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Digital Peacebuilding: Path Towards Reconciliation

Abstract

Society at present is facing numerous challenges and risks due to the complicated nature of wars and conflicts. War has shifted from traditional dimensions to nonconventional formats where wars happen on virtual platforms, including social media. Due to these reasons, peacebuilding efforts toward reconciliation need to have a holistic approach rather than traditional peacebuilding initiatives. Therefore, in this context, "Digital Peacebuilding" becomes more relevant and practical. Even though digital peacebuilding emerges as a promising approach, leveraging technology to foster reconciliation, it comes with its own set of challenges. Therefore, the researcher aims to analyze the potential of digital peacebuilding in reconciliation efforts as its research problem. The research questions are: What constitutes digital peacebuilding? Which case studies demonstrate its successes? What challenges does it face? The researcher has utilized a qualitative methodology, and both primary and secondary data are included. Primary data is gathered through key informants selected via purposive sampling, while secondary data is gathered from books, journals, and conference proceedings. Findings suggest that while digital peacebuilding has achieved notable successes, it also encounters significant risks and challenges such as social media warfare and information warfare. The conclusion emphasizes the necessity of striking a balance between these risks to harness the full potential of digital peacebuilding for sustainable reconciliation.

Keywords: *Challenges, Digital Peacebuilding, Reconciliation, Risks, Unconventional Wars.*

Introduction

Peacebuilding is a term that is often used in both domestic and international settings, whether liberal, illiberal, or digital in name. Peacebuilding can be regarded as a vital component in a society that attempts and continues reconciliation efforts in a post-war or conflict context. Before exploring what peacebuilding is, it is crucial to look into what 'peace' is. Ercoşkun in his article titled, "On Galtung's Approach to Peace Studies", has mentioned that "one of the most widely accepted definitions in the discipline of international relations is Galtung's concept of peace. In his study "What is peace research?" published in 1964, Galtung describes negative peace as the absence of human violence and war, and positive peace as the absence of structural violence (Galtung, 1964, pp. 1-4)".[166] Even though Galtung's positive peace has a point, in reality there exists an undeniable truth which is how can a country eliminate underlying structural disparities in total. Due to the complex nature of violence and conflict, whether direct or indirect, instilling peace also becomes arduous. Since peacebuilding does not have a one-size-fits-all approach, applying peacebuilding initiatives requires lessons learned.

As explained by the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, "Peacebuilding is the development of constructive personal, group, and political relationships across ethnic, religious, class, national, and racial boundaries. It aims to resolve injustice in nonviolent ways

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[166] Burak Ercoşkun, "On Galtung's Approach to Peace Studies," Lectio Socialis, January 2021. https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/1282610#:~:text=In%20his%20study%20%E2%80%9CWhat%20is,1%2D4.

and to transform the structural conditions that generate deadly conflict. Peacebuilding can include conflict prevention; conflict management; conflict resolution and transformation, and post-conflict reconciliation".[167] Realistically, peacebuilding is not an overnight process; achieving success involves navigating many challenges.

Societies undergo various types of conflicts, such as international conflicts and non-international armed conflicts. Conflictual situations can arise due to various factors such as inequitable resource allocation, minority rights, religious tensions, ethnic differences, language barriers, and cultural anxiety. Nonetheless, a country grappling with a way out of a conflictual situation needs a proper mechanism that is constantly supervised, updated, and followed up to check whether post-war initiatives are a success. Countries engage in post-war reconciliation and post-conflict initiatives to reconcile. What is reconciliation? To put it simply, reconciliation denotes coexistence. As cited by the United States Institute of Peace, "Reconciliation is the long-term process by which the parties to a violent dispute build trust, learn to live cooperatively, and create a stable peace. It can happen at the individual level, the community level, and the national level. It may involve dialogue, admissions of guilt, judicial processes, truth commissions, ritual forgiveness, and sulha (a traditional Arabic form of ritual forgiveness and restitution)."[168]

Since the dimensions of threats have shifted from tangible formats to intangible ones, including information warfare, cloud-based conflicts, and social media battles, strategies for fighting wars and for implementing peace measures should take a novel approach. In light of this shift, 'Digital Peacebuilding' has become increasingly imperative yet challenging. Regardless of a country's form or size, utilizing digital peacebuilding presents a range of strengths along with challenges.

