

*Article*

## The Impact of Facebook Communities on International Conflict Resolution

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### Abstract

International conflicts in the 21st century pose a dire challenge for peace and conflict professionals due to the influx of non-state actors, globalization and development of communication technology. Within this context, people-to-people dialogue has been the main tool used by grassroots organizations that aims to build peace using a bottom-up approach to conflict resolution. The development and widespread use of social media platforms have created new opportunities for improving the effectiveness, monitoring and evaluation of people-to-people dialogue programs. Combined with face to face encounters, the use of social media platforms offers some solutions to the shortcomings of contact-based interventions. Digital engagement creates opportunities for long-term and consistent interaction, reduces power asymmetries, has applicable impact in real-time, and allows for wider-scale participation and new evaluation methodology. This paper aims to give an overview of the opportunities online dialogue platforms hold in maintaining channels of communications. It is based on observation and research of an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue project that took place during the Gaza war in 2014, mostly on *Facebook*.

### Keywords

Social Media, Conflict Transformation, People-People Dialogue, Intergroup Conflict, Facebook Community, Structured Online Community Interfaces

### Introduction

The role and hegemony of sovereign nation states have shifted in the aftermath of the Cold War making conflict resolution extremely difficult. Globalization and advances in technology have increased the number of actors with conflicting or similar interests. At the same time, the international system is going through

structural changes in which non-state and sub-state actors gained more presence in political processes. As a result, achieving conflict resolution solely through official means is inadequate. Signing a peace treaty or making peace between political elites is hardly sufficient to put an end to conflicts, not to mention the social and psychological damage they have caused (Handelman & Chowdhury 2017). It is crucial to include civil society and community level relationship building in managing conflicts, given the importance of grassroots activism in events, such as the Arab Spring uprisings. Therefore, while official diplomacy is necessary in maintaining diplomatic channels, integrating citizens is a vital component of resolving conflicts in the long-run.

People to People (P2P) dialogue has been the main tool used by grassroots organizations as part of Track 3 Diplomacy that aims to build peace using a 'bottom-up' approach to conflict resolution. Unlike theoretical models of negotiation and conflict resolution which are used as the basis for Track 1 and 2 Diplomacy, the Track 3 avenue has yet to find a theory that will sufficiently deal with the complexities of a bottom-up approach. Many practitioners of conflict resolution base their approaches on Gordon Allport's contact theory, which posits that, "the best way to reduce tensions between groups in conflict is to bring them together since the basis of evil is the unknown" (*The Nature of Prejudice*, 1954). Many public diplomacy initiatives too, are rooted in the notion that engagement helps overcome fears and psychological barriers. Despite its wide use, contact theory suffers from numerous shortcomings and has received substantial criticism. Primarily, the lack of clear indicators for success has led many to doubt the validity and usefulness as an approach to conflict engagement. However, dialogue programs continue to be common practice in many conflict zones, since no alternative has been found yet.

The ascendance of technology, and social media platforms have created new opportunities for improving the effectiveness, monitoring and evaluation of People to People dialogue programs. Moreover, it offers a new model to which both practitioners and academics could contribute and mutually benefit from. Combined with Face to Face encounters, the use of social media platforms offers notable solutions to the shortcomings of contact-based interventions. Amongst the solutions are the opportunity for long-term and consistent interaction, reducing power asymmetry, visible effective impact in real-time, wider-scale participation and new evaluation methodologies.

This research paper will aim to give an overview of the opportunities Structured Online Community Interfaces (SOCIs) entail and will describe in detail how technological innovations can contribute to the conduct of peacebuilding projects and to the discipline of peace and conflict. This paper provides a case study of an Israeli-Palestinian digital engagement that employed Facebook as a main communication platform to facilitate continuous dialogue. The case study presented

in this paper is exemplar of digital technologies assisting peacebuilding processes which combine face to face and online dialogues. For that reason, this paper is relevant to both scholars and practitioners in laying out a new methodology of digital peacebuilding. In doing so, this paper also examines the ways in which digital technologies can enhance public diplomacy. The first section discusses people to people dialogues and the contribution of digital technologies to peacebuilding. The next section gives an overview of the MENA Leaders for Change Facebook Community Project that was established as part of the *Yala Young Leaders movement*. The third section examines the opportunities and prospects for digital engagement and will finally end in concluding remarks. Introducing this unique case study from the field, and from Israel, a nation that has a well-established digital diplomacy network, will offer important tips for future directions of digitalized peacebuilding.

