

# Realising the potential of social media as a tool for building peace

Policy Paper | November 2020



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**Protesters in Martyrs' Square in Beirut. Social media helped to mobilise the October 2019 protests in Lebanon – sparked by a severe economic downturn and lack of access to basic public services – and was used to put pressure on the cabinet and raise public awareness about those issues.**  
© Idealink Photography/Alamy

In 2018, International Alert and the British Council, in collaboration with global polling organisation RIWI, conducted a Peace Perceptions Poll.<sup>1</sup> The poll revealed that a significant percentage of respondents perceived social media as an enabler of political agency (see Annex 1). This finding was juxtaposed with public discourse around the

role of social media companies in our political systems, polarisation and violence. If social media remains critical to people's political engagement, especially in times such as these, how then might it be used to promote peace more explicitly? This paper offers reflections in answer to that question.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Egan, Peace Perceptions Poll 2018, London: International Alert, <https://www.international-alert.org/publications/peace-perceptions-poll-2018>

# Executive summary

Social media,<sup>2</sup> in the context of peace and conflict, can be an enabler of political agency and a positive social connector, but it can also be a driver of polarisation, hate speech and violence.

While significant time has been invested in understanding social media as a threat, how it can be more effectively harnessed for building peace is a question of increasing interest to elected officials, donors and peacebuilding practitioners alike.

This paper offers reflections in answer to that question, drawing on perspectives from interviews with peacebuilders in Lebanon, Nigeria and the Philippines, and survey responses, as well as the wider literature on the subject.

This paper suggests that social media has the potential to play a greater role in building peace in the following ways:

- ▶ **Offering new perspectives in understanding conflict contexts and so informing how interventions are designed**, including mapping actors and conversations, gathering data about conflict dynamics and overcoming traditional programme design challenges.
- ▶ **Amplifying peaceful voices while shaping the public and political narrative**, including countering fake news and threat narratives, addressing potential trigger points such as rumour management and acting as a bridging function between local, national and international spheres to mobilise action.



**Bangladeshi students stage a protest in Dhaka in 2016 against attacks on Hindu temples and houses in the eastern district of Brahmanbaria after an alleged Facebook post mocking one of Islam's holiest sites.** © Mamunur Rashid/Alamy Live News

<sup>2</sup> Social media comprises of social networking websites such as Twitter and Facebook, but also ad hoc websites promoting social interactions and instant messaging and voice applications (e.g. WhatsApp or Viber).

- ▶ **Creating new spaces for people to connect, coordinate and mobilise around peace**, including as a vehicle for collective coping, augmenting traditional dialogue activities, engaging people in dialogue who may not ordinarily participate in offline activities and strengthening peace processes.

A number of challenges are also highlighted, including technical skills within peacebuilding organisations, access to infrastructure, assessing the impact of social media interventions, access to data, design and safeguarding considerations, and a lag in social media companies' uptake of conflict-sensitive approaches. There is also a tendency for peacebuilding organisations to rely primarily on social media as an extension of existing (largely communications) work rather than as a vehicle for peacebuilding in and of itself.

To take full advantage of social media's potential, the paper recommends the establishment of partnerships between donors, social media companies and peacebuilding organisations; increased support for and emphasis on social media as a public space for positive political dialogue and countering misinformation; investment in a stronger evidence base; increased flexibility in design and funding for social media peace-oriented programming; and the safeguarding of civil society space in regulating the sector.

While this work was commissioned prior to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, it has significant resonance in the current context. Anecdotal evidence from peacebuilding organisations highlights the impact of the virus and the responses to it on conflict contexts and methods of peacebuilding. Social distancing is impacting on traditional approaches such as in-person dialogue. In the absence of face-to-face interactions, people, where possible, are gravitating towards social media and online platforms as a means to connect. There is emerging evidence of rumours on social media relating to COVID-19 that are eroding trust in government and fuelling divisions in a number of contexts. The onset of what the United Nations (UN) has described as an 'infodemic'<sup>3</sup> of misinformation has once again thrust social media into the spotlight. As such, this paper offers ideas about how to work around current physical constraints, and how peacebuilders might leverage current reliance on virtual platforms.

<sup>3</sup> UN tackles 'infodemic' of misinformation and cybercrime in COVID-19 crisis, UN, 13 March 2020, <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19>

# 1. A dynamic landscape

Existing literature explores social media's role as an 'actor' in the conflict and peacebuilding environment. Well-documented uses of disinformation campaigns, including targeted adverts and messages to deliberately seed mistrust and division or propagation of hate speech, have been linked with conflict dynamics.<sup>4</sup> Globally, budgets for social media campaigns have increased for politicians and for political campaigns; at the same time, governments are increasingly using social media for monitoring and surveillance, raising concerns over user privacy and creeping authoritarianism.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, platform algorithms shape our experience of social media, and prioritise certain content on our news feeds. Algorithms that are designed to maximise engagement also tend to maximise the reach of emotional and, in some cases, hateful or divisive posts; this reinforces both the sharing of that information and, in some cases, its perceived legitimacy.<sup>6</sup> There is thus a growing recognition of the relevance of the structure of social media platforms and their influence on peacebuilding efforts.



