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RESEARCH ARTICLE

WAY FORWARD: USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO BUILD PEACE AND INCLUSIVITY AND TO COUNTER HATE SPEECH

* **Jatutu Pambi Yusuf**

PhD Student, College of Business, Peace, Leadership and Governance, Africa University,
P.O Box 1320, Mutare, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that social media can be used as a tool for peace building and inclusivity. It also picks out major actions to assist social media companies/technical skills. The study went on to suggest critical actions that donors, social media companies and policy makers can employ to counter hate speech using social media and to incorporate inclusivity. Since peace building is an eclectic process demanding a holistic approach, it is prudent that it encompass major priorities when responding to particular needs and dynamics in context such as social media. Social media companies just like any other actors must own the peace building and inclusivity process.

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INTRODUCTION

Peace building is an eclectic process with so many approaches. While many scholars, Stella, Ferrara, & De Domenico, (2018). define these approaches differently, there is an agreement that peace building has both social, securities, legal, political and economic aspects which demands critical scrutiny. Differentiating it from the normal process of development, peace building is currently known to be a social concern encompassing the involvement of various social media companies to reduce the escalation of violence, conflict and hate speeches. Social media is in a state of massive growth. Media tensions are going high by the day. The social media companies as the reigning platforms are to be blame for the increase in conflict and hate speech in the new edge. However, the assumption of this paper is that social media can be used for peace building and inclusivity and also to counter hate speech. Donors and policy makers should as well pay attention to counterproductive regulations, access to data and analysis, design and risk considerations to assist social media towards the path of sustainable peace building and inclusivity.

While peace building is an eclectic process demanding holistic and or all round approaches, it needs to encompass major priorities when responding to particular needs in context such as social media. Considering the media situations in the world today, social media peace building and inclusivity should be verse; it should not be limited to a conventional way of development but must be informed by the current social media conflicts and hate speeches emanating from platforms such as Facebook, twitter, whatsapp and instagram.

Interrogating the dynamic landscape of social media: While significant time has been dedicated to understanding social media as a threat, how it can be helpful in harnessing peace is a question of increasing interest to scholars, donors, policy makers, and peace building practitioners alike. Anecdotal evidence from peace building organizations highlights the impact of the virus and the responses to it on conflict contexts and methods of peace building. UN, (2020) social distancing is impacting on traditional approaches such as person-person dialogue. In the absence of face-to-face interactions, people, where possible, are gravitating towards social media and online platforms as a means to connect. There is emerging evidence of rumors on social media relating to COVID-19 that are eroding trust in government and fueling divisions in a number of contexts. The onset of what the United Nations (UN) has described as an 'infodemic'³of

***Corresponding author:** *Jatutu Pambi Yusuf*,
PhD Student, College of Business, Peace, Leadership and
Governance, Africa University, P.O Box 1320, Mutare, Zimbabwe.

misinformation has once again thrust social media into the spotlight. Existing literature explores social media's role as an 'actor' in the conflict and peace building environment. Well-documented uses of disinformation campaigns, including targeted adverts and messages to deliberately seed mistrust and division or propagation of hate speech, have been linked with conflict dynamics (Mercy Corps, 2019; IA, 2020). Globally, budgets for social media campaigns have increased for politicians and political campaigns; at the same time, governments are increasingly using social media for monitoring and surveillance, raising concerns over user privacy and creeping authoritarianism (Shahbaz and Funk, 2019). Meanwhile, platform algorithms shape our experience of social media, and priorities certain content on our news feeds. Algorithms that are designed to maximize engagement also tend to maximize the reach of emotional and, in some cases, hateful or divisive posts; this reinforces both the sharing of that information and, in some cases, its perceived legitimacy Omidyar, (2017). There is thus a growing recognition of the relevance of the structure of social media platforms and their influence on peace building efforts.

In contrast to those seeking to build peace, there are those who are increasingly adept at using social media to sow division and promote conflict narratives Stella, Ferrara, & De Domenico, (2018). Globally, divisive actors intent on polarization are increasingly using highly targeted content, moving away from the use of high-profile celebrity accounts, making 'paid' or 'fake' accounts appear more organic (Franco and Calamba, 2019). This reflects a greater refinement in micro-targeting – the targeting of specific groups – and in actors' engagement with smaller numbers of followers. These dynamics are making online actions, such as disinformation campaigns, difficult to identify and track. In addition, private, localized Facebook groups facilitate direct engagement with diverse stakeholders without detection. Such strategies often operate outside or on the fringes of platforms' terms of service or, in some cases, on fringe platforms, further complicating authorities' and peace builders' ability to respond. Institutional donors are increasingly paying attention to social media. It first came into sharper focus around responses to violent extremists using social media. Although donor support has now moved beyond its initial focus on counter-terrorism and violent extremism, the full extent, level of investment and nature of work outside this sphere is unclear.