### **People to People Dialogue**

Track-one diplomacy is a term used to define activities that take place within the official realm of diplomacy between government officials. Growing need to engage opinion leaders particularly in respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the 1970s and 1980s initiated processes outside the realm of official diplomacy. Joseph Montville, an American diplomat, coined the term track-two diplomacy arguing that unofficial, informal interaction between members of adversary groups or nations might help resolve their conflict. (Montville 1991; Davidson & Montville 1981) Hence, track-two diplomacy became a widespread method complementing track-one diplomacy at the grassroots level (Montville 1991; Azar 2002). Saunders (2001) argues that the human dimension is central to peacebuilding processes and that citizens are able to transform conflicts by building relationships beyond the official state structures. This argument situates people to people interaction at the heart of citizen diplomacy, which is also used interchangeably as track three diplomacy. Similarly, the relational paradigm of public diplomacy aims to heal, protect, and preserve relationships between peoples (Zaharna 2010). Therefore, public diplomacy emphasizes mutual engagement, mutual learning, collaboration and relationship building resulting in meaningful exchanges (Arsenault & Cowan 2008). In order to achieve meaningful exchanges, public diplomacy is grounded in people-to-people dialogue. In this respect, track three dialogues can be analyzed as public diplomacy with the aim to build relationships.

Track two and track three dialogues became extensively popular and widely applied in finding a solution to the Middle East conflict. Although these initiatives have at times proved to be successful, overall they have not achieved groundbreaking resulting from a diverse set of problems including the unwillingness of political actors to commit to peace. People to people dialogue projects in the Middle

East have suffered many drawbacks and have been subjected to criticism. There are two main concerns in respect to people to people dialogue. The most common and basis for criticism has been the asymmetry of the projects which reflect the power imbalance of the parties in conflict. The power imbalance lends itself to the strength and weakness of parties. For example, in respect to the Middle East conflict existing literature indicates that a higher number of meetings take place in the Israeli territory, and most of the moderators and participants are Israeli (Maoz 2004). As a result, Israeli dominance in the dialogue process, hampers the effectiveness of the conflict transformation process, since participants who belong to the weaker party feel less comfortable to express their grievances. Hence, an imbalanced conflict transformation process will not achieve the desired change in attitudes and perceptions. The second challenge is the number of participants attending dialogue projects. Due to technical and political barriers such as entry permits (when necessary) it effective dialogue of this sort should take place could be available for rather small number of people ( Albeck, Adwan & Bar-On 2002) . The drawback is that very small amounts of people could be transformed. Given these technical and logistical barriers, new communication technologies led by digital media offer prospects for improved conflict transformation processes.

The use of digital technologies in peacebuilding is a relatively new venue, which has its roots in online mediation. The origins of Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) date back to the 1990s when the World Wide Web first started to gain popular use. As human interactions began to take place in the virtual space, it became clear that online engagement would include debates and conflicts. Therefore, there was an opportunity to utilize online platforms to manage and resolve conflicts. The first article about ODR was published in 1996 when the National Center for Automated Information Research organized the first conference on ODR marking the field's infrastructure establishment (Wahab, Katsh & Rainey 2012). Since then, ODR has developed mainly in the context of business disputes between providers and consumers. While there is research on the ways online platforms help resolve family disputes (Augar & Zeleznikow 2014) and in its application to law and litigation (Katsh 2007), there has been limited research on international political conflict resolution and online technologies.

Previous research that touches upon similar principles and advantages of online platforms for dialogue. For example Peyser's examination of the use of massive online dialogue among citizens of New York and argues that online dialogue can be used to promote trust and collaboration (Pyser 2004). In addition, the use of ICT (Information Communication Technologies) in peacebuilding platforms promotes a wide range of grassroots actors and groups in post-conflict zones (Telidid & Kappler 2016). Paul Reilly discusses the uses of social media in facilitating inter-group conflict in Northern Ireland and argues that online interaction

alone does not suffice to promote understanding and trust (Reilly 2012). A recent research by Cao and Lin focuses on the different types of CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) and argues that video communication yields better results on attitudes of the outgroup than text-based communication (Cao & Lin 2017). One of the most relevant research to this paper is the study by Ifat Maoz and Donald Ellis who examined the differences in online and face-face communication between groups of Israelis and Palestinians and emphasized the lack of constructive arguments in the dialogue process (Ellis & Maoz 2007).

