

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Social Media and Peace Mediation

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Illustration of Social Media Data, 2017. Creative Commons

Introduction

New technologies increasingly shape the environment of peace mediation, as conflict parties and mediators resort to technology for different purposes. This trend is likely to continue and yet, mediation practitioners are ill prepared and do not fully understand the impact of new technologies on peace mediation. To address this gap, in March 2018, the UN Department of Political Affairs (UNDPA), together with three Switzerland-based organizations – swisspeace, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) and DiploFoundation – initiated the [#CyberMediation Initiative](#). The Initiative dovetails with UN efforts to better understand and leverage new technologies in global governance and collective security in the context of the Secretary-General’s [Strategy on New Technologies](#).

As part of the Initiative, swisspeace focused on the topic of social media, exploring how the increasing social media penetration influences peace mediation and how, in turn, parties and mediators use social media tools. In this Policy Brief, we present key insights from this work. We draw on the [launch](#) of the #CyberMediation Initiative in March 2018, a 1-day workshop with 20 experts organized by swisspeace in July 2018, a panel discussion at the Geneva Peace Week in November 2018 as well as many informal discussions with representatives of UN mediation teams, [#CyberMediation](#) partners and other practitioners.

In this Policy Brief, we understand ‘social media’ to comprise social networking websites (e.g. Twitter and Facebook, but also ad hoc websites promoting social interactions) as well as instant messaging and voice applications (e.g. WhatsApp

or Viber). Concerning peace mediation, we focus on so-called ‘Track 1’ processes: negotiations between official representatives of conflict parties facilitated by third parties, usually international actors.

As a general approach, we acknowledge that social media represents a new reality that offers opportunities, but also poses challenges to peace mediators. We identified eight themes related to the increasing social media use in mediation processes, first outlining opportunities followed by challenges.

Preparedness & analysis

The [UN Guidance](#) highlights preparedness as a fundamental of effective mediation. For any given conflict setting, peace mediators need to know who the main stakeholders are, what narratives they are pushing, what dynamics are unfolding on

the ground, where violence is escalating, etc. Social media offers interesting opportunities in this regard, because of the breadth of information it makes available and because it allows peace mediators to broaden their sources of information, rather than relying

on the conflict parties. This is especially valuable for hard-to-reach, besieged or otherwise inaccessible areas. Information on social media, including reports from ‘citizen journalists’ who bypass restrictions on conventional journalism, provide peace mediators with a real-time picture of the developing situation and narratives on the ground.

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Relying on social media for conflict analysis also poses challenges for peace mediators. Information available on social media is difficult to authenticate and conflict parties can manipulate it. As Sanjana Hattotuwa from ICT4Peace [explained](#) during the July 2018 workshop, the sheer mass of information means that turning it into “actionable intelligence” for peace mediators is a challenging task that requires expertise and resources within a mediation team. What is more, Internet penetration and literacy rate of a specific region affects the accuracy of the collected data.

Public communication & narratives

Social media is a powerful public information tool for peace mediators. It enables faster, wider and more targeted communication, allowing mediators to explain why peace is needed, what their mandate is, and where the process stands. As highlighted by the UN Secretary General’s Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Nickolay Mladenov, at a DiploFoundation [event](#) in July 2018, social media also allows peace mediators to communicate via pictures, building a story about the process that is understandable for broad audiences.

However, peace mediators need to exercise caution when communicating via social media, because they can face attacks and be drawn into ‘information wars’. Indeed, social media is where the battle for narratives in a conflict takes place, with opposing sides vying to get their views trending on Twitter. #Rohingya, #Syria and #ColombiaDecide are examples of hashtags having experienced fierce competition at different junctures of the conflict. Social media may thus create echo chambers, foster extreme views and polarize communities. Moreover, in many cases, social media has become a tool of warfare, actively undermining peacemaking. Many armed groups rely on instant mass-messaging platforms, and social media has been used as a platform to promote hate speech. The Islamic State of Iraq and Levant’s use of social media to incite violence and fear, disseminate propaganda, and recruit fighters presented a stark example showing the destructive potential of social media.

