

# Social Media and Peacebuilding: Could Mindsets be Positively Affected?

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With over 2.6 billion users worldwide, social media has drastically altered the traditional media landscape. Social media introduced a whole new participatory component, and an unprecedented ability to disseminate information and connect an immense user base. At the same time, social media features that provide this exceptional ability to reach new audiences bring with them detrimental side effects.<sup>1</sup> As with many discoveries and innovations, social media's meteoric development preceded society's ability to fully comprehend, and appropriately manage, the ways in which it impacts on communities.

Both Israel and the Palestinian territories are home to prolific social media use by individuals, organizations, and governments. This article examines the role social media plays in the Israel-Palestinian conflict, and specifically its use by organizations interested in promoting peace.

## Background

Israelis are no stranger to social media, ranking at, or near the top, of many estimates of social media use by country. A recent poll found that 67 percent of Israelis access daily news through the internet, and 38 percent receive their daily news through social media.<sup>2</sup> A different poll found that 65 percent of Palestinians were registered internet users,<sup>3</sup> and that social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are the primary news source for young

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Palestinians.<sup>4</sup> These statistics highlight the pervasiveness of social media platforms in the region.

Use of social media in Israel and the Palestinian territories has not been without controversy. Various social media platforms have been used to disseminate hate speech and incite violence. During the Palestinian terror attacks of October 2015, hashtags such as “Intifada of the Knives” were considered catalysts for violence.<sup>5</sup> In response to episodes of violence attributed to social media, the Knesset passed a law in 2017 that restricts access to specific sites and introduced a bill that allows the courts to order the removal of content posing a danger to individuals or the state. This legislation has been derided by opponents as an attack on free speech.<sup>6</sup> Restrictions on social media users are also imposed in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip by Israel, Fatah, and Hamas.<sup>7</sup>

The Institute for Economics and Peace cites the free flow of information as one of the basic elements for a peaceful society, and maintains that free media are essential for citizens to gain knowledge and play a role in the political process.<sup>8</sup> Access to information has a crucial part in educating society about the world and cultivating an informed opinion on a subject. A corollary is that media also foster divisive rhetoric. If a principal role of media is to reinforce the separation of identities without also having the capacity, or means, to create shared identities, then media become divisive.<sup>9</sup> This brings into focus the paradoxical nature of social media, whereby the creation of shared identity is possible but often obstructed through personal predilections or external factors like platform design. Barriers to healthy social media use can come in the form of over-censorship, homophily, confirmation bias, filter bubbles, and divisive dialogue.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Israeli-Palestinian Context**

A prominent use of social media in Israel and the Palestinian territories in connection with peacebuilding and anti-violence efforts is top-down public diplomacy campaigns. An example of this is the Facebook and Twitter use by IDF Arab Media spokesman Avichay Adraee, and to a smaller extent the “Palestine in Hebrew” Facebook page. With 1.2 million followers on his Facebook page and 191,000 Twitter followers, Adraee appears to be connecting with a substantial amount of people.

How is campaign effectiveness measured? The efficacy of a social media campaign cannot be measured solely by the number of followers, and the numbers themselves cannot be taken entirely at face value.<sup>11</sup> Likes, followers,

and comments can all be purchased online, which makes it difficult to evaluate the true reach of a campaign. Spam in this form is so pervasive that Facebook disabled around 500 million fake accounts in the first quarter of 2018 alone.<sup>12</sup> The second metric of success, which is even more difficult to measure, is the degree to which people are influenced by a campaign. In public diplomacy campaigns, a primary goal is to direct the attention of a foreign or adversarial audience to specific topics while downplaying others through well-selected contents. In this manner, digital public diplomacy is primarily used as an instrument of information dissemination.<sup>13</sup> A brief analysis of Adrae's recent posts on Facebook shows a large degree of interaction through likes and comments, but a strong majority of the comments are confrontational. The same is true of the Palestine in Hebrew page, where comments are used mainly to refute claims or condemn actions. This invites the question, what is the effect of these campaigns? Adrae may be disseminating information to a large audience, but the question is whether the exposure to alternative narratives is enough to promote the moderation of extreme views.

Social media are likewise prominent in various peacebuilding campaigns in Israel, which by definition are bottom-up initiatives. Intuitively, it would seem that more potential for fostering change exists in these efforts, which focus on inclusivity and participation, in addition to information dissemination. One prominent example is the Israel-Loves-Iran Facebook page, which has 118,000 likes and has spawned similar campaigns based on the same model. One of these offshoots, the Palestine Loves Israel Facebook page, has 32,000 likes. Further examples can be seen through civil society NGO pages such as Peace Now, Yesh Din, and B'Tselem. As with the public diplomacy campaigns, using the number of followers or the number of likes as a metric for success only tells part of the story.