Mor, Ron and Maoz's research based on the Facebook page called *Tweeting Arabs*, analyzes posts that present the Palestinian narrative in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other posts by Palestinians that call for peace and reconciliation (Mor, Ron & Maoz 2016). Perhaps the most relevant study that has been published is the work of Hamburger, Hasler and Shani-Sherman in which they examine intergroup conflict in the digital age. There are a number of factors that offer advantage to intergroup dialogue on social media. Social media platforms are more engaging, they're anonymous, universal and they offer constant availability and equality (Amichai-Hamburger, Hasler & Shani-Sherman 2015) in practical projects.

### **MENA Young Leaders Facebook Community Project**

The events of the Arab Spring have served as an example of the power of civic activism in the age of social media (Howard, et al 2011) The speed and manner in which activists were able to mobilize, and national aspirations for democracy to spread across borders, gave hope that social media could play a critical role in reinvigorating civil society, democracy and peace across the region (Ibid; Anderson 2011).

The project which forms the subject of the present evaluation represents a unique offshoot of this persuasion, with its belief that these same principles might be applied successfully to the Israel Palestinian conflict.<sup>1</sup> It is predicated, in part, on the belief that while linking Israeli and Palestinian young leaders with a wider network of activists from across the MENA region might serve to liberate them from the various blind-spots imposed by the conflict's strict borders, an enduring and shared social media platform could lend their work geographic breadth and a sustainability rare in most current peacebuilding efforts. In such a way, the project might in potential provide the spark for the upsurge in regional social change and democratization to make its own inroads into the Israeli Palestinian conflict.

*The Yala Young Leaders' MENA Leaders for Change Program was an Israeli-Arab*

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<sup>1</sup> Yala "Mena Leaders for Change 2013-14" Program: Empowering Emerging Leaders to Advance Peace and Positive Change in the Mena Region. Submitted By The Peres Center For Peace [Original project proposal]

people-people online and in person dialogue project that took place from June–November 2014. The project was funded by the US Department of State and was managed by the Peres Center for Peace and Yala Palestine, two regional NGOs. It was designed as a multi-stage intervention, structured around a preliminary skills training workshop, ongoing guided interaction and discussion in the *Facebook™* closed and secret group, and, for a select group of participants, participation in a three-day summative conference in Jordan. The project's participants came from Israel, The Palestinian Authority, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Syria.

Reports on use of the *Facebook™* platform indicate that actual use was well in excess of program minima: while 22.8% of participants visited the MLC *Facebook™* group on a weekly basis (per program requirements), the majority of participants (74.2%) visited the platform much more frequently, 49.5% visiting daily, and 16.8% more than twice a day (see Chart 9). Only 3.0% said they did not visit the group regularly. In terms of self-assessed future use, 52.5% said they foresaw visiting the group on a weekly basis, 34.7% daily, and 8.9% more than this. 4.0% did not see themselves visiting the group in the future.

Of participants, the vast majority (80%) saw themselves using the *Facebook™* platform to keep in touch with other respondents. 67% thought they would use it to share their thoughts with others, 62% foresaw using it as a forum to discuss ideas, while 59% envisioned using the group as a platform for actually working together (See breakdown below). Few (18%) thought they would use the platform to request emergency assistance. A small minority felt they would not use it at all (5%).

Overall, participants felt the *Facebook™* group was a somewhat effective way (4.92 out of 7) to engage participants around peacebuilding, and a somewhat effective way (4.87 out of 7) to mobilize people across the MENA region in peacebuilding. Controlled for demography, Israeli Jews were the most skeptical with regards to the former (3.9), MENA participants the most optimistic (5.84). For the latter, MENA citizens were the most enthusiastic (5.6) about the platform's potential regionally. Gender differences also mattered, with women more skeptical (4.6) than men (5.2) regarding the platform's effectiveness.

In the period following completion of the online course, affiliation with the project was largely synonymous with participation in the *Facebook™* platform. From their responses to the questionnaire, the majority of participants visited the platform more frequently than was required (daily use outflanking the required weekly use by a factor of more than 3:1), and the vast majority (95%) felt that they would continue to visit the group on at least a weekly basis.

