Chapter 9
Social Media and Peacemaking: A Snapshot of Literature

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ABSTRACT

Taken together, this snapshot of articles affirms that social media participates in the process of peace-making. Unlike traditional media, which used to set the agenda for peace, social media diffuses the process, making it possible to speak on both sides of any issue. These articles reveal that governments like Russia, China, Malaysia, and Turkey can control social media as a key part of propaganda. At the same time, as in the Arab Spring, activist groups can use social media to undermine government, despite the fact that their new approach might prove temporary. Perhaps most important is the view that media continue to mirror society in the digital age. Prior to social media (about 2005), traditional media fulfilled this function until an internal elite cadre of journalists started speaking to each other and controlling the agenda through something they called “advocacy journalism.” Having thus shattered the mirror of society, they now face the prospect of giving way to citizens’ journalism, where their gatekeeping function are in rapid decline.

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of social media and nearly universal access to mass communication, one might expect peace and harmony in the world. Ideally a plethora of messages, with provision for two-way comment and sharing, would lead everyone to understand each other. However, just a glance at the daily news confirms that this is not the case.

Where did social media fail? In future years, social media will represent the advent of a major development in world communication. However, this development has fallen far short of expectations, for social media has contributed to additional conflict, not desired conditions of world understanding, justice, and love.

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The purpose of this analysis is to report and classify a brief period of scholarly comment and research studies regarding social media. It is limited to a brief “snapshot” of articles identified by Google Scholar during a three-month period, December 2016 through February 2017. While a much wider search is certainly called for, just this snapshot is informative for anyone desiring to know more about social media and its effect on world peace. If nothing else, it suggests a tentative rubric for future analysis of scholarly works on social media and peace. Table 1 presents a tentative list of categories for such research.

This report starts by reviewing studies on international conflict or simply managing public affairs. Next it describes social media in other aspects. For each subject, a brief description is given to illustrate the multi-dimensional nature of this topic.

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND ACTIVISM

While social media might seem like a mere vehicle for communication among friends, it has grown to include effects on national and international politics. Perhaps the “friend” emphasis has led to increased trust for messages which, increasingly, seek to influence vast groups of people.

Barnett, Xu, Chu, Jiang, Huh, Park, & Park (2016) examines international relations by analysis of over 1.8 billion Facebook postings in English and 51 million Chinese posts on Weibo. The study argues that social media represent a transnational electronic public sphere with public discussions that display characteristics of international relations from the viewpoint of a foreign public. According to the authors, these are associated with the amount of news coverage and public attention a country receives.

Cyberactivism

Vromen (2017) reports original work on cyberactivism and social movements with new theoretical work. He examines hybrid media systems and connective action, studying their impact on individualized collective action and social movements in an effort to understand the context and practice of digital citizenship in the social media age. The author argues that the “meso-level” of politics—the political organization—still matters, but that the emergence of digital media has challenged all forms of civil society activism and advocacy.

Justice

Fileborn (2016) reports on the power of social media in activism. With a focus on justice in social media, Fileborn reports that, to date (2016), there has been little consideration of the experiences of individuals who seek justice online, and the extent to which victims’ justice needs can be met that way. The author identifies rape as one consideration, suggesting that the depiction of war-time rape is unspeakable and even worse than rape during times of peace.