

Repurposing social media – a new chance for peacebuilding

On May 7th, as part of the 2021 Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development, International Alert and PAX hosted a [joint session](#) on using social media to build peace and inclusivity and to counter hate speech. To provide a space for cross-context learning about the possibilities for using social media as a peacebuilding tool. Four speakers presented different approaches to this highly relevant yet complex topic. This policy brief will reflect on the general theoretical framework of peacebuilding through social media as well as highlight practical actions and recommendations for decision makers and practitioners.

Why is social media relevant?

The discussion around social media is current than ever, as life and discussions have moved online during the COVID/19 pandemic, increasing opportunities for both threats and peacebuilding. Yet, while significant time has been invested in understanding social media as a threat, a more proactive and optimistic approach can open new doors for conflict resolution. More precisely, investigating how social media can be more effectively harnessed for building peace is a fruitful way to understand the actions that stakeholders can take in different conflict situations.

To do so, we have to repurpose rather than abandon social media. One of the speakers at the session, Helena Puig Larrauri, explained why: first, we cannot get people off social media due to its numerous positive sides, such as considerably high cost-efficiency compared to traditional media. Moreover, switching from mainstream platforms to alternative ways of online communication would be difficult as many people and infrastructures are already dependent on them. Lastly, social media is unique in

its widespread accessibility making it especially valuable for peacebuilding.

The speakers elaborated on how exactly this repurposing can look like and what challenges and benefits we should expect along the way.

Overview of the Session

HELENA PUIG LARRAURI is a governance and peacebuilding professional. As director of Build Up, she focuses on the integration of digital technology to peace processes and on the analysis of digital conflict drivers.

Helena clarified how we can repurpose social media in a positive way. The vast accessibility of social media can bring in new perspectives and thus enhance our understanding of complex conflict situations. A second, more proactive use of social media comes into play when shaping such as rumour management or tackling hate speech. Social media can also function as a platform for dialogue between the conflicting parties.

Above all, Helena stresses the need to understand the impact social media itself has on conflicts and to find

ways to counter the therefrom emerging digital conflict drivers. This can for instance be done by educating society about new challenges posed by online networks.

Some tech companies are already trying to implement a more transparent content management. However, Helena is convinced that conflict sensitivity still remains a blind spot on social media. Conflict sensitivity requires us to move well beyond content by addressing both the regulations and underlying designs of platforms – a conversation that is still very difficult to start/a topic that still experiences great opposition in most tech companies.

DR MEDINAT ABDULAZEEZ MALEFAKIS *works as a global researcher and policy expert in the field of international security and humanitarian displacement. Since Medinat has done significant research analyzing the Boko Haram insurgency in northeast Nigeria, she was able to provide us with first-hand experience on what role social media can play in understanding conflict contexts.*

To Medinat, social media is an indispensable peacebuilding tool as Boko Haram is exploiting online platforms as their propaganda and recruitment mechanism. Conflict analysts like Medinat therefore use social media to map both the conflict actors and ultimately the broader conflict context. By assessing social media analytics, she was able to identify key actors, such as the journalist Ahmed Salkid, who has direct links to former Boko Haram leader Mohammed Yusuf. This discovery guaranteed a veritable source of information about the groups (Boko Haram and

ISWAP), and provided an alternative information pool apart from what the government and security apparatus were offering. It also assured a link to the group's leadership if peacebuilding measures ever reached the mediation and negotiation stages.

Above this, social media can bring previously undiscussed topic to the public's attention. Following the Chibok schoolgirls kidnapping, the growing international pressure on social media caused the Nigerian government to explore new ways of negotiation with Boko Haram¹.

Most importantly, social media can help us understand the public conflict perspective. Often the narrative is dominated by one side as in the case of the Nigerian army and government whose online propaganda overshadows the entire conflict. To prevent the monopolization of information, social media can and should be repurposed to facilitate balanced communication. This entails amplifying marginalized voices – a goal that can only be achieved if social media companies become more conflict-sensitive. Hence, tech companies need to align their activities to the goals of peacemakers.