### **SOCI's as an Opportunity for Conflictual Speech Analysis: The Online Discourse Analysis Matrix (ODM) as a Potential Tool**

The availability of reams of written exchanges undertaken in real time on conflictual subjects afforded the evaluators of the MENA Young Leaders Facebook Community Project a unique opportunity that is rarely afforded in conflict research: the opportunity to undertake close narrative analysis of conflict dynamics in online speech.

The abundant research on conflict theory has been mostly concerned with issues of identity, attitudes and the dynamics of conflict escalation: as a result, they have been well-served by a wide variety of survey and case-study designs (Darby 1986; Varshney 2003; Torstrick 2000). Analysis of conflicts in conversation (as would befit an analysis of postings on *Facebook*<sup>TM</sup>) has rarely been a focus. However, such analyses are a staple of gender studies and couples research (e.g. Tannen, 1990, 1994, 1996). One of the most highly-regarded of these is Gottman et al's *Rapid Couples Interaction Scoring System*, developed out of the *Center for the Study of Marital Roles* in 1993, and used regularly ever since (Gottman 1993). Designed to predict the likelihood for divorce among married couples by codifying statements made over the course of discussions on issues of contention between the couple, the scale lends itself readily to conflict analysis for its focus on conflicts, and the dynamics that lead up to confrontation, resolution or stalemate (Bui-Wrzosinska, Gelfand, Nowak, & Severance 2013)

For the purposes of evaluating the program, Gottman et al's (1993) scale was adapted into a code whose categories would account for the full variety of responses that could be seen in a *Facebook*<sup>TM</sup> feed spanning several months. The code was developed over several iterations, in which the categories were honed and re-honed until they fully and accurately accounted for every statement-type that was identified in the feed (Glaser & Strauss 1967). The code features a general matrix of responses by type (including 'neutral,' 'positive' 'reinforcement' 'repair/mitigation' and 'conflict'), along which specific types of responses (representing the full variety of responses seen) were allocated. (An alphabetical system was used, in which each letter represented a response-type: a 'k', for instance indicated an expression of personal concern for another participant, sympathy or commiseration; an 's' indicated an attempt at mollifying a conflict via exhortation to peace, flexibility, neutrality or openness. Of the three 'conflict' categories, 'x' represented a controversial or potentially incendiary statement, a 'y' a direct challenge to another participant, and a 'z' an antagonistic comment that did not invite any response, including condemnation, insult, stonewalling, or the expression of an intractable position..) For the purposes of the study, the goal was to see how ideological differences between participants were expressed and negotiated. To this end, a feed representing four months of discussion was selected, and scoured for any and all



potential conflicts (i.e. strings of conversation in which an x, y or z formed the basis for a subsequent comment or series of comments). The full string was then analyzed to its conclusion ('v'), with each post assigned a code-letter (or, as often the case, series of letters). The final analyzed string could thus be able to provide a schema delineating the length of the conflict, the way it was resolved, and the types of responses offered by participants in it to mitigate (or exacerbate) conflictual situations.

Over 3 months' worth of posts (June 15 to September 15) were reviewed employing the coding system developed for the evaluation. Within that time-frame, 22 'controversies' (separate events surrounding a post or response coded either as an x, a y, or a z according to the scheme) comprising a total of 481 distinct 'posts' were identified. (A small number by any standard, these isolated controversies represented a fraction of the discussion even during the height of the escalation in Gaza.) Each of these events was then analyzed as a string of posts and responses, with each response assigned a code. It is important to note that much of these discussions were undertaken between a relatively small group of participants (in some strings as few as 3, though even the longest having no more than 11).

Of the controversies, three (3) were left unresolved (ending in an unanswered string, often an 'x') and four (4) were put to rest by the moderator. The remaining 15 conflicts (roughly two-thirds of all controversies) were resolved by the participants themselves. (All controversies revolved around the Gaza war, in virtually every case as the result of a statement or post made in justification of one side of the conflict.) In all, the moderator intervened 29 times within a total 481 posts, or an average of once for every sixteen posts; in reality, however, discussions did not require even this amount of intervention: of the 29 occasions, 10 occurred over the course of one string from late July. The average number of interventions was closer to less than once per string (0.904).<sup>2</sup>

**Fig.17: The Strings**



<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that this number cannot take into account the moderation and facilitation which staff conducted with participants outside the context of the platform, such as the direct 1:1 correspondences which were conducted with participants on an ongoing basis— especially in cases where a participant might begin to show signs of increased antagonism.