Moreover, an examination of recent comments on the pages listed above reveals a predictable distribution. Most of those commenting are supporters, with a smaller percentage of detractors commenting, generally with polarized opinions. In this regard, social media appear to foster the development of like-minded communities, where exposure to different ideologies is minimal and less than productive. This in turn builds on the argument that political discussions in homogenous networks reinforce an individual's existing position.<sup>14</sup> This paints a picture of social media's limited ability to modulate political mindsets. Thus for social movements

and peacebuilding efforts, there is an even greater necessity to connect users at a level beyond solely disseminating information.<sup>15</sup>

These incidental evaluations of social media use in Israel are supported by a quantitative analysis that was conducted on a Facebook page titled “Tweeting Arabs.” Tweeting Arabs was administered by Palestinians with the stated goal of enabling a moderate voice to be heard and encouraging dialogue between Israeli Jews and Palestinians. The researchers found that “exposure to Palestinians’ calls for peace generated predominantly positive reactions from Israeli Jewish commenters and enabled a dialogue characterized by partnership and hope.” More critical dialogue generally led to “defensive and negative Jewish–Israeli responses and to discussions in which both groups blamed one another for the situation.”<sup>16</sup> These findings emphasize the need to focus on the content of the discussion, rather than only the creation of a forum. This quantitative study and the anecdotal research highlight two key barriers within the social media world: the lack of exposure to alternative views, and the propensity for negative interactions when confronted with them.

A prominent psychological theory, the contact hypothesis, states that the root cause of prejudice is the separation of groups, and that interpersonal contact is one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice between group members. In a broad study of Israeli and Palestinian Facebook groups employing some form of the contact hypothesis, the aggregate outcomes were mixed but positive. The results of this study stand in stark comparison to a content analysis done on all Israeli and Palestinian Facebook groups, which revealed a “fragmented and polarised landscape with few spaces devoted to intergroup communication.”<sup>17</sup> This helps to illustrate the need for more spaces devoted to the promotion of healthy dialogue. The study also indicates the potential that ancillary community-building efforts have in supporting a larger peace process. In this realm, perhaps some of the most constructive social media campaigns are shelved in the form of community projects, which can more easily incorporate the criteria proposed for healthy intergroup interactions. These criteria are equal-group status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and institutional support.<sup>18</sup>

### **Regulation and Engagement**

From the previously described studies, it follows that appropriate management of online interactions is necessary to create spaces that encourage healthy group dynamics. This brings into question the idea of

the appropriateness of online moderation, an increasingly salient global topic. The role of regulation on social media is still in formation. In the absence of stringent governmental controls, or in the presence of controls that do little to promote peaceful dialogue, civil society organizations must determine the appropriate scale and scope for moderation of their own campaigns and pages. Moderation of social media can take many forms, from computerized censors removing key words, to live mediators or facilitators working with constituents to solve dilemmas. To avoid having the moderation appear arbitrary or biased, it is essential to have a clear charter detailing acceptable practices and censorship policies. For organizations wishing to employ these methods, the goals, cost, and context need to be taken into consideration when choosing what model to use.<sup>19</sup>

A second major barrier to constructive social media use is a lack of exposure to alternative views. In part, this is built into social media by design. Tech companies run algorithms to ensure, as a marketing strategy, that people see what already interests them.<sup>20</sup> Other design features, like hashtags or geo-locating, function as a triage mechanism for photos and posts. Because these features are inherent in the platform, groups and organizations must actively combat this phenomenon. At the macro level, this is done through increased pressure on social media platforms to implement constructive changes to their policies. This is already beginning to happen. In response to growing criticism, both Facebook and Twitter are implementing changes to their content policies.<sup>21</sup> Twitter recently partnered with a non-profit connected with the MIT Media Lab to develop metrics to measure the conversational health of online interactions. These metrics are defined as shared attention, shared reality, a variety of opinions, and receptivity. Facebook is also modifying the algorithm it uses to control what comes up in a person's news feed, and how content is flagged as fake.<sup>22</sup> Beyond the specific platforms, a more forceful push for comprehensive regulation on all social media platforms has begun. For these efforts to succeed, the health of online communication must remain a priority, and knowledge about healthy interactions must be used to develop regulations.

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Independent developers are also working on applications to combat filter bubbles and conformation bias. One example is the Burst app for the social media website Reddit, which forces users to see a variety of

different pages when they search or browse.<sup>23</sup> Similar applications can be used by organizations to help gradually expose users to alternative views. A second way to combat filter bubbles and confirmation bias is through the improvement of individuals' media usage aptitude. People often never learn proper online search techniques, basic critical thinking skills, and the ways to identify bias in an argument. These skills can be taught through social media education campaigns online and will contribute to more constructive interactions.