**Passengers in the Philippines use their smartphones to get updates on the latest news and use social media to pass the time while riding a mini passenger bus.** © Danilo Pinzon Jr./Alamy

4 Mercy Corps, The weaponization of social media: How social media can spark violence and what can be done about it, Portland, OR: Mercy Corps, November 2019

5 A. Shahbaz and A. Funk, Freedom on the Net 2019: The crisis of social media, Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2019. See also A. Omer, Tweet your cause: Cyber witnessing and the case of Palestinian solidarity, in P. Firchow et al, PeaceTech: The liminal spaces of digital technology in peacebuilding, International Studies Perspectives, 18(1), 2017, pp.4–42.

6 T. Rose-Stockwell, This is how your fear and outrage are being sold for profit, Quartz, 28 July 2017, <https://qz.com/1039910/how-facebooks-news-feed-algorithm-sells-our-fear-and-outrage-for-profit/>; E. Klein, How technology is designed to bring out the worst in us, Vox, 18 February 2018, <https://www.vox.com/technology/2018/2/19/17020310/tristan-harris-facebook-twitter-humane-tech-time>; A. Deb, S. Donohue and T. Glaisyer, Is social media a threat to democracy?, The Omidyar Group, 2017; L. Schirch, Social media impacts on social & political goods: A peacebuilding perspective, Policy Brief 22, Tokyo: Toda Peace Institute, 2018

In contrast to those seeking to build peace, there are those who are increasingly adept at using social media to sow division and promote conflict narratives.<sup>7</sup> Globally, divisive actors intent on polarisation are increasingly using highly targeted content, moving away from the use of high-profile celebrity accounts, making 'paid' or 'fake' accounts appear more organic.<sup>8</sup> This reflects a greater refinement in micro-targeting – the targeting of specific groups – and in actors' engagement with smaller numbers of followers. These dynamics are making online actions, such as disinformation campaigns, difficult to identify and track. In addition, private, localised Facebook groups facilitate direct engagement with diverse stakeholders without detection. Such strategies often operate outside or on the fringes of platforms' terms of service or, in some cases, on fringe platforms, further complicating authorities' and peacebuilders' ability to respond.<sup>9</sup>

Institutional donors are increasingly paying attention to social media. It first came into sharper focus around responses to violent extremists using social media. Although donor support has now moved beyond its initial focus on counter-terrorism and violent extremism, the full extent, level of investment and nature of work outside this sphere is unclear.

Experience suggests that social media companies often have a limited understanding of how their platforms are operating as actors in conflict contexts, which has real consequences for many people in conflict settings.<sup>10</sup> Equally, peacebuilding practitioners are still adjusting to how social media impacts on their conflict contexts and learning how they can better leverage it to deliver peace.

So, in a rapidly changing environment, where should those committed to building peace begin?

7 Boko Haram, for instance, uses social media to spread propaganda, encouraging their members to take action and publicly take responsibility for attacks. See M.A. Malefakis, *Social media dynamics in Boko Haram's terrorist insurgency*, Policy Brief 50, Tokyo: Toda Peace Institute, 2019. See also M. Stella, E. Ferrara and M. De Domenico, *Bots increase exposure to negative and inflammatory content in online social systems*, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115(49), 2018, pp.12435–12440.

8 C. Silverman, *The Philippines was a test of Facebook's new approach to countering disinformation. Things got worse*, *Buzzfeed*, 7 August 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/2020-philippines-disinformation>; see also B.Y. Franco and S. Calamba, *Despite disinformation, social media in the Philippines remains a space for genuine grassroots mobilisation*, *New Mandala*, 23 August 2019, <https://www.newmandala.org/despite-disinformation-social-media-in-the-philippines-still-a-space-for-genuine-grassroots-mobilisation/>.

9 Some innovative projects are seeking to overcome this, such as the integration of strategic communications and media strategy training for local peacebuilding champions in Lebanon, and working with individuals that are micro-influencers in their communities. Source: Interview with peacebuilding practitioner, Lebanon, December 2019

10 This is well documented throughout the many interviews and literature. For instance, see P. Dave, *Facebook says human rights report shows it should do more in Myanmar*, *Reuters*, 6 November 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/facebook-myanmar/facebook-says-human-rights-report-shows-it-should-do-more-in-myanmar-idUSL2N1XH01Q>.

## 2. Supporting nuanced context analysis and design

Peacebuilders are increasingly using social media to collect and analyse data as part of their broader conflict analysis and as a starting point for the design of new interventions.

Examples of this were found across the research. Practitioners in Nigeria described how they used social media as a way to initially **map actors and monitor the current nature of conversations** around specific hashtags or themes, trends in the number of people engaged, the origin of posts and the identities of the people associated with the conversation.<sup>11</sup> In Lebanon, efforts have been made to understand the impact of social media on conflict through research on social media narratives regarding refugee–host community tensions.<sup>12</sup> Another peacebuilding non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Lebanon conducted surveys asking about social media usage to inform a strategic communications programme.<sup>13</sup>

Social media is also being used to **gather data about conflict dynamics** for use in early warning programmes.<sup>14</sup> This can help

empower and support localised response mechanisms, among other benefits.<sup>15</sup> However, questions exist on the exact predictive value of such data,<sup>16</sup> for instance, around whether problematic conversations online materialise as offline violence or in person.<sup>17</sup>

Social media can help **overcome peacebuilding design challenges**. International non-governmental organisation (INGO) research often risks being perceived as extractive. Social media analysis can help reduce the research ‘footprint’ on communities, while also empowering and **servicing these communities through creating information feedback loops**. For example, it can support an evidence base necessary to promote political change. International Alert Philippines integrates social media into the dissemination strategy for their Conflict Alert incident tracker. In doing so, information on incidents in Bangsamoro and Mindanao is democratised, reaching new audiences<sup>18</sup> and returning information to communities, which, in turn, can help frame relationships with each other and the state.

