

Social Media – A New Ally for Peacebuilding

This two-pager summarizes the most important recommendations of the corresponding research paper. On behalf of a collaboration between the Middle East and the Fundraising Team, Hillena Thoms conducted the research as part of her six-week internship at the Middle East Team.

About the research

Our society has arrived at a crossroad where social media could become either the biggest enemy or the greatest ally of peace. Among other stakeholders like governments, tech giants and civilians, peace organizations carry a key responsibility in paving the way for a future in which social media can support rather than impede conflict resolution.

Therefore, the research explores the positive potential of social media in peacebuilding to map, resolve and prevent conflicts. More specifically, it provides an overview of projects conducted by PAX's peer peace organizations that incorporate social media. Based on the results PAX can extract useful take-aways for its own application of social media as a tool for conflict resolution keeping in mind its programmatic focus and resource capacity. Methodologically, the findings were informed by desk research and expert interviews.

1. Focus on small scale digital analysis

Following expert opinions from PeaceTech Lab and GeoA, I would recommend PAX utilize small scale social media analyses to inform their online interventions and projects.¹ This digital context analysis about a target audience can reveal the most used websites, key social media influencers within specific groups, or main topics of discussion – all of which can contribute to more successful project implementation.

- ◆ A project similar to PeaceTech Lab's (PTL) **Hate Speech Lexicon** might be a feasible idea for any team at PAX to understand specific conflict narratives while also providing alternative words relevant to countering hate speech.² The lexicon pairs social media analysis with in-depth qualitative research conducted in online community forums where the local population can discuss the relevant language.
- ◆ The **Kurdish Constitution Project** run by PTL provides a useful blueprint for including civilians in important political processes.³ By planting social media plug-ins on websites, PAX could use this strategy to easily collect feedback from different conflict actors.
- ◆ In order to gather the relevant social media data for these projects, PAX can utilize some relatively simple and affordable data analytics tools such as **Brandwatch** or **NodeXL**.⁴

¹ Tim Receveur interviewed by Hillena Thoms, June 15 2021; Luke Gilder interviewed by Hillena Thoms, June 24 2021

² <https://www.peacetechlab.org/toolbox-lexicons>.

³ <http://govright.org/debating-the-draft-kurdish-constitution/>.

⁴ <https://www.brandwatch.com/>; <https://www.smrfoundation.org/nodexl/>

2. Prioritize outbound strategies

It would be easiest for PAX to use social media both as a strategic communication tool as well as for creating dialogue, forming online communities and amplifying marginalized voices.

- ◆ **The Road to Equal Justice**, a project run by PeaceTech Lab shows how PAX could adopt social media as a strategic communication tool for spreading the word about and recruiting participants for project-based initiatives.⁵
- ◆ If PAX received the necessary technological support from partner organizations, PAX could launch a chatbot similar to **MIDO**, developed by Build Up and Myanmar ICT for Development Organization.⁶ Not only it allows PAX to get in touch with citizens in conflict areas, but also serves as a teaching tool for media literacy and awareness-raising.
- ◆ The **Donbass Dialogue Platform** shows how a form of interactive social media community could support PAX's Ukraine team in providing a participatory, locally-driven response to their reform efforts.⁷ More specifically, it could monitor the needs of IDPs through a dialogue platform and thus derive more practical solutions.

3. Use Twitter and WhatsApp

Tim Receiver from PTL sees social media's biggest potential in accelerating support for peace initiatives, connecting people and sharing messages.

- ◆ As Facebook pages require a lot of staffing, Tim would rather recommend using Instagram or Twitter to create and share online content effectively.
- ◆ PAX could utilize social media for creating group chats (e.g. WhatsApp) to set the stage for in-person meetings or workshops. Thus, the organizers can already discuss sensitive topics and understand the most pressing conflict drivers prior to a workshop.

Conclusion

The research highlights the great potential of social media for PAX's peacebuilding efforts. Social media could allow PAX to gain a better understanding of conflict dynamics, get in touch with previously unknown conflict actors and empower oppressed parts of society. Moreover, it facilitates supervising victims, exchanging perspectives, documenting experiences and even serving as a vehicle for collective coping. In the beginning it would be sensible to collaborate with an already more experienced peacetech organization to receive guidance and resources. The long version of the research with further elaboration on its theory, methods and findings can be accessed through the Middle East Team.

⁵ <https://www.peacetechlab.org/the-road-to-equal-justice>.

⁶ <https://howtobuildup.org/programs/peace-innovators/meet-the-fellows/myanmar-fellows-2018/>

⁷ <https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/resources/>.