

Making peace online: A vision or an illusion?

This is a unique, youth-led research initiative supported by the Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research.



Dmitry Epstein,
dmitry.epstein@h-network.org



Farah Mahmood
farah.mahmood@h-network.org



Lisa Thurston
lisa.thurston@h-network.org
'The Human Network'

'Where there is a will...'

A quote addressed to American president Harry Truman states: "It is understanding that gives us ability to have peace. When we understand the other fellow's viewpoint and he understands ours, than we can sit down and work our differences." But what happens when significant portions of population are excluded from the communication process? What is the true role of grassroots communication and how it can contribute to sustainable peace? How does it fit what is labeled as 'information revolution'?

The Human Network PEACE and ICT Research Project is a unique, youth-led research initiative supported by the Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research. Led by 13 young researchers based in 10 different locations all over the globe, it explores the potential of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in peace-building processes. Particularly, it examines the role of the digital divide and policies and practices aimed to bridge it, as potential constraints to, or elements of, a constructive grassroots dialogue in conflict situations.

New ICTs in peace discourse

The 'PEACE and ICT' research acknowledges that young people represent the major percentage of victims in conflict conditions and are also placed at the forefront of today's information revolution. Hence, the conceptual framework of the research is based on two main theoretical foundations. The first is derived from the research done on the role of communication in peace building processes. It emphasises the role of new communication possibilities provided by modern ICTs. The second foundation is the study of the digital divide phenomenon with a particular focus on youth.

Peace scholarship has a record of intensive debate and analysis of definitions of peace and conflict. Building on a complex and holistic view of peace and conflict resolution as a cultural journey, based on inclusion and effective dialogue, this research enquires into the advantages and disadvantages of new communication technologies as tools for nurturing appropriate conditions for sustainable peace.

Due to its global reach and relative lack of control, the Internet is used extensively as a propaganda tool and for the coordination of activities by radical groups. As such, the Internet and other new ICTs can sometimes be viewed as vehicles for extending conflict, hatred and even war. New communication technologies offer much greater potential for promoting tolerance and peace if they are developed, implemented and utilized according to appropriate ethics and values. A key factor in bringing about an environment conducive to a just peace, according to Rees (2003) is that there is inclusiveness in practically every aspect of life. By contrast, exclusion will likely lead to a breakdown in the process towards peace, because it lacks justice and the perception of fairness. In this research, we focus on an aspect of our life that continues to exclude a bulk of international society: ICTs.

Conflict of exclusion

In an age when new technologies appear to be immensely helpful in a range of areas, this does not apply to everyone. In fact, it does not apply to the majority of the world's population. Distribution of accessibility to the Internet within the nation is also an issue, with obvious disparities between the cultural and racial groupings. Traditionally being addressed as lack of access, the digital divide has broader implications. Inherent in the concept of ICTs being 'inaccessible' is that

even when modern devices and advanced technical infrastructure are present in a given location, misunderstanding, lack of knowledge, lack of expertise, and lack of tuition render these ICTs 'effectively inaccessible'. This applies to a wide range of people in any given community, but particularly in developing, and lower socio-economic demographic sections. One can clearly outline a correlation between the social development of a region or a country and its ability to adopt and effectively utilise communication technology. This leads us to question how these gaps can be better understood and how we might bridge them to provide an environment conducive to peace with justice.

The youth perspective

On average youth are more IT-literate and are more open to adopt new technological innovations. The gap between youths and adults is wider in developing countries compared to developed or countries in transition. Feeling disenfranchised from socio-political processes and lacking a depth of political experience, young people tend to associate with grassroots activities and NGOs. In this aspect the new communication technologies play a significant role allowing enhanced participation. In Israel, for example, high-school students organized a nation-wide strike at the beginning of 2005 in protest of planned reforms in the education system. The activity was organised using SMS and the Internet, thus emphasizing once again the features of ICTs, which allow grassroots activism. In turn, this grassroots nature of activism leads towards the emergence of new patterns of leadership based on personal qualities and level of personal contribution, rather than on external social factors, although these cannot be neglected from the discussion.



Shifting from the more general civil activism of youth via new ICTs to peace-building processes we find further support for the patterns of leadership mentioned above in our preliminary findings. In a series of discussion groups conducted in Peshawar, Pakistan, university students showed an awareness and concern regarding the digital divide, after the issues were explained. However, the idea of utilizing ICTs to create a dialogue towards peace remained an alien concept to the discussion participants. This observation hints there is a lack of realisation of the full potential of ICTs; beyond being a cheaper communication and knowledge source.

The idea of ICT for peace being an alien concept seems to cross cultures. The Israeli case shows that the policy makers tend to hold

a double standard towards digital divide. They agree on the importance of the issue and need for an adequate action to bridge the divide, but on a practical level the process is viewed solely as an economic capacity building track. This neglects the social and developmental aspects of digital inclusion and sustains quite a 'naive' idea of ICT's potential for peace processes. Interestingly enough, the civil society organisations, which focus on peace, are utilizing information technology to initiate a first-hand interaction between the conflict parties. Most of these projects are youth-focused or youth-led. However, NGOs focused on bridging the digital divide, remain in a narrow instrumentalist view of technology, not identifying the broader repercussions of technology use.

The picture emerging at this stage is of digital divide being a highly debatable matter. As an issue, it is being heavily politicised without regard to the multi-faceted nature of the challenge. Moreover, it is a phenomenon addressed mainly by civil society organisations. The latter present a unique and innovative approach to possibilities offered by the new medium. In the context of peace and dialogue, NGOs present a hands-on agenda of using the platform for grassroots activities. This potential is not reflected in official policies on social welfare and inclusion. The peace-building potential of digital inclusion in particular is usually neglected.

A note on process

During the course of our research, the research team has been able to bring the concept of 'digital inclusion for peace' into the lime light, not only raising awareness but also motivating youth to think about the critical question of 'how?' A wide range of ideas both from young people as well as policy experts point towards "ICT for dialogue", an idea, which is already practiced through personal blogs, websites, and online groups where the discussions get no official recognition. The PEACE and ICT research is an effort towards promoting these still small but significant processes towards building peace.

Research into online human interaction is subject to scrutiny due to its highly subjective and non-quantifiable nature, yet it provides invaluable benefits to communication – both in its efficiency and productivity. Given this 'prima facie' evidence of the potential of Internet-mediated communication, further study of online communication for peace building is required.

Looking ahead

During the research, the PEACE and ICT team has grown, including new researchers of diverse academic background. The team is looking forward to join the next phase of Toda Institute's grants focusing on global governance, human development and regional conflicts. Since the preliminary findings hint at relationships between issues as poverty and peace as in Nigerian findings, the next phase combines themes of culture, environment, gender and social equality, sustainable development, and technology diffusion with views and perceptions of the younger generation. Viewing new ICTs as an essential communication platform for current era, the project will enquire into the broader role of ICT in developmental processes such as education, industry, social services while seeking to identify the applications of ICT to inter-regional conflict resolution. ■

The complete article with references can be read at www.i4d.csdms.in