11 Interview with Dr Medinat Abdulazeez Malefakis, ACAPS, Switzerland, December 2019; Interview with International Alert Nigeria, December 2019

12 See, for example, D. O'Driscoll, Communication interventions supporting positive civic action in Lebanon, K4D Helpdesk, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2018

13 Interview with peacebuilding practitioner, Lebanon, December 2019

14 For instance, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), <https://acleddata.com/>, or Ushahidi, <https://www.ushahidi.com>

15 H.P. Larrauri and A. Kahl, Technology for peacebuilding, *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 2(3), 2013, <https://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.cv/>

16 M. Betz, Media noise and the complexity of conflicts: Making sense of media in conflict prevention, Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018; see also J. Lefton et al, Analysing refugee–host community narratives on social media in Lebanon, Build Up, UNDP Lebanon, 2019

17 Ibid.

18 Interview with Nikki de la Rosa, Diana Moraleda, Maureen Anthea Lacuesta and Luis Antonio Go, International Alert Philippines, December 2019

# 3. Shaping the public and political narrative

There is a wide body of work on effective tools to counter hate speech online. These methods emphasise, for example, shared identity and demonstrating intergroup friendships, while cautioning against employing empathy-only approaches.<sup>19</sup>

These interventions are also increasingly being used to **counter fake news and threat narratives**. In Nigeria, one NGO encouraged women agricultural workers in rural areas to create and share new stories about themselves and connect with others around personal experiences rather than reposting existing stories.<sup>20</sup> Nigerian citizens are also utilising social media to document and share their lived realities of conflict, thus shaping the narrative around the actions and narratives of Boko Haram and the Nigerian government. This social media engagement, in turn, helps civil society shape the government's response through reframing conversations on Boko Haram's activities<sup>21</sup> – for example, some tech-savvy Muslim clerics who have a strong youth following and are actively working to create a more peaceful narrative as opposed to one framed around counter-terrorism.<sup>22</sup>

This is important where – as is often the case in conflict contexts – media and communication channels are dominated by the state and/or elite groups. In this way, “social media removes traditional media gatekeepers and democratizes content creation”,<sup>23</sup> providing a means for citizens to take control

of content, highlight abuses by both the state and other parties, and mobilise for action.<sup>24</sup>

Social media has also been used in a responsive manner to **address potential trigger points, such as through rumour management**.<sup>25</sup> During the 2015 Nigerian election, following the sound of an explosion, social media monitoring noted that people were linking the sound to Boko Haram activities or the blast of an Improvised Explosive Device.<sup>26</sup> By verifying the source of the noise (the accidental ignition of a gas cylinder), then sharing this information online, an NGO was able to correct the narrative quickly, potentially preventing more problematic consequences.<sup>27</sup>

Across these campaigns, there is a growing recognition of the need for communities to be involved in the development of messaging. One interviewee in Lebanon noted that a participatory approach to strategic communications should be an essential part of a conflict-sensitive approach that ensures narratives unite rather than divide the digital “public square”.<sup>28</sup> He went on to highlight the importance of building in skills to enable local leadership, including training in content creation on social cohesion.

It is also important to adapt tactics to the evolution of conversations. In Nigeria, one interviewee noted that a conversation that starts with a discussion about football may

19 R. Brown and L. Livingston, Counteracting hate and dangerous speech online: Strategies and considerations, Policy Brief 34, Tokyo: Toda Peace Institute, 2019

20 Interview with Josephine Alabi, Keen and Care Initiative (KCI), December 2019

21 Interview with Dr Medinat Abdulazeez Malefakis, ACAPS, Switzerland, December 2019

22 Ibid.

23 R. Brown and L. Livingston, 2019, Op. cit.

24 E. Gheyntanchi and V. Moghadam, Women, social protests, and the new media activism in the Middle East and North Africa, *International Review of Modern Sociology*, 40(1), 2014, pp.1–26; T. Zeitzoff, How social media is changing conflict, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 61(9), 2017, pp.1970–1991

25 C.E. Uzuegbunam and N. Omenugha, Mainstream media, social media and peace-building in Nigeria: Old challenges, new opportunities?, *The Nigerian Journal of Communication (TNJC)*, 15(2), 2018, pp.519–534

26 Interview with Kolo Kenneth Kadiri, International Alert Nigeria, December 2019

27 Ibid.

28 Interview with communications practitioner, Lebanon, December 2019



Children in Nigeria taking part in the #BringBackOurGirls campaign about the missing Chibok girls abducted by Boko Haram.  
© Alucardion/Shutterstock

evolve into a conversation about team recruitment, and then spark a conversation around football player identities and who they represent.<sup>29</sup> A conversation that started with football may end in a polarising discussion around conflicts in Nigeria.<sup>30</sup>

