IN DEPTH

Social networks: fuel to conflict and tool for transformation

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In 1966, Foucault alerted us to the difficulty of perceiving the structures of power that condition the narratives through which we construct reality[1]. Today, social networks are a critical element of the "hidden network" through which we construct our reality –and if we are to understand conflict, we must see both how they fuel polarization and what we can do to use them for transformation. Every year, the number of hours people spend engaging with content on social networks grows –as does its relevance, with a growing percentage in many countries getting most of their news and political opinions via social network posts and sharing. At Build Up, the organization I direct, we have been on a journey over the past two years to understand polarization in social networks and experiment with using them for conflict transformation at scale.

Social networks shape the conflict context

When we first started engaging in the use of technologies for conflict transformation, we approached technology as "just a tool" that could be used for good or evil. When it came to social networks, we knew they were being very effectively used for recruitment to armed groups, notably by ISIS, for example to find Muslim women in Spain willing to marry ISIS combatants. But we also knew of creative, powerful peace messaging campaigns with mass appeal such as the work of the Peace Factory in Israel and Palestine. Social networks are just a tool, and what matters is how we as peacebuilders chose to use them.

Over the past two or three years, the negative impact of social networks on conflict seems to have vastly overwhelmed any positive influence they might have on connecting people. Social networks have been conduits to amplify hatred against marginalized groups across the world, from Myanmar, to Lebanon, to the USA. With posts reporting fake news often garnering the highest levels of engagement, and algorithms set to maximise engagement, misinformation spreads fast on many networks. This algorithmic emphasis on engagement is also partly the reason why political discussions on social networks are notoriously angry –even after some social networks, like Facebook, altered their algorithms.

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We began to observe that whatever peacebuilders do to promote narratives and initiatives that bridge divides on social networks simply does not have the same impact as the work of actors promoting division, polarization and violence on the same networks. So we set about understanding this new conflict context: exactly how do social networks proliferate polarization and division? There is a growing body of academic research that examines these dynamics, often using small-scale experiments that can be difficult to translate into recommendations for practitioners. Through a combination of secondary research and our own reflection and analysis, we’ve honed in on three inter-dependent mechanisms that are key to understanding how social networks are fundamentally altering the human experience in ways that increase propensity to conflict: by changing the incentives we have to engage with some content / people and not others, by affecting how we construct discourse, and by altering how we build our identities.

Leaning in to conflict on social networks

With this review of the evidence came a realization: as peacebuilders, we had to take what we knew about offline interventions to bridge divides and find ways to meet people where they are at. We might wish that social networks cease to command the attention of billions of people for billions of hours per day, but that's unlikely to happen any time soon. At Build Up, we're leaning in to the challenge of social networks by trying to counter-act the ways in which technology is tooling us.

Our flagship program is The Commons[2], an initiative that identifies people engaged in political conversations on Twitter and Facebook, analyses what kinds of behaviors may denote a person is exposed to polarizing narratives or dynamics, and targets people with these characteristics with automated messages that invite them into a conversation about bridging divides. If they respond, one of our trained dialogue facilitators has a conversation with them on the platform (Twitter and Facebook), and eventually invites them to a group video call for a mediated conversation with people who have other opinions.

“ People want to be heard about the experience of not being heard by the other side –this is the key to generating empathy, avoiding parallel narratives, and starting to build a bridge of understanding ”

People need to understand what is happening to them and their community

The core assumption that underlies the methodology of The Commons is that polarization is happening to us. This initiative works with people who are caught in a polarizing dynamic on social networks that they are either unaware of or wish they were not a part of. It is not about (directly) combating hatespeech, countering violent extremism, or preventing the spread of misinformation[3]

Our main objective at The Commons is to make people aware of polarization, and to use that awareness as a lever to influence their behavior offline. We believe that awareness of polarization is key to the construction of discourse online (and offline), and to the formation of our identities. We are leaning on a growing body of research in social psychology to understand what kind of messages and conversations will foster an awareness of polarization. In a nutshell, we think that what works is to be multi-partial, focus on hearing personal experiences, and generally "complicate the narrative". We also track every single automated message we send out and every conversation our facilitators have, which gives us the ability to monitor response rates and (to a certain extent) measure impact over time. This means we are constantly learning and iterating on our use of language, targeting metrics, and approaches to dialogue. The main thing we have learned to date is that what people most want is to be heard about the experience of not being heard by the other side – this is the key to generating empathy, avoiding parallel narratives, and starting to build a bridge of understanding.

" It is imperative that peacebuilders intervene in social networks to counteract polarizing dynamics "

We need to build more commons

From the experience of The Commons so far, I am convinced that it is imperative that peacebuilders intervene in social networks to counteract polarizing dynamics. We opened the report on The Commons pilot with a wonderful poem by Khaled Mattawa that reads in part: "The rule is everyone is a gypsy now / Everyone is searching for his tribe." Too many of our current social conflicts –including in Catalunya and Spain– are being fueled in part by interactions on social networks.

Build Up has done some exploratory work on polarization in social networks in the UK and Lebanon. We are tentatively finding that the core principles of The Commons approach are valid across contexts. There is certainly more to be done to explore other

social networks, especially WhatsApp, which may have different polarizing dynamics. Still, we believe the methodology we have developed could be adapted and replicated in other situations where social networks are fueling conflict to turn the potential they offer in reach, scale and influence towards conflict transformation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Helena Puig is co-founder and co-director of Build Up, a social enterprise dedicated to support the emergence of alternative infrastructures for civic engagement and peacebuilding. She has a vast experience in peacebuilding, focusing on technology-enabled programs to promote peace. She has worked on projects in Sudan, South Sudan, Libya, Cyprus, Zimbabwe, Nepal, Somalia and Iraq.

1. Foucault wrote: “Order is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language” (*The Order of Things*, 1966).

2. We are currently running an initiative at a much larger scale, and aim to share results and the iterated methodology by the end of 2019.

3. There are excellent initiatives addressing these other three important aspects of conflict on social networks, such as the PeaceTech Lab’s work on combating online hatespeech, moonshot CVE’s Redirect Method, and MIDO’s work to tackle misinformation and fake news in Myanmar.

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