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Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a key feature in mediation processes, allowing peace mediators to establish a protected space where parties are able to exchange views freely and in confidence. The spread of social media offers opportunities insofar as it obliges peace mediators to make ground rules related to communication explicit. When parties commit to a confidential negotiation setting, it emphasizes the seriousness of their effort. For example, Matthias Lüfkens, founder of [twiplomacy](#), mentioned at the Geneva Peace Week event in November 2018 that during the final stage of the Iran talks, the negotiators agreed to refrain from communicating via social media. They notably left it to the EU High Representative Federica Mogherini to announce on Twitter the successful conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in July 2015.

However, social media primarily poses challenges, as it has become much more difficult for peace mediators to control the information environment and ensure the confidentiality of peace talks. Information leaks have become common in peace negotiations, causing distraction, undermining trust, and undercutting political compromises between the political parties. For example, the Minsk talks dealing with the conflict in and around Ukraine have been affected by leaks, contributing to a negative atmosphere in the negotiations. The increasing use of social media also challenges the privacy of peace mediators, as leakages of private conversations with parties are more likely. There is also a risk that third parties intercept and monitor a peace mediator’s sensitive communications on social media channels.

Outreach and inclusivity

Social media platforms offer exciting opportunities to promote the inclusivity of a peace mediation process. Mediators can use social media to reach out to broad circles of society in order to explain what they are doing, what their mandate is, what limitations the process faces, where the talks stand and where they are heading. At the same time, it allows them to solicit inputs from a large number of people in terms of what issues they care most about, what their aspirations are, how they view the process etc. In short, social media is a useful tool for mediators to broaden a process, hearing the views of a broad range of stakeholders, without necessarily enlarging the negotiation table as such.

For example, during the consultative phase of Libyan National Conference Process, HD developed an interactive [website](#), informing Libyans about meetings and allowing them to share their views. Likewise, the Office of the UN Special Envoy for Syria has explored a concept for a similar website as part of the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR). In the Havana talks between the Colombian government and the FARC, the negotiators initiated an online consultation via a dedicated website and app. This generated thousands of written inputs from Colombian citizens about different aspects of the negotiation agendas.

On the other side, social media may also create challenges for inclusivity. In Colombia, the negotiators struggled to deal with the mass of information generated, which meant that the potential of online consultations was underused. This points to the need to structure virtual consultations, collating information generated through social media, analyzing it and systematically feeding it back into the talks.

During the July 2018 workshop, Andreas Hirblinger from the Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative, highlighted another challenge of using social media to promote inclusivity in mediation processes: the use of technology creates new hierarchies, amplifying the voices of those who are able to access and operate it, to the detriment of those who do not. Peace mediators need to be aware of such dynamics and work to reduce the technology bias by engaging with groups whose access to social media is limited.

Cyber negotiations

Instant messaging services facilitate the communication between mediators and parties. They offer logistical advantages by making it easier to coordinate schedules and set up meetings. Moreover, social media makes it easier for peace mediators to convey messages, establish rapport with the parties and solicit their reaction to proposals at an arm's length without the risk that physical meetings may pose. Several peace mediators consulted during the #CyberMediation Initiative reported about agreements negotiated via social media, with draft texts going back and forth between the parties and the mediators. The UN also uses instant messaging in humanitarian access negotiations, for example in Syria and Gaza. This illustrates that social media can significantly reduce transaction costs in complex negotiation settings.

However, negotiations via WhatsApp or Viber also have problematic consequences. Texts negotiated via instant messaging services can be leaked or intercepted. These technologies

also require personalizing communication, counteracting institutionalization of a mediation process. When negotiations take place in the cyber space, it is challenging to make sure all members of the mediation team as well as capitals or headquarters are informed about the content of the negotiations. When senior mediators or key advisers leave a process, information and contacts may get lost. Institutional memory faces problems, as it is difficult to archive conversations or draft texts from social media sources.

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Cyber dialogue

Social media platforms offer new – and sometimes alternative – spaces for dialogue, either moderated or unmoderated. They allow people to listen and speak to each other in the cyber space who are not able to meet physically. This especially has potential in areas where personal meetings are logistically, legally and politically impossible. This can help to maintain channels of communication, counteract de-humanization and thus support a mediation process. One example is the [Donbass Dialogue](#), where Ukrainians from both sides of the Line of Contact talk to each other about how conflict affects their lives. [Chatham House](#) highlighted the role of Twitter in ensuring communication between US and Iranian officials in the absence of formal diplomatic channels, thus helping pave the way for the negotiations that led to the nuclear deal in 2015.