Research Methodology

The research methodology employed is qualitative. Unlike quantitative research, which relies on statistical calculations and correlations, qualitative research involves analysis without these numerical methods. Thus, the researcher analyzes data, identifies differences, and draws conclusions. To gather data for the paper, a multi-method approach was used, incorporating both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through key informants selected via purposive sampling, while secondary data was gathered by reviewing available scholarly information.

Results and Discussion

Present Conflict Setting

At present, the world is wholly digitalized, and humans can travel miles within seconds from their fingertips on the screen without any hassle. With the advent of social media and the changing communication landscape, accessing, gathering, modifying, amplifying, and disseminating information have become convenient. In cases where material, sensitive, or classified information has fallen into the hands of individuals or entities with ulterior motives,

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[167] Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, "What Is Strategic Peacebuilding?, accessed July 11, 2024. https://kroc.nd.edu/about-us/what-is-peace-studies/what-is-strategic-peacebuilding/.

[168] United States Institute of Peace, "Reconciliation: Truth, Justice, Peace, Mercy," November 24, 2021. https://www.usip.org/public-education-new/reconciliation-truth-justice-peace-mercy#:~:text=Reconciliation%20is%20the%20long%2Dterm,level%2C%20and%20the%20national%20level.

the repercussions are always grave. Those with ulterior motives can include belligerents, extremists, radicalized individuals, or terrorists.

In the earlier context, wars were fought in the field; now, they take place intangibly, perhaps through manipulated algorithms, echo chambers, bots, deepfakes, amplified content, or manipulated images. Information warfare, net warfare, social media warfare, and cyber warfare can be explicitly seen in the present world. As a result, disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda - including fictitious narratives, hate speech, and fake news - are prevalent. False, fictitious, and manipulated information does not remain confined to the cyber domain, leaving digital footprints. What is serious is that the information is widely circulated, disseminated, absorbed, and commented on by people. The biases and perceptions formed and convinced can lead to societal unrest, giving rise to rebellions, wars, and riots.

Therefore, countering and preventing distorted perceptions have become extremely challenging. This underscores the necessity of having prudent, constantly evolving, resilient peacebuilding tools in the digital and information domains. These mechanisms can be state-led, initiated by nongovernmental organizations, or driven by the general public.

Digital Peacebuilding

According to Victoria State Government, 2019,[169] "Digital technologies are electronic tools, systems, devices and resources that generate, store or process data. Well-known examples include social media, online games, multimedia, and mobile phones." In the present world, the role of digital technologies and expectations from digital technologies have become crucial determinants in peacebuilding. Prior to examining the challenges and opportunities, it is pivotal to look into what digital peacebuilding is. As per Schirch,[170] "PeaceTech" and Digital Peacebuilding defined the technology that contributes to peacebuilding. Digital peacebuilding is the broader nexus between the field of peacebuilding and digital technologies. This nexus includes three interfaces. First, most peacebuilding efforts use "normal" technologies such as email, websites, word processing, databases, and platforms like Skype or Zoom for communication and basic computation. Second, specific types of technology can be developed with the explicit goal of analyzing conflict, protecting civilians, facilitating dialogue, or achieving other objectives related to peacebuilding. Third, the field of peacebuilding can respond to new threats posed by technology, including cyber warfare tactics such as disinformation aimed at undermining democracy or hate speech on social media that leads to greater polarization. Having understood what digital peacebuilding is, it is crucial to explore the role of digital technologies in peacebuilding.

Role of Digital Technologies in Peacebuilding with Examples

Digital technology includes communication tools, social media platforms, and digital databases, which enable more effective coordination among peacekeeping forces, aid organizations, and local communities. Among these, social media plays a crucial and active role due to its widespread nature and availability. Digital technologies have a significant role in the peacebuilding process, leading to reconciliation. One of their key functions is to foster connectivity. Digital platforms allow peacebuilders across the world to connect and empower

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[169] "Information for Schools," *Schools Vic*, n.d., https://www.schools.vic.gov.au/.