Over the course of these strings, there were 77 x's, 75 y's and 27 z's. That is to say: 30% of all interaction was made up of potentially controversial or polarizing content, the remainder dedicated to mitigation, clarification and repair. (It is important to note that these strings were the exception rather than the rule in virtually *all* contact through the Facebook platform. On the whole, interactions were highly amicable, generous and optimistic; in fact, an overall review of the entirety of the Facebook content would see a predominance of e, b, g and k comments – the inverse of their predominance in the analyzed strings.)

If x's comprised potentially controversial posts or statements not necessarily actively linked to an agenda or argument and y's a direct challenge to the views of another participant, it is heartening to note that roughly 1/5 of all these statements (22% in the case of x's, 20% in the case of y's) were mitigated— that is, couched in language or conventions designed to soften the impact of the statement. (Thus for example: “i trully [sic] emphesize with your cry and pain it is trully [sic] unfair the situation you are stuck in. What upsets me is[...]” ‘Z’ statements were rarely mitigated for obvious reasons (z's representing intractable views, stonewalling, denigration or refusal to communicate). At the same time, it is encouraging that, in a period of time marred by violent conflict in which the governments of some 1/3 of all participants were directly involved, only 27 such statements were recorded. In all but two occasions, each z was preceded either by a ‘y’ or another ‘z’ occurring 1-3 statements earlier. That is to say: virtually all z's were reactive, and thus easily negotiated down.

The most common strategy for defusing conflicts which program participants employed in their conversations with one another was the clarification of their views on a previous ideological position or statement. This reparative strategy was used in 116 of all 481 posts (24.1% of all postings), in 55 cases (47.4% of the time) in conjunction with other strategies. The next most-used defusing device was a more positive strategy: reverting the conversation back to a personal or general philosophical stance. Thus, for example, in response to a heated and polarized debate in which both Jewish and Palestinian historical claims to the land were challenged (string 14), one participant writes:

*Hi everyone, after reading your dialogue it made me think alot. It is important for both sides to reflect and share their narrative and it is important for us to understand each other history, but focusing only in the past won't bring us anywhere.*

While there is some use of this strategy in the early strings (notably string 12, from July 14th, where there were 8 such reversions), on average this was rarely done until a series of interventions by the moderator in string 16 (an exchange from July 24th), culminating in the following suggestion to the correspondents:

*would like to make an experiment: let's try to discuss things without using the tool of comparison. State your opinion, views, questions and wills but don't say "but X did that!" or "We can do this cause Y does that". Comparisons usually provide us with an easy way out of deep thinking.*

After this, use of the strategy more than doubled, from 1.3 times per string to 3. By the final string, one month later (August 24th), it is used more than 12 times. (In fact, the final conflict is dedicated more to an exchange of views than actual confrontational or intractable content.)

**Fig.18: Strategies Employed by Participants in Controversial Exchanges, by Frequency**

Matrix Category	Strategy	CODE LETTER	Total	Used on its own
Repair	Clarifications	C	116	61
Positive	Presentation of personal philosophy	F	52	30
Repair	Inquiries for explanation	J	38	23
Repair	Appeals to the importance of peace	S	31	19
Repair	Miscellaneous	U	29	26
Repair	Appeals to the common cause of the group	T	22	12
Neutral	Opening the floor	D	21	10
Reinforcement	Agreement of concession	Q	21	7
Repair	Calls to view "both sides" of an issue	H	17	4
Reinforcement	Like	O	12	11
Positive	Commiseration	K	9	3
Repair	Apologies	I	6	2
Positive	Best wishes	E	4	3
Repair	Humor	R	3	3

Though a highly innovative approach to the problem of analyzing conversational data, the ODM is limited precisely because of its novelty. Unlike the scale on which it is based which has had several decades of iterations to hone its categories, decades in which findings could be compared to actual outcomes (in this case, divorces), the ODM can only give a window onto conversation dynamics in real time; until it has undergone numerous iterations it can offer little predictive value. Further, dominated as many of these online exchanges are by a relatively small group of more vocal participants, the matrix cannot give a precise window onto how all participants learned to negotiate differences in and outside of the auspices of the project; all it can do is to show how a certain number of select conflicts evolved and the dynamics by which they were mediated by those involved (including the degree to which program moderators were needed). The design is thus still at an exploratory stage. If continued to be developed and tested on further groups, however, it poses a great deal of potential to serve as a predictive tool

in contending with online and discursive conflicts in real time.