Social media can also play a bridging function between local and national spheres to exert political influence: from an activist core to the public, from user-generated content to mainstream mass media, and from local struggles to international attention.<sup>31</sup> Others see social media as a witnessing tool in

generating ethical outrage and commitments through knowledge production and raw images of suffering and protest – accelerating involvement of third parties.<sup>32</sup> There is also strong potential for fostering coordination and mobilisation around specific causes (e.g. #BringBackOurGirls in response to the kidnapping of girls by Boko Haram) and enhancing collective action.<sup>33</sup> It can also “empower marginalised actors and lead to a more locally-owned, more representative transformation of the conflict”,<sup>34</sup> providing communities with a voice they may not otherwise have.<sup>35</sup>

29 Interview with Kolo Kenneth Kadiri, International Alert Nigeria, December 2019

30 Ibid.

31 S. Aday et al, Blogs and bullets II: New media and conflict after the Arab Spring, United States Institute of Peace, 10 July 2012, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2012/07/blogs-and-bullets-ii-new-media-and-conflict-after-arab-spring>

32 A. Omer, 2017, Op. cit.; see also B. Van Niekerk and M. Maharaj, Social media and information conflict, *International Journal of Communication*, 7, 2013, pp.1162–1184; S. Roy, A study on the role of social media as a tool for promoting dialogues on peace building and non violence among the youth, *Peaceworks*, 6(1), 2016, pp.39–49

33 A. Konnelly, #Activism: Identity, affiliation, and political discourse-making on Twitter, *The Arbutus Review*, 6(1), 2015, pp.1–16

34 I. Tellidis and S. Kappler, Information and communication technologies in peacebuilding: Implications, opportunities and challenges, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 51(1), 2016, pp. 75–93; C.E. Uzuegbunam and N. Omenughu, 2018, Op. cit.

35 M. Betz, 2018, Op. cit.

# 4. Creating spaces for people to connect, coordinate and mobilise around peace

Social media can be a powerful tool for fostering connections between and within communities and enabling dialogue. For example, it can be a **vehicle for “collective coping”**<sup>36</sup> as part of psycho-social support and linked reconciliation interventions. This can allow, for example, survivors to tell people they survived, collective social construction of people’s experiences and the working through of emotions by documenting and memorialising experience. Peacebuilders have translated this function into using social media as a platform to connect participants in peacebuilding activities, such as in the Philippines, where Facebook groups are used to informally connect individuals with a shared experience.<sup>37</sup>

The potential of social media as a vehicle for dialogue has been understood for some time.<sup>38</sup> It can bring together people from diverse backgrounds, reduce stigma and stereotypes, and promote the exchange of ideas. In practice, it is now increasingly used to **augment traditional dialogue activities**. As an example, an organisation in Lebanon is planning to share messages developed in local dialogues through a nationwide social media campaign.<sup>39</sup>

Other interviewees noted the value of **using social media as an entry point for recruiting people into offline dialogue**.<sup>40</sup> There was a strong sense among stakeholders interviewed that dialogues conducted wholly online are not entirely effective without a link to offline dialogue processes. In the Philippines, online informal dialogue groups complement offline training. In Lebanon, the importance of regular face-to-face connection was identified as key to trust building. It also contributed to greater ownership and action. This view partly stems from concerns over access in regions where technology infrastructure and uptake is more limited. Further, where dialogue does happen on social media, it is often more effective if it takes place on a platform with which participants are already familiar.

Social media can also be used to **engage in dialogue people who may not ordinarily participate in offline activities**. In the US, under ‘The Commons’ project, a team of facilitators identify and engage Americans in a constructive conversation on some of the most polarising topics on Facebook and Twitter. It helps reach people who would not ‘self-select’ for offline activities and could be very useful in other contexts where there is a need to strengthen the reach and legitimacy of dialogue processes.<sup>41</sup>

36 P. Estella and M. Loeffelholz, Philippine Media Landscape, European Journalism Centre (EJC), 2019

37 Interview with Nikki de la Rosa, Diana Moraleda, Maureen Anthea Lacuesta and Luis Antonio Go, International Alert Philippines, December 2019

38 S. Himelfarb, Social media and conflict prevention, United States Institute of Peace (USIP), 20 December 2012, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2012/12/social-media-and-conflict-prevention>; J. Deane, Fragile states: The role of media and communication, Policy Brief 10, BBC Media Action, 2013; United Nations and World Bank, Pathways for peace: Inclusive approaches to preventing violent conflict, Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018

39 Interview with peacebuilding practitioner, Lebanon, December 2019

40 Interview with communications practitioner, Lebanon, December 2019

41 Scaling The Commons: An intervention to depolarize political conversations on Twitter and Facebook in the USA, Build Up, 12 December 2019, <https://medium.com/@howtobuildup/scaling-the-commons-969b15c98012>

Social media can be a double-edged sword for **mediation and peace processes**.<sup>42</sup> Mediators highlight the risk of information leaks about negotiations posted to social media and the potential for the construction and dissemination of negative narratives that are detrimental to a peace process. At the same time, mediators are beginning to conduct social media analysis to identify actors and topics that could be meaningful entry points for dialogue.<sup>43</sup> Social media can also play a role in linking communities to processes, building the societal support needed to underpin the durability of peace agreements, which are often negotiated at the elite level.<sup>44</sup>

One response, by the UN Department for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, has been to develop a toolkit for mediators to use digital technologies, focusing on conflict analysis, engagement with conflict parties, inclusivity and strategic communications.<sup>45</sup> Other creative tactics are being tested, such as the use of social media to solicit views on peace processes through digital consultations – as has happened in Colombia and Libya – as a way to broaden the selection of voices brought into peace processes.<sup>46</sup>