Finally, although social media has great potential to increase communication, effecting broader social change requires additional action. A pitfall of social media activism is the phenomenon known as "slacktivism," or the idea that supporters can engage in low cost efforts that devalue social campaigns. In response, researchers suggest a "ladder of engagement" that places involvement with a cause on a continuum of intensity. Involvement starts with the recruitment of new members, and then gives them the ability to build relationships and engage in low level behaviors, for example, "liking" and "sharing." Low level engagement transitions to intermediate level engagement, which can involve participation in signing petitions or emailing representatives. Finally, high level behavior extends beyond the electronic platform and includes volunteering and donations. In social movements, the ability to move supporters incrementally from awareness to action is crucial to furthering a cause.<sup>24</sup>

### The Kenyan Case

Notwithstanding differences in time, context, and circumstances, lessons can be drawn from Kenya's incorporation of social media into domestic peacebuilding efforts following the 2007-2008 post-election violence.

Social media as tools for activism and social change work best by augmenting existing campaigns.

Violence flared up in Kenya in late 2007 as a response to long lasting grievances, ethnic diversity, and most directly, the disputed results of the presidential election. There were mass protests and violence, which left over a thousand dead and created approximately 600,000 internally displaced people.<sup>25</sup> The political solution was a power-sharing agreement brokered by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, but it did little to heal the rift in Kenyan society. In response, the government set up various entities, including the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Kenyan civil society also played a critical role in the process.

During the crisis, social media were often cited as both a catalyst for violence and a tool for peacebuilding. An examination of the events by Reporters Without Borders concluded that the traditional media had failed the Kenyan people by being too timid in their reporting.<sup>26</sup> The strong intertextuality between social media and traditional media was seen through Twitter use, where users frequently re-tweeted news items that advocated peace. In this regard, social media played a significant role in promoting peace and safeguarding against the spread of hate speech.

During the chaos following the 2007 elections, a website called Ushahidi (Testimony) was set up. It was designed to allow people to report instances of violence via email, SMS, or directly through the site. The data was then compiled into a map to inform the public and aid workers about the areas that were affected by violence and destruction. The site was also designed to serve as a record of events to help in the reconciliation process. A statement from Ushahidi read, “When this crisis comes to an end we don’t want what happened to be swept under the rug in the name of ‘moving forward’ – for us to truly move forward, the truth of what happened needs to be told.”<sup>27</sup>

Ushahidi was developed further in advance of the 2013 elections to collect data on a mass scale that could be used for violence prevention. The site compiled Facebook, Twitter, and SMS-delivered web postings. Peaceful messages were also circulated and promoted by several other organizations. The company Crown Paint developed a campaign called the “Uniting Colors of Kenya,” which offered rewards for people sending peaceful messages. In another example, the mobile network company Safaricom donated 50 million free text messages aimed at countering the hate speech that was used to spread violence.<sup>28</sup>

In anticipation of the ensuing 2017 elections, the Sentinel Project and iHub Research created Una Hakika, which means “Are you sure?” – an information service that monitors and checks the spread of rumors.<sup>29</sup> Google also teamed up with several state agencies to try to provide content that promotes truth and understanding and drown out negative content promoting violence, hate, or fear. The Google program used online youth advocates who were drawn from a program called Webrangers Kenya.<sup>30</sup>

It is difficult to isolate the effects that the Kenyan social media campaigns had on the election process, but overall the 2017 elections had a small fraction

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of the violence that afflicted the 2007 elections. The degree to which these social media campaigns placated the violence is unknown, but it appears they had a substantial positive impact.

The campaigns in Kenya thus suggest the impact organizations can have through implemented campaigns. They also substantiate some of the concepts detailed in the UN Development Program guidelines concerning social media's organizational ability, their ability to promote participatory dialogue, the way they can incentivize people to collaborate on change efforts, and how they aid in the establishment of a community.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

According to the Facebook Peace page, 195,435 new friendships formed between people living in Israel and the Palestinian territories on a single day in early May 2018.<sup>32</sup> This suggests substantial potential for peacebuilding efforts through sheer numbers. However, healthy development will not happen on its own. Active, effective, and ethical management of social media platforms is critical for the success of any campaign, especially with polarizing topics like Israeli-Palestinian peace initiatives.

Social media as a tool for activism and social change work best by augmenting existing campaigns.<sup>33</sup> Groups and organizations can effectively utilize social media by developing a comprehensive plan to attract a diverse base of constituents, to engage users, and foster their activity.<sup>34</sup> This means first developing a strategy for crossing standard political lines to appeal to a wide range of people. It can be done through group projects, with incremental goals that benefit an entire community. Second, organizations need to moderate online content and online spaces effectively, using clear guidelines and appropriate controls. This can range from flagging and deleting defamatory posts to facilitating discussions or disagreements among users. Third, specific campaigns must have a plan for a gradual increase in involvement. To truly make a difference, users need to move beyond the trap of "slacktivism" into genuine and committed action. Again, this can be done through community initiatives that begin online but ultimately transition into real-world activities.

Using the strategies presented in this paper, organizations in Israel and in the Palestinian territories can increase the quality and efficacy of interactions taking place through their respective social media pages and across them. Although social media are far from a panacea in conflict



resolution or peacebuilding, their effective use can lead to more cohesion and growth within the two conflicting societies.

## Notes

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