

Critical Reflection

following the 2 September 2013 KOFF roundtable on

The Use of New Technologies: Expanding Opportunities for Peacebuilding?

Helena PUIG LARRAURI, Independent Peacebuilding Consultant

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Technology provides new avenues for participation, enabling people to engage with the world and seek change in new ways. Many areas of public policy and development practice have embraced these opportunities that technology provides. Governments increasingly use web portals and mobile applications to deliver services more efficiently. Applications and online platforms to facilitate voting are becoming commonplace. Games encouraging adoption of healthier behaviors are popular with many people. Crowdfunding for civic and development projects is growing fast.

The peacebuilding field is somewhat behind in this growing trend of technology use. Most uses of technology focus on data processing for conflict early warning. The KOFF roundtable on technology and peacebuilding and this critical reflection note aim to expand thinking about uses of technology for peacebuilding. The roundtable and this critical reflection note are based on a framework that looks at both functions that technology can take in a peacebuilding program and program areas of peacebuilding where technology tools can be put to use. A copy of the presentation delivered at the roundtable, which includes a visual representation of this framework, is available [here](#).

The remainder of this note begins by outlining peacebuilding program areas where technology can be used. It then explores possible functions of technology in peacebuilding programs. Both sides of the framework are illustrated with

examples of technology-enabled initiatives. Some of the examples used are full-fledge projects; others are pilot initiatives. And some are just aspirations: imaginings of how a similar project in a different field could inspire a particular use of technology in a peacebuilding program area. In conclusion, the note draws out some key challenges that practitioners using technology for peacebuilding might face.

Peacebuilding Program Areas

There are many ways to categorize peacebuilding programming. For the purpose of the framework used in this note, four program areas are used.

1. Early Warning & Early Response (EWER)

Early Warning programs aim to collect and analyze information in a fragile or conflict-affected context that can provide an early indicator of changes or deterioration in the situation. Warnings are then shared with early responders, who can intervene to prevent escalation. EWER programs can be run by government organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or civic networks.

[Uwiano \(data processing & EWER\)](#)

The [Uwiano Platform for Peace](#) is an initiative of the Kenyan National Election Commission (NEC)

with the support of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) that began in the run up to the 2010 Constitutional Referendum. It allows citizens to send messages via SMS or via an online form about tensions, irregularities and positive peaceful actions to central platform. Messages are categorized, geo-located and analyzed, and the NEC responds to warnings. After 2010, the platform evolved into a standing early warning system, with peace monitors in every state charged both with sending in information and with responding to rising tensions. The public messaging option is also still in place.

[2. Collaboration](#)

Initiatives fostering collaboration between groups in a conflict setting are often an important component of peacebuilding programs. These initiatives may be simply opportunities for contact between different groups. Such contacts can develop into inter-group networks of connectors that support peace messaging and activities to prevent conflict.

[#18daysinegypt \(communication & collaboration\)](#)

The Egyptian revolution brought together people from many different social, economic and political groups. After the revolution, many felt their story of what happened was being lost. At that time, a joint narrative that included many voices was considered crucial by many to a peaceful transition. [#18daysinegypt](#) is a collaborative media platform that tries to address this need by creating a record of what happened using direct voices from the public.

[3. Attitude change](#)

Attitudes and behaviors towards the “other” in a conflict setting are often critical stumbling blocks for peaceful change. Many peacebuilding programs focus on challenging prevailing attitudes and encourage behavioral change, often by providing opportunities to learn about the other and spaces to build new narratives about inter-group relations.

[Peace.facebook.com \(data processing & attitude\)](#)

Beliefs about the inability of conflicting groups to engage in peaceful relations with one another (by themselves or others) constitutes a common stumbling block to peace. [Peace.facebook.com](#)

challenges these assumptions by publicly posting trends in Facebook friending between groups that are on opposite sides of a conflict divide (Israelis-Palestinians, Turks-Greeks, Jews-Muslims, etc.)

[4. Policy Change](#)

In some contexts, the ultimate goal of peacebuilding programs is to change a public policy, whether directly addressing a conflict (e.g. agreeing to a peace deal) or indirectly contributing to conflict (e.g. peaceful management of a disputed territory). Peacebuilding programs in these contexts often aim to build support for policy change and communicate this to policy makers.