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42 D. Lanz and A. Eleiba, *The good, the bad and the ugly: Social media and peace mediation*, Policy Brief 12, Basel: Swisspeace, 2018; *Digital technologies and mediation: Toolkit 1.0*, United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (UNDPPA) and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, <https://peacemaker.un.org/digitaltoolkit>, accessed July 2020

43 D. Lanz and A. Eleiba, 2018, *Op. cit.*

44 British Council and Build Up, *Innovative peacebuilding in Syria II: An update on the strategic use of technology to build peace in the Syrian context*, London: British Council, 2016

45 *Digital technologies and mediation: Toolkit 1.0*, UNDPPA and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, <https://peacemaker.un.org/digitaltoolkit>, accessed July 2020

46 D. Lanz and A. Eleiba, 2018, *Op. cit.*

# 5. Gaps, challenges and opportunities

The reality is that social media is still far from a mainstream tool when it comes to building peace. Key gaps and opportunities include the following.

## SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES

So far, little has been said about the role of social media companies, but they have an important part to play. This starts by recognising and paying greater attention to how their platforms interplay with local conflict dynamics. Understanding this and then adjusting business practice to respond is called being ‘conflict sensitive’.<sup>47</sup>

The importance of technology companies applying this approach cannot be overstated. They hold the keys to the algorithms that create an enabling environment for certain narratives and behaviours to flourish. Some argue that Facebook has limited capacity to identify and moderate dangerous speech, as what users may experience as problematic content is not always viewed as violating Facebook standards.<sup>48</sup> Financial models and the need to “sell the attention of users”<sup>49</sup> mean that fact-checking efforts alone may not be effective against the greater system and algorithms, **requiring companies and peacebuilders to move beyond data management and limited strategic communications** campaigns.

This represents a significant collaborative opportunity. Sectors such as extractive industries offer examples of how to mitigate

and adapt business strategies and practices to reduce negative impacts in conflict contexts. The establishment of instruments such as the Voluntary Principles on Human Rights and Security<sup>50</sup> and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative illustrate how companies, governments and civil society can work collaboratively. There is an increasing amount of supporting guidance, such as International Alert’s conflict-sensitive business practice guide.<sup>51</sup> The UN Global Compact’s Business for Peace<sup>52</sup> initiative extends this approach to a range of new sectors from agriculture and renewables to tourism and telecommunications. It recognises that all companies can impact conflict dynamics and seeks to pair mitigating risk and sustaining long-term financial performance with a role in supporting peace and development.

Such a response would build on companies’ approaches to date,<sup>53</sup> taking them from a threat-based compliance response approach to a more holistic preventative one. This would complement the broader suite of measures currently being pursued by regulators, ranging from countering extremist material to online child protection.

## TECHNICAL SKILLS

A deficit in technical knowledge and skills within peacebuilding organisations can represent a barrier to the more sophisticated use of social media (see Annex 2).

47 What is conflict sensitivity?, Conflict Sensitivity Community Hub, <https://conflictsensitivity.org/conflict-sensitivity/what-is-conflict-sensitivity/>, accessed July 2020

48 A. Taub and M. Fisher, Where countries are tinderboxes and Facebook is a match, New York Times, 21 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/21/world/asia/facebook-sri-lanka-riots.html>

49 L. Schirch, 2018, Op. cit.

50 See <https://www.voluntaryprinciples.org/>.

51 R. Cleland and Y. Orsini, Human rights due diligence in conflict-affected settings: Guidance for extractives industries, London: International Alert, 2018

52 Join Business for Peace, United Nations Global Compact, <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/take-action/action/peace>

53 Twitter Safety, Enforcing new rules to reduce hateful conduct and abusive behavior, Twitter, 18 December 2017, [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2017/safetypoliciesdec2017.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2017/safetypoliciesdec2017.html); Twitter Inc, 15th Transparency Report: Increase in proactive enforcement on accounts, Twitter, 31 October 2019, [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2019/twitter-transparency-report-2019.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/twitter-transparency-report-2019.html); A. Warofka, An independent assessment of the human rights impact of Facebook in Myanmar, for steps taken by Facebook to counter hate speech, 5 November 2018, <https://about.fb.com/news/2018/11/myanmar-hria/>

Engaging with social media requires specialised capacities to navigate social media networks and to develop effective strategies, as well as safeguard confidentiality and digital security. These skills are not readily accessible to all peacebuilders.

Platforms are not standardised, meaning that engaging on new platforms requires additional learning,<sup>54</sup> especially given that users have varying levels of trust in different platforms<sup>55</sup> and vastly differing usage habits across contexts.

Limited skill sets are reflected in the fact that peacebuilding organisations still tend to use social media primarily for strategic communications to extend the reach of offline programming rather than as a potential vehicle with its own inherent merits (see Annex 2 for survey results).

As the tactics of tech-savvy actors intent on polarisation constantly shift, it is an added technical challenge for peacebuilders to keep abreast of developments and respond. It is challenging to keep pace with the rapid evolution of hate speech phrases and terms, and identify patterns of speech at various levels, from local to national.

To overcome the technical challenges of data analysis, organisations such as PeaceTech Lab have developed partnerships between local peacebuilders and technology experts through initiatives like their Hate Speech Lexicons.<sup>56</sup>

## ACCESS TO DATA AND ANALYSIS

Harvesting raw data from social media and the complexity of some methodologies, such as sentiment analysis, are also challenging.<sup>57</sup> This makes it hard for peacebuilders to engage in quantitative social media analysis.