### **The MENA Young Leaders Facebook Community Project: An Impact Assessment**

High levels of use aside, the real question here is what the value of using the *Facebook*<sup>TM</sup> page really is as far as peacebuilding is concerned. A preliminary answer to this can be found in the responses to the question of current engagements solicited in the conference questionnaire. There, of the 28 projects cited, the top three (accounting for 12 of the 28 citations, not including those of MLC sponsored platforms), are all online-based platforms. For a good number of participants, participation in peace programs, for the time being, seems to mean affiliation with additional online networks. There are a number of possible reasons for this. Firstly, many of the participants being newcomers to the world of peacebuilding, online communities may be the best and easiest way to proceed: a way of being networked (even if as passive participants) in wider platforms based primarily on more networking and contact. A second reason can be distilled from the difference in views vis-à-vis the online nature of the program among different demographic groups. Both participants from Gaza and from other MENA countries accorded the most importance to the online/social media character of the program in terms of their decision to enroll (5.86 and 4.90 out of 7 respectively), and for good reason: for them, closed borders and geographic distances respectively represent significant hindrances to face-to-face encounters with their counterparts. In the absence of a real space in which to work together, it is no surprise that many participants embraced the online platform as a productive way to mobilize and promote peace. Israelis, by contrast, tended to be less enthused about the online platform than their counterparts from Gaza or other MENA countries.

The *Facebook*<sup>TM</sup> platform was seen, overall, as a viable medium through which much of the preliminary work of peacebuilding could be accomplished, from networking (80% of respondents saying they would use it to stay in touch, 67% to share thoughts and 62% to discuss events) to planning collaborative projects (59%). While the long-term value of online participation (or, as certain civil society researchers would have it, passive involvement) in promoting a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains to be seen, as far as consensus-building was concerned, the proceedings on the *Facebook*<sup>TM</sup> platform (30%) proved to be just as decisive as face-to-face contact between participants (30%).

The second and much more notable difference between this program and its counterparts in the traditional approach to bridging Israelis and Palestinians is its emphasis on dealing directly with conflictual issues. As noted above, the central criticism of the majority of Israeli-Palestinian encounter programs of the past has been their emphasis on the finding of common ground, to the point that they

have traditionally shied away completely from contentious issues (Maoz 2011). The MLC program encouraged the opposite, making the negotiation of highly politicized and contentious differences between participants a central focus of the program. Further, it seems to have taken the proper steps to ensure that the ensuing interactions did not thoroughly undermine the program: participants were screened carefully before being accepted, underwent online training segments from which they claim to have above all developed their listening skills and motivation to understand, and finally, were given an online forum in which to interact and in which they were carefully monitored and guided. Without these, even the most well-intentioned interactions could easily have devolved into factionalism, as is illustrated by a close analysis of the *Facebook*<sup>TM</sup> feeds. Given the proportionally very small number of criticisms and dropouts from the program as a result of this, this approach should be seen as a resounding success. While, on the one hand, it is unrealistic to assume that several months of mediated online correspondence can compete with the views and attitudes which participants hear continuously around them, both socially and through their respective national media, the ability of program participants to continue their interaction despite a highly divisive war in Gaza seems in itself a strong endorsement of both the program's curriculum and the work of its staff. And while, participants still have a ways to go before they truly see eye to eye on these issues (even if this means leaving their ideological differences aside in pursuit of a common goal) it seems that the program has done its part in setting the stage for truly resilient 'bridging.' The optimism of expressed by the majority of participants at the close of the program, the numbers and extent of participants friendships and the degree to which participants seemed invested in continuing to work together all attest to the program's accomplishments in negotiating a very complex terrain.

### **The Advantages of Structured Online Community Interfaces as Conflict Resolution Dialogue Programs: Reflections from the Field**

The results of the project demonstrate how using social media platforms, particularly Facebook, assist in managing common challenges in people-people dialogue. In what follows, we will elaborate on the challenges of people to people dialogue and the opportunities presented by online platforms.

