Social Media Impacts on Conflict Dynamics:
A Synthesis of Ten Case Studies & a Peacebuilding Plan for Tech

In 2019, the Toda Peace Institute's research programme on "Social Media, Technology and Peacebuilding" published a series of policy briefs exploring the impact of social media technologies on conflict dynamics in ten countries: three in Latin America, three in Africa, three in the Middle East and South Asia, and Northern Ireland. On November 13, 2019, the ten authors met together with 30 practitioners, scholars, professionals, faculty and students working at the intersection
between technology and peacebuilding at a workshop at the University of San Diego Joan B. Kroc School for Peace Studies. See the list of participants at the end of the report.

The Toda Peace Institute hosted the workshop in collaboration with Build Up, University of San Diego, Mercy Corps, Activate Labs, BSR, and JustPeace Labs. During the facilitated workshop, the group of 40 mapped out the themes and patterns shared across the case studies, as well as the policy recommendations for tech companies, governments, media, and civil society emerging from the reports. This report synthesises the key findings of the ten policy briefs and the workshop. Monica Curca of Activate Labs provided graphic facilitation of the workshop, including the illustrations in this report.

Routledge Publishers will publish a longer version of this report and condensed case studies in an upcoming book: *"Social Media Impacts on Conflict Dynamics and a Peacebuilding Plan for Tech: The Techtonic Shift"*. This report and the book are based on the following ten Policy Briefs published in 2019 by the Toda Peace Institute.

1. Social Media in Zimbabwe: A Toxic Tool or a Future Bridge to Peace?
2. Social Media Dynamics in Boko Haram's Terrorist Insurgence
3. Social Media and Social Change in Jordan: Opportunities and Threats
4. Social Media in Egypt: Impacts on Civil Society, Violent Extremism & Government Control
5. The False Information Ecosystem in India
6. Social Media and Conflict Dynamics on Northern Ireland's Peace Lines
7. Social Media Literacy, Ethnicity and Peacebuilding in Kenya
8. Venezuela´s 21st-century authoritarianism in the digital sphere
9. The use of social media in Colombian democratic spaces: A double-edged sword

Research Design

Newspapers carry alarming stories of the impact of social media on privacy violations, addiction, social isolation, depression, filter bubbles, information disorders, polarisation, democratic backsliding, dangerous speech, and violent attacks on individuals and even genocide. Facebook's early motto to "move fast and break things" was a harbinger of the growing recognition that this youthful social media platform can indeed break things, big things like democracy and peace. How do we understand the relationships between these stories, and the broader digital shifts in our world?

In this exploratory research project, local journalists were asked to describe the positive and negative impacts of social media on local conflicts. Exploratory research aims to map the terrain of the problem in order to understand how to prioritise and design future research. Most of the existing research on social media impacts on conflict dynamics comes from just a handful of countries: the US, the UK, Germany, and Myanmar. The goal of this research in 2019 was to explore social media impacts on conflict dynamics in ten additional countries. Researchers were given a wide scope to define the key social media issues in their countries, recognising that each country has a distinct history of state-society relationships, a distinct legal context and framework, unique types of social divisions and fractures within society over religion, ethnicity, class, etc. and a distinct media landscape of both legacy media and social media.

Due to the increasing awareness of digitally transmitted disinformation and hate speech, authors were specifically asked to offer specific examples of disinformation and hate speech, and to

describe how these features impacted society, particularly relating to whether polarisation and direct violence seem to increase with social media usage.

Researchers were asked to explore potential patterns, recognising that anecdotes are not evidence of causation. Polarisation, for example, has a variety of causes and existed in many societies prior to the advent of social media. Social media is not the sole "cause" of problems like disinformation, polarisation, or violence. This research conforms to other scholarship on this issue. For while there are dozens of new books analysing social media impacts on society, few offer hard evidence of direct causation.

There is no direct causal link between social media and violent conflict or polarisation. There is a complex relationship between social media and conflict dynamics. At the Toda Peace Institute, we are developing a complex systems model that builds on hypotheses about the relationship between technology and society. This research explores potential patterns between the rise of social media and heightened conflict dynamics in diverse countries. These exploratory case studies contribute toward an understanding of the relationship between technology and society. Our research questions continue to evolve and include:

- What are the range of positive and negative impacts related to digital communication?
- What basic characteristics of digital communication seem to contribute to negative impacts?
- Are the design and affordances of specific social media platforms better or worse than others in terms of conflict dynamics?
- What are other, non-technological factors influencing the decline in democracy?
- What are the range of interventions from civil society, tech companies, legacy media, and governments that can help address the impact of technology on conflict dynamics?

This report does not answer any of these questions. However, it does help us refine the questions and provides anecdotes to inform these queries.