[170] Lisa Schirch, "25 Spheres of Digital Peacebuilding and PeaceTech 1 Introduction and Methodology," n.d. https://toda.org/assets/files/resources/policy-briefs/t-pb-93_lisa-schirch.pdf.

one another, implement initiatives, conduct cross-cultural training, and arrive at sustainable solutions and outcomes. Additionally, these technologies facilitate connectivity through crowdsourced information, while instant communication enhances networking. They also enable early warning systems.

One prominent example is the Ushahidi Platform, "the Ushahidi Platform [which] helps communities turn information into action with an intuitive and accessible crowdsourcing and mapping tool. By enabling the rapid collection, management, and analysis of crowdsourced information, Ushahidi empowers everyone - individuals, community groups, governments, activists, and organizations to create meaningful change."[171] This platform was highly instrumental in the post-election violence in Kenya between 2007-2008, The platform facilitated crowdsourced mapping, room to report incidents in real-time via various channels, provided dynamic visualization and also served as an early warning system. In addition, digital platforms also provide room for digital storytelling. One such example is Humans of New York. In the Syrian Series, Brandon Stanton, embarked on a journey to the Middle East to share the stories of Syrian refugees. This gave individual narratives, created empathy, and fostered global reach. Moreover, another crucial role that digital media can play is in virtual peace-building initiatives. These initiatives are both prudent and convenient for regions facing conflict and access constraints. An example is PeaceTech Lab, which works with individuals and communities affected by conflict. The lab uses technology, media, and data to accelerate local peacebuilding efforts. Additionally, digital media can facilitate community engagement, empowering communities through social media and other platforms, as well as providing online training and capacity building.

Challenges

Even though digital technologies have an extensive role as well as a huge potential, there are inherent challenges that make peacebuilding challenging. According to International Alert, 2020, challenges include, "technical skills within peacebuilding organizations, 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 organizations 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 (dependency risk)".[172]

However, there are other hurdles as well. For example, not all countries possess the same infrastructure and technical expertise. The burden of the digital divide acts as a significant barrier, as certain communities may be excluded due to a lack of resources and access, further exacerbating existing social, economic, and political inequalities. In Yemen, for instance, the digital divide poses substantial challenges to online peacebuilding initiatives. A significant portion of the population, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas, faces limited internet access and lacks the technological devices and expertise necessary for participation. This precludes inclusivity and hampers diversity in online peace dialogues, hindering the effectiveness of programs that rely on digital platforms. As a result, the digital divide in Yemen not only excludes many from virtual participation but also diminishes community engagement

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[171] "Ushahidi," n.d., https://www.ushahidi.com/.

[172] Penny Kiley, "Realising the Potential of Social Media as a Tool for Building Peace," *International Alert*, November 30, 2020, https://www.international-alert.org/publications/realising-potential-social-media-tool-building-peace/.

and resilience, impeding the overall impact of online peacebuilding efforts in these conflict-affected and rural regions.

In addition, a lack of digital literacy and information literacy acts as a barrier since people are unable to identify what is true and what is fake. An example of a lack of digital literacy as explained by Win, 2023 is "the Rohingya refugees [who] continue to lack the necessary support to cultivate digital literacy skills that are crucial for obtaining information, maintaining connections with their families, fostering self-empowerment, and ensuring online safety. This enduring digital disparity stands as one of the most neglected facets of these refugees' basic human rights, alongside access to food and shelter."[173] Therefore, a lack of digital literacy excludes them from participating in peacebuilding efforts.

In addition, a lack of information literacy is another hurdle that impedes digital peacebuilding, especially given the prevalence of misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, and hate speech. If the public or authorities are unable to discern what is legitimate and what is not, the consequences can be devastating. This is evident in Myanmar, where the spread of ethnically charged disinformation on social media poses a significant barrier to digital peacebuilding. Driven by limited information literacy, this situation fuels heightened ethnic and religious tensions. Individuals' struggles to critically evaluate the authenticity of content contribute to digital polarization, deepening existing divides. Furthermore, ill-motivated actors exploit this lack of information literacy to manipulate online spaces by amplifying historical grievances and fostering animosity between diverse communities. Additional challenges include cybersecurity concerns and privacy violations, as rivals and third parties may exploit information insecurity to steal sensitive data or distort it for their purposes.