Proper data analysis requires greater preparedness for collaboration between social media platforms and peacebuilders, the only

alternative being often high-cost payments to data companies. For example, Twitter data has been more accessible than Facebook data, resulting in a greater use of quantitative analysis using that platform.<sup>58</sup> Quantitative data analysis also presents complexities related to changing requirements in terms of privacy and content governance.

## ASSESSING IMPACT

Monitoring and evaluating impact also represents a challenge. There is a need for deeper understanding of the connection between content posted, consumption of content by a user and their related action and/or behavioural change.<sup>59</sup>

Positive messaging campaigns are common but little documentation exists on their impact. Where it does exist, it shows up the associated challenges. For example, in Lebanon, an interviewee participating in the evaluation of a counter fake news campaign was well versed in fake news and clearly understood the key tenets of fact checking – in a sense, the ‘learning objectives’ had been achieved. However, when presented with several examples of fake news items, the individual reverted to making sectarian judgements, as their internal prejudices resurfaced.

Tracking user behaviours online assumes that they mirror offline behaviours and that they exist in a traceable format. In reality, social media users may go from public social media to private spheres, making it difficult to track for impact and hate speech even when public data is available.<sup>60</sup> It is not possible to assume that the mere output – some number of tweets – equals impact.<sup>61</sup>

Behaviour change happens over long time periods, which is not always reflected in the timeframe of projects. The challenge of counteracting a deeper threat around identity formation highlights the importance of pairing online with offline activities to test and solidify

54 Interview with Kolo Kenneth Kadiri, International Alert Nigeria, December 2019

55 Levels of trust on social media were researched in depth by Charles Martin-Shields in ‘Technology and Collective Action During Crisis’ (2017), where he explored when actors trust and act on information through different mediums.

56 Combating Hate Speech, PeaceTech Labs, <https://www.peacetechnology.org/hate-speech>, accessed June 2020

57 Sentiment analysis classifies text, such as that contained within a tweet on Twitter, to identify the feelings or attitudes of that text.

58 L. Laurenson, Polarisation and peacebuilding strategy on digital media platforms: The current research (Part I), Policy Brief 44, Tokyo: Toda Peace Institute, 2019; L. Laurenson, Polarisation and peacebuilding strategy on digital media platforms: Current strategies and their discontents (Part II), Policy Brief 45, Tokyo: Toda Peace Institute, 2019

59 C. Cramer, J. Goodhand and R. Morris, Evidence synthesis: What interventions have been effective in preventing or mitigating armed violence in developing and middle-income countries?, London: Department for International Development, 2016

60 R. Brown and L. Livingston, 2019, Op. cit.

61 S. Aday et al, 2012, Op. cit.

gains and support longer-term behavioural change. While this is not unique to social media interventions, it is exacerbated by online campaigns, which are difficult to link to offline change.<sup>62</sup>

## DESIGN AND RISK CONSIDERATIONS

Programme design and risk appetite also shape the ability of peacebuilders to employ social media meaningfully as a tool to promote peace.

Among the peacebuilding organisations interviewed, financial constraints were identified as limiting their ability to access technical training or to integrate social media more strategically into their work.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests a limited risk appetite on the part of some donors. This can limit the experimentation with and potential for social media campaigns at the local level,<sup>63</sup> noting campaigns carried out privately at the local level are often the most effective.

## COUNTERPRODUCTIVE REGULATION

Legal and regulatory challenges can also serve as an obstacle to this work. With evolving government regulation around social media, peacebuilding organisations or individual peacebuilders may limit their engagement on social media to avoid legal risks. For instance, in Nigeria, the evolving hate speech legislation creates risks around implementing a social media strategy when social media messaging can potentially be interpreted as a criminal act when it does not align with a country's policies or associated political leadership.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, in South East Asia, disinformation laws have been used to crack down on peaceful activists.<sup>65</sup>

## ACCESS, ETHICAL AND SAFEGUARDING CONSIDERATIONS

The 'digital divide' and, consequently, access to social media platforms by more marginalised individuals and communities is

a serious issue for consideration in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. This is, in part, due to poor internet penetration in many areas.<sup>66</sup> Those who do have access to social media are often (but not always) urban and educated young people with access to technology, infrastructure and the internet. The 'gender digital divide' is particularly visible among rural women in fragile contexts where access is limited, literacy is low and the digital spaces are mainly dominated by male users.<sup>67</sup> While the rise in women's online activism in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt has been documented, this has been limited to urban, well-educated women.<sup>68</sup> Intersectional gender analysis that takes into account geography, class, education, disability and age is key to help mitigate exclusion of key groups from peacebuilding programmes.

There is a need to explore ethical challenges more fully, such as issues around privacy and consent and balancing cyber security and ethics. Without a clearer ethical framework for social media use, peacebuilders can be over-cautious and also face serious safeguarding repercussions for their staff who engage with the deeper divisive conflict narratives.