Observable Patterns Across Ten Countries

Social media's relationship with violent conflict is complex; there is no simple cause-effect relationship. These ten case studies indicate that there are a variety of factors at play that impact how social media affects conflict dynamics. This report documents an array of observable patterns as published in ten policy briefs (see links above). We argue there is a "**techtonic shift**" happening; people are using technology in ways that exacerbate some of the most concerning trends and challenges inhibiting democracy and fueling violent conflict.

1. **Social media is a double-edged sword** having both good and bad effects on society. It is difficult to find clear quantitative indicators to calculate the net effect of social media. Qualitative studies such as these ten policy briefs offer a window on some of the most obvious trends.

2. **Social media is a "strategic space" for diverse stakeholders.** Conflict actors are competing with each other for "narrative

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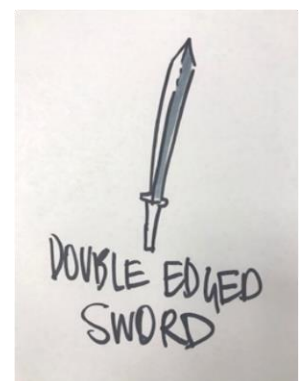
dominance" on social media. Social media is a battleground between authoritarian forces and pro-democracy movements. Nonviolent social movements use the internet to share information and mobilise collective action. Some governments use social media to improve governance and the state-society relationship. But other governments are using social media to advance corrupt regimes and to undermine political processes. Political actors are digitally manipulating emotions like fear and hate to support electoral outcomes. Nonstate malicious actors and "uncivil society" use cyberspace for undermining democratic institutions and spreading disinformation. There are increasingly state-backed, and party-organised digital militias and cyber armies to surveil and repress opposition and democracy movements with no global legal framework to protect a digital human rights mandate. Businesses and individuals use social media to seek profit from click bait.

3. **Fundamental characteristics of digital communication seem to be responsible for both negative and positive social media impacts.** Communication on the internet is distinct from other legacy forms of communication such as newspapers, magazines, television, phones, or post mail. These "Eleven S-words" sum up the major unique aspects of digital communication. In many of the case studies, these basic characteristics of digital communication enabled people to use social media to mobilise mass action to support democracy or to spread of disinformation. These fundamental characteristics are distinct from the unique affordances and platform designs by YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, or Tik Tok that build on these capacities.

- Speed: Allows instantaneous communication.
- Scope: Allows geographic access with anyone on the planet with access to digital technology.
- Scale: Allows access with millions of people.
- Space: Allows groups of people to communicate with each other.
- Secrecy: Allows groups to communicate in private chat rooms or forums.
- Speech Freedom: Allows speech unhampered by editors or gate keepers.
- Swift developments: Allows for rapid growth of new technologies.
- Sticker price: Allows for relatively low-cost distribution of messages or ads.
- Simple: Allows for people to share material without very much technical knowledge.
- Searchable: Allows for people to find other people with similar interests.
- Surveillance: Allows tech owners to track user's location and data.

Unlike television or newspapers, for example, a message on social media can travel faster (speed) and reach millions of people (scale) around the planet (scope). With digital technology, a person can post a message on any topic (speech freedom) with total freedom of content unhampered by editors to millions of people with no or low cost (sticker price). A person can find other people interested in a topic (searchable) and then meet in chat rooms (space) to have private conversations (secrecy). These tech engines are features of the internet, not of specific platforms like Twitter or WhatsApp. Unlike legacy technology, digital technology is rapidly developing (swift developments) new ways to enable users to easily produce written, oral, and visual content that looks professional (simple). Finally, unlike legacy media, digital media enables tech owners and governments to track user's location, friends, interests, and any digital activity (surveillance).

Each of the 11 characteristics holds both a positive and negative potential for society. Social media platforms maximise the potential and ease of some of these characteristics. Further research could explore in more detail how platforms can design to minimise negative potentials related to these characteristics.

4. **The unique profit motives, design, and algorithms of social media platforms seem to be responsible for *some* of the problems related to social media, democracy and conflict.** Many scholars[1] write that negative social media impacts on society are "baked into the fundamental model" of how social media platforms work. The profit model for most popular social media platforms depends on what Harvard Business School professor Shoshana Zuboff calls "surveillance capitalism." These platforms profit from collecting user's personal data and selling access to specific targeted users to political and corporate advertisers. Platforms have a profit incentive to maximise user's time and interaction on their platform. In an extractive "attention economy," companies design their platforms and affordances[2] such as the "Like" button and scrolling features using neuroscience and behaviour design to keep users on their platforms as long as possible.[3] The third aspect involves the use by platforms of secret machine learning algorithms that often seem to amplify highly emotional material such as hate speech, disinformation and conspiracy theories as this material seems to keep users on these platforms longer. These engines are interdependent. Carefully calculated algorithms maximise extraction of user's data and attention, like powerful hydraulic pumps. Multiple scholars argue that social media platforms have an economic motivation to reproduce and distribute outrage   and misinformation.