[Peace Factory \(communication & policy change\)](#)

In March 2012, Ronny Edry (an Israeli designer) posted a picture of himself and his daughter with a sign saying “Israel loves Iran” on his Facebook wall, along with a simple message explaining that he believed most Israelis and Iranians did not want a war between their countries. The post was very popular, and quickly copied by other Israelis and Iranians. Ronny eventually printed a selection of these posters and bought advertising space on the sides of buses in Tel Aviv to display them. The initiative has now grown to a [full online community](#) establishing bridges between people in the Middle East and making peace viral.

[Functions of Technology](#)

The functions of technology used in this note are not comprehensive. They are chosen to reflect the needs of peacebuilding practitioners in the four broad program areas described above.

[1. Data Processing](#)

Technology tools make it increasingly easy for non-experts to aggregate, analyze and visualize data. The availability of free and intuitive tools that help people engage directly with data and use it to tell their stories and enter in a dialogue with others is perhaps the most important contribution of technology to data processing.

Technology also makes it possible for people to collect data more easily and from different sources than were previously available.

Crowdsourcing techniques and tools allow organizations to quickly request information from the public (the “crowd”). So-called “big data” tools make it possible to mine existing “data exhaust” (data produced by users for another purpose, such as tweets or google search terms) for interesting insights.

[Iraq Monitor \(data processing & collaboration\)](#)

[Mercy Corps Iraq works with a network of Iraqi mediators](#) who resolve local disputes. The network has kept a detailed record of their intervention in disputes for years. Digitizing these records and teaching network members basic data entry, category analysis and mapping skills has enabled the network to make use of this information. The aggregated information has provided network members with a deeper understanding of the causes of conflict and a better way to share insights and adapt their methods based on experience.

[2. Communications](#)

New technologies make it easier for people to produce their own media using blogs or wikis, becoming citizen journalists or being active on social media. This means more voices on any topic (including conflict and its causes) are available to the public. It also means that more people are able to challenge prevailing narratives on a conflict and offer alternative perspectives on identity that can help build peace.

[Shoot Your Identity \(communications & attitude\)](#)

Search for Common Ground capitalized on the wide availability of cameras among Lebanese youth to organize a competition around notions of identity. They asked young people to [shoot a short video describing what it means to them to be Lebanese](#), and upload it onto YouTube. The YouTube channel was promoted as an avenue for alternative voices and a prize given to the best video.

[3. Games](#)

Games for peace are still relatively rare, but their use in other areas of social change can inspire peacebuilding practitioners. Researchers on learning games explain that games don't structure facts, they structure experience and identity. Thus, games are already widely used to

change attitudes and teach values in areas such as health and education.

Some organizations have even turned to games to encourage certain actions. For example, research organizations have found that they can persuade the public to perform ‘microtasks’ online that contribute to their research by making them look like a small game (see for example [FoldIt](#)). Others build games around civic actions in the real world, giving players game-like rewards and incentives to perform civic duties.

[Somalia mapping \(games & EWER\)](#)

This example does not pertain to peacebuilding, but points to possible applications. During the 2011 Somalia drought, UNHCR needed to quickly identify places where displaced Somalis had moved to. Rather than sending out field teams to a wide area, the agency wanted to first look through satellite imagery to identify areas for field team investigation. This involved analyzing a vast amount of imagery and looking for temporary shelters. The Standby Task Force (an online volunteer community) and Tomnod (a technology company) partnered to devise [a game that would allow volunteers to tag imagery](#). In just 5 days volunteers tagged over 250,000 temporary shelters in nearly 4,000 images. This type of gamified microtasking may have similar applications where rapid assessments are necessary for early warning and response.

[4. Engagement](#)

Technology tools and platforms for engagement are common-place in e-governance programs, but less so in peacebuilding. Engagement online can focus around providing feedback on a policy or issue (e-petitions, forums) or building community around an issue (social networking sites, project collaboration sites). Increasingly, many engagement platforms also provide ways for the public to engage financially with a proposal for social change via crowdfunding.