To avoid exacerbating tensions,<sup>69</sup> peacebuilding organisations should prioritise communicating in a culturally and conflict-sensitive way to keep partners and colleagues safe online. This may include developing plans to respond where someone is harassed, stalked or trolled online, and protecting the mental health of staff engaging regularly in challenging conversations on social media. Building digital resilience can be seen in Syria with the work of SalamaTech, which assists non-violent Syrian women and youth to stay safe online and helps make their peacebuilding voices heard by protecting them from hacking and harassment.<sup>70</sup>

62 Interview with peacebuilding practitioner, Lebanon, December 2019

63 Ibid.

64 Interview with Dr Medinat Abdulazeez Malefakis, ACAPS, Switzerland, December 2019

65 Z. Peter, Thailand's anti-fake news center fans fears of censorship, VOA, 6 October 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/thailands-anti-fake-news-center-fans-fears-censorship>

66 A. Comminos, *The role of social media and user-generated content in post-conflict peacebuilding*, Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2013

67 L. Ndangam and P. Lee, *Media ethics: Social media for peace*, Global Ethics Forum 2011–2012, 2012, [https://www.globethics.net/documents/4289936/14121854/InformationEthics\\_SocialMediaAndEthicsWACCReport.pdf](https://www.globethics.net/documents/4289936/14121854/InformationEthics_SocialMediaAndEthicsWACCReport.pdf); S. Neumark, *How digital technologies enable women's public praxis in Morocco*, *Inspiring Critical Thought*, 9(2), 2017, pp.15–25

68 E. Gheyntchi and V.N. Moghadam, 2014, Op. cit.

69 Interview with Nikki de la Rosa, Diana Moraleda, Maureen Anthea Lacuesta and Luis Antonio Go, International Alert Philippines, December 2019

70 Building digital resilience in Syria, SalamaTech, <https://en.salamatech.org/about-the-project/>, accessed July 2020

# 6. Suggested ways forward

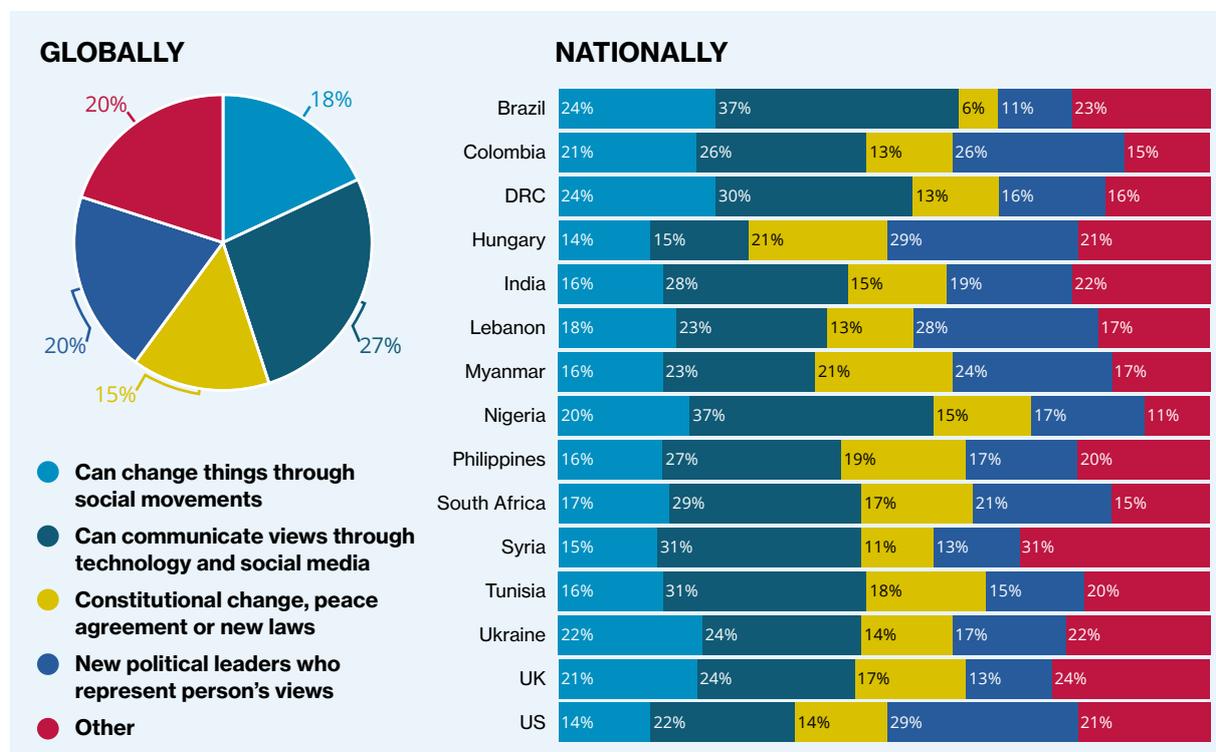
Social media is closely intertwined with conflict and peace dynamics in today's world. Responses must be equally dynamic and nuanced. The following is a set of top-line proposals to help ensure social media can play a greater role in building peace.