Opportunities

Despite the risks and challenges associated with digital technologies, digital technologies pose a vast potential to thrive and foster peace. According to International Alert, 2020,[174] social media introduces fresh perspectives for comprehending conflict contexts, by influencing the formulation of interventions. This also involves the mapping of individuals and conversations, collecting data on conflict dynamics, and surmounting traditional challenges in program design. Moreover, social media has the power to amplify voices advocating for peace and shape both public and political narratives. This includes countering and mitigating misinformation and narratives of threat, as well as managing potential trigger points through rumor control. Furthermore, social media serves as a bridge across local, national, and international domains, facilitating the mobilization of collective action. It also establishes novel avenues for people to connect, coordinate, and rally around peace talks and initiatives. Additionally, it provides a platform for communal coping, supplements traditional dialogue initiatives, involves individuals who might not typically participate in offline activities, and reinforces peace processes. Beyond all these functions, digital technologies play a pivotal role in advancing peacebuilding through various essential means.

Primarily, digital tools enable immediate communication and connectivity, acting as a potent tool for peacebuilders to extend their reach and connect communities globally as evidenced earlier. Furthermore, these technologies facilitate efficient gathering and analysis of data,

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[173] Kathy Win, "Digital Gap Deepens Marginalization of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh," *The Contrapuntal*, October 29, 2023, https://thecontrapuntal.com/digital-gap-deepens-marginalization-of-rohingya-refugees-in-bangladesh/.

[174] PeaceTech Lab, "Realizing the Potential of Social Media as a Tool for Building Peace," *International Alert*, November 9, 2020.

offering valuable insights into the dynamics of conflicts and contributing to the formulation of well-informed strategies that will serve as lessons learned as well as facilitate preparedness. Moreover, digital platforms provide a channel for the distribution of information, facilitating awareness-raising and countering misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, and false news thereby enhancing transparency and comprehension among multiple stakeholders. Additionally, social media and other digital platforms empower communities to actively and proactively participate in peacebuilding endeavors, promoting dialogue and collaboration on a broader scale. In addition, technology can be harnessed to establish early warning systems, by identifying potential conflicts before they escalate and allowing for timely intervention. Allowing grassroots participation from the general public enables top leaders to stay informed and connected. Mobile applications, SMS platforms, and social media demonstrate the transformative influence of digital technologies on the landscape of peacebuilding by serving these varied functions effectively.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the rise of digital technologies has altered the threat landscape as well as the dynamics of peacebuilding. The relationship between violence, conflict, and the pursuit of peace in a digital age requires a holistic understanding of the roles played by digital technology. As societies fight with various forms of violence, conflict ranging from physical aggression to more subtle actions in digital spaces, the imperative of peacebuilding emerges as a necessity especially in terms of reconciliation.

Digital peacebuilding, rooted in technology, opens up an area of possibilities and has multiple potentials. Yet, the journey toward digital peacebuilding is challenging. Drawbacks, loopholes, and weaknesses such as technical skill disparities within peacebuilding organizations, uneven access to infrastructure, and the complex evaluation of social media interventions create negative consequences. The digital divide further exacerbates existing inequalities, obstructing inclusivity in peace dialogues. Moreover, the lack of digital and information literacy poses a significant barrier, as seen in the struggles of Rohingya refugees in acquiring essential digital skills. Despite these challenges, digital technologies offer vast potential. Social media, a prominent player, fosters global connectivity, amplifies voices for peace, creates and builds empathy, and acts as a platform for impactful digital storytelling. Platforms like Ushahidi showcase the power of crowdsourcing and mapping in conflict scenarios. Additionally, initiatives like Humans of New York leverage virtual storytelling to foster empathy. Virtual peace-building efforts, such as PeaceTech Lab, transcend geographical constraints to accelerate local peacebuilding initiatives.

The opportunities presented by digital technologies encompass communication, data analysis, data verification, information dissemination, and community engagement. Early warning systems that utilize technology contribute to timely conflict intervention. However, to effectively capitalize on these opportunities, it is essential to address challenges such as the digital divide, cybersecurity concerns, and privacy violations. In summary, the role of digital technologies in peacebuilding is dynamic and evolving. Therefore, strategically integrating digital tools while working to bridge gaps in access and literacy can lead to innovative, impactful, and sustainable peacebuilding efforts in the digital age.

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