[Soliya \(collaboration & attitudes\)](#)

[Soliya](#) is a non-profit founded on a vision that meaningful contact between young people in different cultures can have a profound transformative effect. Soliya's flagship Connect program is an online cross-cultural education program. Connect has brought together students

from 100 universities in 27 countries since 2003. Participants join a group of about 10 students and 2 facilitators, meeting online for two hours over ten weeks. The group talks about every day life and culture, but also about controversial social and political issues.

From among the brightest participants in the Connect Program, Soliya selects a few for a fellowship program. Soliya Fellows are tasked with creating “civil media” that amplify positive messages in their community. They also work with civil society organizations to identify specific issues of popular concern and organize “public squares” – online dialogues that address these issues constructively.

Key Challenges

The risk of initiating any peacebuilding intervention is that it may have unintended consequences that exacerbate conflict dynamics rather than building peace. Any tech-enabled intervention should follow best practices applied to peacebuilding program design in general. There are also a few challenges specific to the introduction of technology that practitioners should bare in mind.

1. The Bias of Connectivity

Technology tools are often seen as a means for reaching out to more people, but not everyone has access to all types of technology. In many countries, those with access to technology are younger, more urban and better off economically. In such contexts, technology will be useful to peacebuilding if the key people that an intervention wants to reach are also the people who can access technology. The key to managing the bias of connectivity is to understand the information and technology eco-system of a context and keep it in mind during the design phase.

2. Designing for Empowerment

Some uses of technology can render participation meaningless to those most affected by conflict.

Sending in information but receiving no feedback, clicking a “like” button but not fundamentally changing one’s attitude, discussing an issue online but taking no action offline – these are all examples of thin engagement. Thin engagement is disempowering and unlikely to result in long-lasting impact on a conflict context. But tech-enabled projects, if well designed, can also provide new avenues for empowerment. The key is to ensure that the tools and processes are well-understood by users.

3. Ethics, security and privacy

The principles of Do No Harm apply to tech-enabled peacebuilding projects just as they do to any project operating in a conflict context. There are however particular risks associated with technology use that need to be included in a DNH assessment. Most notably, exchange of information over the internet and mobile phones are easy to track, raising concerns about the ethics, security and privacy of communicating on sensitive conflict issues. Often, peacebuilding actors involved in peacebuilding are unaware of how vulnerable communicating using technology makes them. It is critical to educate people on this so they can make informed choices about risk-taking.

In Conclusion

John Paul Lederach wrote that to build peace we should: “Reach out to those you fear. Touch the heart of complexity. Imagine beyond what is seen. Risk vulnerability one step at a time.” The functions that technology can have in peacebuilding programs as outlined here map onto the theory of change he outlines in this quote. New communication tools help us reach out to those we fear. Data processing technologies allow us to touch the heart of complexity. With games we imagine beyond what is seen. And technology-enabled engagement allows us to risk vulnerability one step at a time.

swisspeace

swisspeace is a practice-oriented peace research institute. It carries out research on violent conflicts and their peaceful transformation. The Foundation aims to build up Swiss and international organizations' civilian peacebuilding capacities by providing trainings, space for networking and exchange of experiences. It also shapes political and academic discourses on peace policy issues at the national and international level through publications, workshops and conferences. swisspeace therefore promotes knowledge transfer between researchers and practitioners. swisspeace was founded in 1988 as the Swiss Peace Foundation in order to promote independent peace research in Switzerland. Today the Foundation employs more than 40 staff members. Its most important donors are the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the Swiss National Science Foundation and the United Nations.

Center for Peacebuilding (KOFF)

The Center for Peacebuilding (KOFF) of the Swiss Peace Foundation swisspeace was founded in 2001 and is funded by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) and 45 Swiss non-governmental organizations. The center's objective is to strengthen Swiss actors' capacities in civilian peacebuilding by providing information, training and consultancy services. KOFF acts as a networking platform fostering policy dialogue and processes of common learning through roundtables and workshops.

Critical reflections

In its *critical reflection* publications, swisspeace and its guest speakers critically reflect on topics addressed at roundtables. They both make a note of the arguments put forward during the roundtables and carry on the discussion in order to encourage further debates.