- 1 Donors and peacebuilding organisations should ensure that social media interventions are working towards **strategic peacebuilding objectives** that harness the inherent benefits offered by virtual engagement.
- 2 Donors, social media companies and peacebuilding organisations should establish **partnerships** in order to promote a conflict-sensitive approach and support mutual skills building, so as to better shape peacebuilding interventions.
- 3 Organisations should be supported to capitalise on the role that social media can play in **understanding conflict dynamics** as a means to enhance and better design peacebuilding interventions. Peacebuilders' skills acquisition should be supported in this area.
- 4 Tech companies, peacebuilding organisations and donors should increase efforts to **leverage social media as a public space** for positive political dialogue and countering misinformation and prejudice that can lead to violence.
- 5 Peacebuilding organisations should be supported to use social media **more strategically and meaningfully as a space for dialogue**, allowing for pairing with offline interventions.
- 6 A greater **evidence base** should be developed around social media's application and its potential impact with greater attention given to how change online translates into change offline.
- 7 Donors and peacebuilding organisations should invest in ensuring that **monitoring and evaluation** frameworks capture the impact of social media interventions.
- 8 Donors should **build flexibility into programme support**, to encourage innovation and interventions that can adapt to the changing online context and, in particular, match the adaptability of malign actors.
- 9 **Longer-term programming cycles** should be put in place to promote deep-rooted change, such as identity formation and offline behavioural and institutional change, while allowing for adaptation and short-term, time-sensitive interventions that address unexpected violence and deepening divisions.
- 10 Governments should invest in policy guidance to ensure that **regulation provides necessary safeguards** related to the malicious use of social media, while also protecting civil society space, and donor, private sector and NGO capability to utilise social media as a vehicle for peacebuilding, while NGOs should reinforce ethical and safeguarding measures.

## ANNEX 1: PEACE PERCEPTIONS POLL DATA

In the Peace Perceptions Poll 2018, when participants were asked why people are more able to influence political decisions that affect them compared to five years ago, while ‘new political leaders’ and ‘new social movements’ scored highly (ranking second and third respectively), it was technology and social media that consistently topped the list. In 11 countries, social media and technology was ranked as the top reason for increased political agency, polling the highest in Brazil, Nigeria, Syria and Tunisia. It was ranked second in a further three countries.

**Figure 1: Why people are more able to influence political decisions that affect them compared to five years ago<sup>71</sup>**



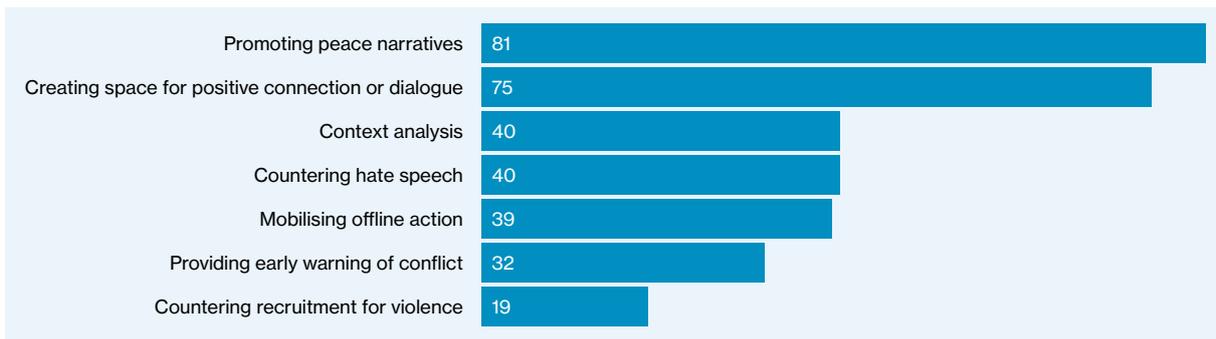
71 2018 data from 7,357 respondents. See J. Egan, 2018, Op. cit.

## ANNEX 2: SUPPORTING SURVEY DATA

In preparing this brief, Build Up, a leading technology-driven peacebuilding organisation, undertook a series of interviews, as well as a short survey, which attracted 117 respondents.

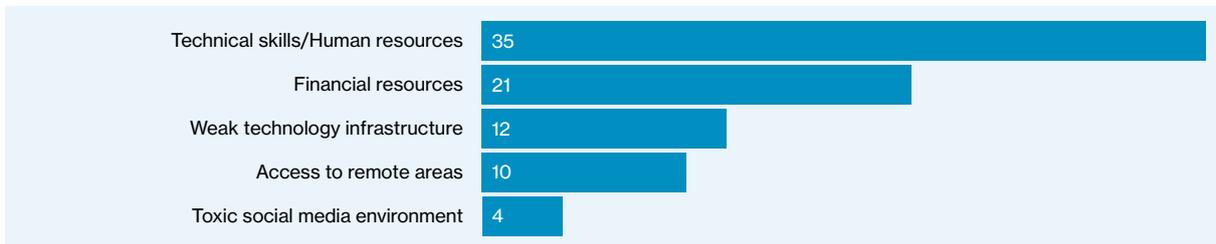
As noted in the paper, a significant proportion (47%) of respondents saw the value of social media as an effective tool to reach more people, followed by an effective tool to reach 'different' people (28%). This demonstrates that peacebuilders view social media as predominantly an amplification tool, rather than as a strategic tool to combat the threats posed by it. Similarly, when asked to identify the specific peacebuilding goals that social media was helping them achieve, the majority of survey respondents cited the promotion of peace narratives.

**Figure 2: What are the specific peacebuilding goals that your organisation uses social media to help achieve?<sup>72</sup>**



This paper highlights a number of challenges that peacebuilders face in maximising the potential of social media as a peacebuilding tool. Figure 3 highlights technical skills as a widely perceived deficit.

**Figure 3: As a peacebuilder, what are your key operational obstacles to using social media?<sup>73</sup>**



72 2020 data from 97 respondents

73 2020 data from 106 respondents

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