Experience suggests that social media companies often have a limited understanding of how their platforms are operating as actors in conflict contexts, which has real consequences for many people in conflict settings. Equally, peace building practitioners are still adjusting to how social media impacts on their conflict contexts and learning how they can better leverage it to deliver peace. Hence, in a rapidly changing environment, where should those committed to building peace begin?

Framework for Countering Social Media Conflict and Hate Speeches: The improvement of social media as a tool for peace building and inclusivity demands various elements majorly associated with the strategy of peace-building ownership. The initial steps should be from social media companies in sync with Global solutions to Global problems. The issue of social media peace building ownership becomes pertinent.

The social media companies, each citizen and policy maker must own the building process. They must actively partake in agenda setting and various peace building processes at different stages even with the highly complicated media tension from the start of covid-19 in 2020. More so, all strategies for social media peace building and inclusivity should be informed by current experiences from the various social media platforms as they provide valuable lessons about the way forward in promoting peace, stability and inclusivity ownership. Valuable way forward for social media peace building and inclusivity include minimization of counter-productive regulations; establishing appropriate access to data and analyses; fostering reliable design and risk considerations; and encouraging access ethical and safeguarding considerations because access to social media platform by more marginalized individuals and communities is a serious issue for consideration in fragile and conflict-affected context. This is, in part, due to poor internet penetration in many areas. Those who have access to social media are often (but not always) urban and educated young people with access to technology, infrastructure and the internet.

Crucial Social Media Companies Support: So far, little has been said about the role of social media companies, but they have an important part to play. This starts by recognizing and paying attention to how their platforms interplay with local conflict dynamics. Understanding this and then adjusting business practice to respond is called being 'conflict sensitive'. The importance of technology companies applying this approach cannot be overstated. They hold the keys to the algorithms that create an enabling environment for certain narratives and behaviors to flourish. Some argue that Facebook has limited capacity to identify and moderate dangerous speech, as what users may experience as problematic content is not always viewed as violating Facebook standards (Taub & Fisher, 2018). Financial models and the need to "sell the attention of users" mean that fact checking efforts alone may not be effective against the greater system and algorithms, requiring companies and peace builders to move beyond data management and limited strategic communications campaigns. This represents a significant collaborative opportunity. Sectors such as extractive industries offer examples of how to mitigate and adapt business strategies and practices to reduce negative impacts in conflict context. The establishment of instruments such as the voluntary principles on Human Rights and Security and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative illustrate how companies, governments and civil society can work collaboratively. There is an increasing amount of supporting guidance, such as International Alert's conflict sensitive business practice guide Cleland & Orsini, (2018). The UN Global Compact's Business for Peace initiative extends this approach to a range of new sectors from agriculture and renewables to tourism and telecommunications. It recognizes that all companies can impact conflict dynamics and seeks to pair mitigating risk and sustaining long term financial performance with a role in supporting peace and development. Such a response would build on companies approaches to date, taking them from a threat based compliance response approach to a more holistic preventive one. This would complement the broader suite of measures currently being pursued by regulators, ranging from countering extremist material to online child protection.

Necessary Technical Skills: Technical skills are also necessary and donors and policy makers should play a vital role in helping social media companies to revive more appropriate technical skills. A deficit in technical knowledge and skills within peace building organizations can represent a barrier to the more sophisticated use of social media. Engaging with social media requires specialized capacities to navigate social media networks and to develop effective strategies, as well as safeguard confidentiality and digital security. These skills are not always accessible to all peace builders. Platforms are not standardized, meaning that engaging on new platforms requires additional learning, especially given that the users have varying levels of trust in different platforms and vastly differing usage habit across contexts. Limited skill sets are reflected in the fact that peace building organizations still tend to use social media primarily for strategic communications to extend the reach of offline programming rather than as a potential vehicle for peace building. According to Peace Tech Labs (2020), in order to overcome the technical challenges of data analysis, organizations should develop partnership with local peace builders and technology experts through initiatives like hate speech lexicons.

Other Critical Element: Access to data and analysis is vital for sustainability and ease for peace builders to carry out appropriate sentiment analysis. Rapid program design and risk consideration is necessary for peace builders to employ social media meaningfully as a tool to promote peace. Peace building organizations requires that actors be conscious of the importance of finances in access to technical training or to integrate social media more strategically into their work. Peace building itself is a long term process that may take a generation to bear result. Hence, monitoring and evaluation is key for deeper understanding of the connection between content posted, consumption of content by a user and their related action and/or behavioral change. Donors, social media companies, and policy makers should establish partnerships in order to promote a conflict sensitive approach and support mutual skills building, so as to better shape peace building interventions.

Conclusion

As evidenced in this paper, the conflict and hate speeches on social media are critical. Social media tensions are high and the level of inclusivity is low.

Though technically, social media could be used as a major tool for peace, it is going through an evolution like trauma due to the fast changing era of technology. Accordingly, there is a need for social media peace building ownership especially by donors, social media companies and policy makers for it to become a major tool for peace building, inclusivity, and countering of hate speech. The aforementioned operational principles of social media peace building framework must be applied eclectically.

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