflict management is an emerging area that has been understudied due to lack of multidisciplinary models and concepts that would view media’s role from peace and conflict realm.

The media has a very complex role to play that, unfortunately, is often taken for granted by political decision-makers and the military. Statements claiming the media’s impressive effects are often heard from decision-makers. Political practitioners, and even researchers, most often assume the effect of news media in political conflicts.

Lederach (2015) views peacebuilding as a form of conflict transformation. Conflict transformation from his perspective is a comprehensive orientation or framework that ultimately may require a fundamental change in our way of thinking. The rationale for

conflict transformation is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change and respond to real-life problems in human relationships (Aggestam & Björkdahl, 2012; Lederach, 2015).

A transformational perspective is built upon two foundations:

- a capacity to envision conflict positively, as a natural phenomenon that creates potential for constructive growth, and
- a willingness to respond in ways that maximize the potential for positive or constructive change

3.1 Goals in Conflict Transformation

According to Lederach (2015), there are four goals in conflict transformation which are:

Personal:

The key essence of personal goal is to minimize the destructive effects of social conflict and maximize the potential for growth and well-being of an individual at physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual levels.

Relational:

Relational goal seeks to minimize poorly functioning communication and maximize understanding between parties in a conflict.

Structural:

The key essence of structural goal is to understand and address root causes and social conditions that give rise to violent and other harmful expressions of conflict. It also seeks to promote nonviolent mechanisms that reduce adversarial confrontation, minimize and ultimately end violence.

Cultural:

Cultural goal seeks to identify and understand the cultural patterns that contribute to the rise of violent expressions of conflict. It also builds upon resources and mechanisms within a cultural setting for constructively responding to and handling conflict.

Conflict transformation ultimately involves de-escalating and engaging conflict, building peace and fostering constructive change. Transformation's guiding question is this: How do we end something not desired and build something we do desire?

Conflict transformation pursues the development of change processes which explicitly focus on creating positives from the difficult or negative. It encourages greater understanding of underlying relational and structural patterns while building creative solutions that improve relationships. Conflict transformation as a phenomenon is more than a set of specific techniques; it is a way of looking as well as seeing. It emphasizes the importance of building right relationships and social structures through a radical respect for human rights and life and tolerance for others.

4.0 The Role of Social Media in Peacebuilding

Social media can be used to facilitate peacebuilding through the following means:

1. Building bridges between people and groups:

Social media platforms facilitate collaboration, interaction, and sharing of content among users, hence allowing audiences to shape their pre-expectations based on the information they

receive regardless of who is the creator that shares the information. The various social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp amongst others can be used as a tool to building communication gaps among various members of a community and influence peace.

2. Providing early warning of potential conflicts

Digital technology has made it possible for people to get information in real-time and in many cases with digital video evidence (Ekoh & George, 2021). Denskus (2019), pointed that social media tools can contribute to peacebuilding via warning, collaboration and policy change. It can improve the knowledge for conflict prevention and increase contact and understanding between opposing groups. Social media can also be useful to crowdsource information for conflict prevention measures and enables people to engage their own initiatives for peace and allows for interactive dialogue. The Ushahidi platform in Kenya is an example of how social media can be used as an early warning mechanism.

3. Improving governance

Online social media networks have proved to be effective tools in advocacy and emergency communications (Rutechura, 2018). Social media has been argued to eliminate the top to bottom structure of governance where leadership is placed in the hands of leaders who alienate their people and also not instilling trust in the people they lead (Dambo et al., 2020). Social media can be used to bring the government closer to the people. Different initiatives can be launched via social media to encourage citizen participation in the development of a state.

4. Increasing knowledge of complex issues

ICTs can be used to monitor various post-conflict agreements and other commitment violations (Ünver, 2019). Some of the affordances of social media are that it offers new opportunities for social action. It can increase an individual's social capital by expanding their network, it can also provide creative new platforms for social organization (Dambo et al., 2020). Social media can be used to sensitise the citizen on the root-causes of issues and seek out suggestions for citizens on the best way to resolve and forestall conflicts.

5. And as a motivator for action to promote peace

Lanz and Eleiba (2018) assert that new technologies increasingly shape the environment of peace mediation, as conflict parties and mediators resort to technology for different purposes. Social media is a useful tool for mediators to broaden a process, hearing the views of a broad range of stakeholders, without necessarily enlarging the negotiation table as such. Lunga (2020), argues that social media can be used to promote peace and tolerance if used carefully.

5.0 Conclusion

Social media's ability to pull people and resources together is a dynamic feature that has been utilised by diverse kinds of groups especially during conflict situations. The framing of information through social media influences how a conflict could be intensified or de-escalated. Social media is now an integral part of our world and cannot be easily pushed aside. Leveraging on social media for conflict resolution and peacebuilding has been the focus of this article. We have highlighted the nexus between conflict resolution, peacebuilding and the social media. The modes by which social media could serve as a platform for conflict resolution mentioned in this research is not exhaustive as the social

media is a dynamic platform always evolving with new tool that brings new opportunities of mediators, dispute resolution to flourish.

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