#### ***1. Effective Participation***

The pillar of peacebuilding efforts based on grassroots initiatives resonates in the participants it targets. Unlike official state-state negotiations in which there is little room to be cognizant of the identity of the participants, people-people dialogue is able to select the type of participants according to the project's goal set forth by the organizing institution. By definition, people to people dialogue projects represent a bottom-up strategy for conflict resolution, targeting the wide

public or segments of it and not decision makers. Instead of signing peace agreements, the goals of the grassroots work are defined as changing attitudes and negative perceptions and have a wide, scalable impact among the masses. This approach has encountered difficulties in achieving its goals due to common challenges of effective participation.

Dialogue projects that involve intergroup conflict usually attract those who have the willingness and motivation to meet with the other side. The attitudes and perceptions of those participants do not need to be changed, therefore the entire projects loses its relevance when there is no need to perform change. Similarly, it is difficult to find a positive target group for intergroup dialogue projects such as hardliners, minorities or influential people in communities who are the actual agents of change. Those usually lack the interest to meet the so called enemy or the time and effort to attend the joint meetings. In today's mega busy world, making the effort and commitment for a project that lasts a few months has to offer an incentive for the participants. Finally, in areas of harsh intractable conflicts, it is unpleasant and even dangerous for members of the community to be seen talking and being in the same room with members of a conflicting community. People try to avoid being criticized or risk for their lives in favor of intergroup dialogue.

Social media platforms offer a partial solution for the challenge of participation. Social media platforms are characterized as popular, attractive and user friendly which make them easier to achieve effective recruitment. Hardliners and even extremists have less objections to engage in a dialogue that is based on a virtual platform, where they can first simply be bystanders and then decide if they wish to actively participate. The online platform serves as an easy jumping board to dive into more difficult discussions. Those who fear hearing accusations and difficult stories are able to log off on the online platform. Moreover, busy participants who are usually active in the social-political-business scenes, are easily able to spend a few minutes every day or at the end of the day, check the latest updates in the online group. Participation in an online dialogue requires less physical and emotional effort. For those who fear to be seen in a physical gathering, the online platform holds a unique advantage in the form of a creating a fake and/or secret profile. Using it, participants can overcome identity challenges.

## ***2. Confronting "Re-entry"***

Another limitation for the effectiveness of people-people dialogue projects is the re-entry problem- the situation in which participants leave the dialogue setting and return to their societies and natural environments - between each meeting session or at the end of the program. The attitude-perception changing process, which the participants are going through, is only effective when the process continues for a long period of time. Generally, dialogue projects are limited in time

due to budget and other technical or political obstacles. The resources included in a project such as funds, availability of staff and participants, and political stability allow the interaction to be held in for a relatively short time and in little recurrence. Moreover, the re-entry problem is even more evident once the project ends and participants go back to their own societies.

Social media can contribute to coping with the problem of reentry, by offering limitless and continuous interaction. The participants who become Facebook friends, or communicate via Twitter, LinkedIn, Whatsapp or similar platforms are exposed to the opinions, thoughts and daily happenings of each another. The continuous interaction contributes to the effectiveness of the conflict transformation process since it promotes a smoother flow and progress, without the need to frequently restart it, as participants avoid re-entry.

### ***3. Balance of Power and Asymmetrical Power***

In most conflicts there is an imbalance of power between parties which is due to differences in military, economic and diplomatic power. When trying to facilitate a dialogue between conflicting parties, it is crucial to ensure that the environment balance the power asymmetry allowing the groups a safe place when they can feel comfortable to express and discuss. In addition, a balanced dialogue environment helps to create trust between the parties and the facilitators-organizing institution, therefore supports the effectiveness and success of the process. Finding a physical neutral ground to hold meetings could be costly and difficult bureaucratically, especially when there is a need for entry permits, long distance travelling and similar unfavorable circumstances.

The virtual world and social media platforms in particular could serve as a neutral meeting place where power asymmetry is not as visible. Under such conditions, the facilitation of the process is under full control of the organizing institution which can use the technological software to ensure power balance throughout the process.