Dialogues in the cyber space do not offer the same quality of personal interaction as physical meetings. There is more distance between parties, as it is more difficult for them to read their body language, develop rapport and ultimately trust. In peace mediation, physical meetings also have symbolic significance and when negotiating agreements, they offer many practical advantages.

Security

The increasing use of social media in peace mediation clearly has security implications. The upcoming HD Mediation Practice Series publication on peacemaking and new technologies covers these well. Social media offer some opportunities in terms of security insofar as they make it easier to relay infor-

mation about security threats. Peace mediators traveling to the field have a means of communication at their disposal to coordinate with contacts and to alert colleagues when they are in trouble.

However, the challenges prevail, as the use of social media causes a number of security risks for peace mediators. One risk is that communication between the mediator and the parties or within a mediation team is intercepted. This constitutes a breach of confidentiality and puts those possessing intercepted information at an advantage in the negotiations. It also exposes interlocutors for sharing sensitive information and may create security risks for them. Another risk is that the use of social media may reveal the location of meetings between peace mediators and representatives of conflict parties. This can be problematic, especially in situations of ongoing armed conflict. It gives rise to a duty of care, which peace mediators have when they communicate via social media with interlocutors on the ground. This is especially so when interlocutors are civilians and when they are not aware of the risks that online communication may entail.

Mediation team dynamics

The growing importance of social media affects the dynamics of mediation teams. One opportunity of the growing recognition that social media is critical for understanding a conflict setting, conducting outreach, and communicating with the parties is that senior mediators will seek to include specialized expertise in their teams. Dedicated social media experts in mediation teams increase the tech savviness and communication competencies of the mediation efforts. They make it more likely that the opportunities highlighted in this Policy Brief are harnessed and the challenges addressed. Demand for social media expertise may also create opportunities for younger mediators.

Some mediation experts consulted during the #CyberMediation Initiative pointed to the danger that social media can cause generational rifts in mediation teams. Younger team members may advocate for a proactive approach, making social media a key component of the envoy's conflict analysis

and communications strategy. Others may primarily see the risks related to the use of social media in peace mediation, thus causing discord.

Conclusion

The spread of social media has an increasing impact on peace mediation. It complicates mediators' efforts to provide a confidential negotiation space. It also provides opportunities for public communication and consultations, allowing peace mediators to engage with audiences that were previously out of reach. It also changes the way conflict parties act, the narratives they advance and in some cases the way they fight wars. It is important for mediators to be aware of these dynamics and

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to prepare accordingly. Despite the changes, social media are unlikely to revolutionize peace mediation. Present and future, just like in the past, it essentially remains a human-driven activity. Peace mediators engage with parties, building trust between them and helping them reach mutually acceptable agreements in situations when developments in the military and political context allow for it.

Against this, we have the following recommendations:

- Peace mediators should **take social media seriously** and make sure social media expertise is available to them. To increase preparedness, they should understand the role of social media in the conflict, know which platforms are favored, understand the use of new technologies in the country concerned, and understand the challenges and opportunities for the process they are leading. Mediation-support units and communication experts at headquarters can help in this endeavor.
- Peace mediators should **incorporate social media in their communication strategy**, deciding what information to share, whether or not the senior mediator is present on social media and at what moment online communication is most appropriate.

- Peace mediators should make use of **social media as part of their efforts to broaden participation and promote inclusivity**. When setting up online consultations in peace talks, mediators and negotiators need to create capacities to collate and analyze information and feed it back into the talks.
- Mediation-support units should explore setting up reflection spaces **allowing senior mediators and tech experts to jointly think through risks and opportunities** associated with the use of social media, including questions of confidentiality, archiving and duty of care. Trainings on specific challenges, for example using social media for conflict analysis, dealing with Twitter wars or data protection, are also promising.
- Peace mediation practitioners should be open to **learn from other fields, which are more advanced in their thinking about adverse effects and opportunities of social media**. This concerns the humanitarian field, for example the work of the ICRC on [data protection](#). It pertains to the peacebuilding field, where innovative ideas have come from organizations, such as [ICT4Peace](#) and [Build Up](#).

About

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors only.

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