AWS AL-SAADI, *founder and CEO of Tech4Peace, is working on digital rights and explained how he uses social media to counter hate speech in Iraq. As a trusted Facebook partner he has access to Crowd Tangle, a data analytics tool to monitor the social media landscape.*

First, Aws pointed out the various challenges of social media in conflict contexts, including shutdowns of the internet, blocks by the government, online

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/15/schoolgirls-kidnapped-suspected-islamists-nigeria>

attacks, hacking and fake news. Therefore, it is essential to make online spaces safer and more transparent. To AWS, the key to this lies in countering fake news.

Most of the online fake news spread in Iraq can be categorized as dis-information – not to be confused with mis- and mal-information – that is false and deliberately created to harm individuals, social groups or organizations. His organization Tech4Peace fact checks online content in eight different languages and operates in seven countries including Iraq, the US, France and the Netherlands.

Their work has proven to be successful over many years. Citizens can send in news that they suspect as being fake. Tech4Peace then runs investigations to check their credibility and confirms whether or not the information is accurate. As such they uncovered that ISIS used pictures from Assad's bombing in Syria to spread fake news about the Iraqi army killing children in 2014. Throughout the process, the organization closely cooperates with citizens and provides education on how to engage critically with social media content. However, tech giants like Twitter are far less responsive thus impeding efforts of NGOs to make social media a safe space.

NADIM NASHIF works as a digital rights defender and policy analyst and is executive director and founder of 7amleh. He described the role of social media companies and vis-à-vis governments in peacebuilding through social media.

Ever since the Arab Spring movement, governments began to tighten their control over online platforms. Sadly, their intention is not to protect the users but

instead to criminalize activists and marginalized social groups. For Nadim, the main issue of social media lies in its lack of transparency concerning content moderation. This is upheld by the dangerous interdependence between tech companies and governments: by granting profit-oriented social media giants to harvest users' data, oppressive regimes in return benefit from the platform's allegiance through which they can manipulate the narrative and content on social media.

As Nadim highlights, it is known that the Israeli government has strong ties with Facebook. Therefore, the platform is almost automatically accepting requests by the Israeli government to take down content of Palestinian activists. The report on the Israel-Palestine conflict is hence no longer balanced. More specifically, Israeli cyber units pass on information to Facebook which in 90% of all cases results in content take-down. The emerging pattern is also applicable to many other cases of oppressive regimes like the Rohingya in Myanmar.

Although Facebook claims to follow their community standards, they often cover up biased takedowns with technical issues or glitches. Therefore, 7amleh monitors cases of digital rights violations and, as a trusted partner of Facebook and Twitter, appeals to tech companies to correct them.

Nadim claims that we need to develop international standards to build transparent information flows on social media and protect peoples' freedom of expression and content. Otherwise, human rights activists, civilians and marginalized social groups will be excluded from one of the most basic democratic processes: communication.

What needs to be done?

PAX's recommendations on how to repurpose social media into an effective peacebuilding tool:

- ◆ **Social media companies** need to redesign algorithms in a way that is **conflict sensitive**, provide more **balanced content** and become accountable for their actions by setting up **transparent policies on content moderation** and evaluate critically the amount of data they store.
- ◆ **Social media companies** need to move beyond mere data management, develop **technology that strengthens peacebuilding capacities** of governments and build stronger ties with NGOs and civilians to **detect fake news**.
- ◆ **Governments** need to set up **international mechanisms** based on the human rights convention to make social media more democratic. They need to implement **standardized legal processes** to keep these mechanism in check and thus allow for appeal or remedy in cases of online rights violations.
- ◆ **Governments** should make social media **accessible** for important conflict actors such as rural dwellers and **provide enabling environmental instruments** such as electricity and formal education.
- ◆ **Donors** in partnership with civil society need to **support inclusive peace initiatives and peace actors** in their effort to safely use new technologies for promoting human rights.
- ◆ **Peace organizations** need to work together with **civilians** on **education** around creating content which is socially cohesive and critically evaluating news. It would be helpful to develop a **toolkit for mediators** on how to use digital technologies.
- ◆ **Peace organizations** need to expand marketing strategies to **tailor online messages** to the respective target group. Rather than empty slogans they should propose **concrete ideas and actions**.
- ◆ **Civilians** need to realize their **liability and responsibility** for social media content. This includes containing hate speech, critically evaluating information and using freely available **factchecking tools** especially when sharing content.

About the program

The session at the 2021 Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development has been a joint effort by International Alert and PAX

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