### ***4. Cost Effective and Easy Infrastructure for Peacebuilding***

Peacebuilding dialogue encounters require infrastructure and resources such as funds, acceptable venues for meetings amongst others based on the type of project. Unlike official track one negotiations which many states compete to host and get the prestige and credit for hosting, track three workshops and dialogue meetings require substantial amounts of funds. Most of the funding goes towards meeting facilities such as hotels, conference rooms and transportation such as buses and flights. The problem is exacerbated when there is a need to find a neutral ground to hold the meetings which often narrows down possibilities to distant and pricy locations, especially in violent conflict zones.

Holding the dialogue on a social media platform saves those costs and as it represents a virtual, safe, easy to access and free of charge venue. Additionally, it saves energy and contributes to a clean and sustainable environment.

### *5. Measurability and Evaluation*

One of the most notable points of criticisms of dialogue programs is their ineffectiveness and limited –if any– impact on the conflict. When there is no agreement to sign, the question that remains is ‘what have been achieved through the joint dialogue and meeting? Furthermore, goals such as - “changing attitudes”, “bridge building”, “create understanding” are difficult to quantify and measure. The most common tools that are used to measure and evaluate peacebuilding dialogue programs are surveys that are handed out in different time spans throughout the program. The validity of surveys is questionable especially since they represent an opinion in a certain moment and depend on the understanding of a certain question.

Conducting Structured Online Community Interfaces enables the development of a new evaluation system. Since the entire communication between the parties is transcribed in real-time , it is possible to follow the dynamics of the dialogue, analyze it and draw conclusions regarding the program’s goals. Using tools like the Online Narrative Matrix, rigorous analyses of conflict dynamics can be further developed, to the point of predictive validity.

### **Conclusion**

International conflicts continue to evolve as new actors, new dimensions and new technologies influence the complexity of political and social systems and processes. In this disruptive era, which some refer to as The Fourth Industrial Revolution, it is essential to find new, creative and innovative ideas to mitigate, transform and resolve conflicts. The application of online social media platforms such as Facebook in conflict resolution processes is not only helpful, but imperative since human communication nowadays takes place on the virtual space as it does on the physical one. The case study presented in this paper offers conflict resolution researchers and practitioners not just a new methodology, but a new path to think, analyze and address international conflicts through technology.

The use of Facebook communities does hold several challenges. First and foremost, the project must take place in a place where potential participants have free and easy access to internet and where social media platforms are popular. In addition, the ongoing, almost non-stop online facilitation requires special preparation as online training for facilitators and more funds allocated for it. The methods for assessing the efficacy of this programming (the ODM) also needs to be developed into a rigorous, predictive tool-- a process that will require ongoing iterations and testing.



Finally, the long-term scalable impact on the conflict remains ambiguous. While violent, intractable conflicts take place at the same time as track 3 peacebuilding initiatives do, it is very difficult to change perceptions and reach understandings among peoples who fight each other outside the “Facebook group”.

It is therefore the obligation of researchers and practitioners to keep finding for new, innovative ways to address international conflicts through peacebuilding, as is the obligation of politicians and negotiators to find ways to resolve international conflicts through diplomacy.

## **Bio**

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Arik Segal is an international mediator and educator who specializes in the application of technologies in innovative dialogue structures. He established “Conntix” – a consultancy that aims to connect people through innovation and technology. He is a member of the Center for Applied Negotiations at the Institute for National Security Studies and serves as the technology and innovation adviser for Mitvim.

Arik is a lecturer at the Interdisciplinary Center in Hertzliya and teaches about: innovative conflict resolution, innovative public diplomacy and online political campaigns. He teaches at the Rotary Peace Fellowship and gives guest lectures on international institutions such as Harvard Kennedy School. Arik established the “Young Professionals in Foreign Policy-Tel Aviv” group and regularly publishes op-eds in various local and international platforms. He is US State Dept. international exchange alumni and a graduate of the International academy for leadership in Gummersbach, Germany.

Born in Canada and raised in Israel, he holds an HBA in International Relations from the University of Toronto and a Masters’ degree from Tel Aviv University in Diplomacy Studies, as well as a Mediator’s certificate from Gevim Group.

### *Yotam Keduri*

Yotam Keduri Has been working as an external evaluator and consultant to the nonprofit sector since 2008. He specializes in program assessment, evaluation and research and performs extensive studies, quantitative surveys as well as more in-depth, qualitative design studies. Yotam earned his MA in Nonprofit Management from Hebrew University in 2008.

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