5. **Social media technology aggravates and enflames existing neurological, social, and institutional vulnerabilities.** Each of the case studies highlights examples of the ways that social media amplifies some of the existing challenges in society**.** The human brain is vulnerable to addictive technologies and emotional hijacking. Outrage is a viral emotion, either with or without social media. Human neurology is in part responsible for   why social media traffics in outrage. Likewise, there was polarisation long before there was social media. Human society is vulnerable to polarisation and the narcissism of minor differences. Ezra Klein's new book Why We're Polarized describes social media as an "accelerant" rather than major cause of division. And institutions like government, education, and legacy media evolve slowly and face immense challenges to address the myriad of social and environmental challenges now facing them. Groups use social me-

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[1] See for example Shoshana Zuboff. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2019; Siva Vaidhyanathan. *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*. New York, NY: USA Oxford University Press, 2018

[2] Every social media platform has unique affordances. Twitter offers short messages of 280 characters or less. WhatsApp is a social media platform that allows people to communicate with groups of people. The Tik Tok platform allows people to discover, comment on, create, and share short music videos. The YouTube platform operates in a similar way but enables longer videos on a variety of topics. Each of these major platforms evolves to maximise profit. Facebook's first design iteration only included making friends and posting messages on personal pages. Then Facebook introduced the "news feed" allowing people to see other people's posts. Facebook developed special algorithms to calculate what people wanted to see, so that it would show each person a unique set of posts designed especially for them. Then Facebook developed the "Like" button to allow people to show approval of other people's posts. Then Facebook enlarged this affordance to allow for showing other emotions like sadness and anger.

[3] See the Center for Humane Technology for their analysis of these challenges.

dia to leverage entrenched animosity in divided societies. Pre-existing frustrations with government, the growing complexity of social, environmental, economic and political issues, the scope of information, and distrust of legacy media and biased journalism contribute to an enabling environment. Social media is not solely to blame; however, it seems to make it easier to hijack our attention, to exacerbate hateful divisions, and to undermine democratic institutions.

6. **Negative social media impacts seem to interact with each other.** The disjointed conversation about social media impacts creates silos of conversation, with some concerned about the social media impacts on young people, some documenting racial bias of algorithms and the impact on polarisation, and others researching the role of social media in the spread of violent extremism, hate, and violence. A system's approach encourages an examination of the ways social media impacts may be reinforcing each other. In a number of countries, social media usage has grown rapidly in the last few years, suggesting cross cultural appeal of the core features of social media platforms, such as the "Like" button and other social judging affordances. People in Latin America, Africa, and Asia find major social media platforms at least as appealing, if not addicting, as users in North America and Europe. In turn, the increased usage seems to link with the   use   of   social media as a news source, which seems to correspond to the disproportionate impact of disinformation online. Disinformation in turn seems to contribute toward polarisation and democratic backsliding. And in some cases, such as Myanmar and India, these social media impacts seem to contribute toward deadly violence.

7. **There are observable patterns between online speech and digitally enflamed threats to democracy and direct violence.** In a variety of countries around the world, social media seems to be contributing toward violence against individuals as well as larger scale intergroup violence. While it is widely known that non-state terror groups use social media in recruitment and spreading of violent extremist ideologies, there is an alarming trend of governments using social media for surveillance and repression of democracy and human rights groups. Table 1 below illustrates these *Patterns of Social Media Impacts on Conflict Dynamics*. Women, youth, religious and indigenous group are particularly vulnerable to digitally enflamed violence. There is a growing and wide agreement that some social media technologies seem to be harming democracies, as detailed in Freedom House's report on [The Crisis of Social Media](). There is an increase in the
number of people using terms like the "weaponization of social media" and "social climate change" to indicate the significant negative impacts on society. The peace and development NGO Mercy Corps report on [The Weaponization of Social Media]() found similar patterns in their 2019 research.

8. **Because of the complex system driving negative social media impacts, a multi-stakeholder approach is necessary to address social media threats**. The case studies document the need for coordinated efforts by governments, tech companies, shareholders, legacy media, and civil society, as outlined at the end of this report. We call this a "peace-

building
approach for tech" because like other peace plans and peace processes, a multi-stakeholder   approach   that coordinates a wide range of stakeholders, approaches, social capital and social movements is necessary to address these challenges.

Table 1: Patterns of Social Media Impacts on Conflict Dynamics

	Venezuela	Colombia	Brazil	Zimbabwe	Kenya	Nigeria	Jordan	Egypt	Northern Ireland	India
Affecting political campaigns & elections	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X
Fueling violence against individuals	X	X	X	X				X		X
Increasing polarisation	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X
Leading to larger scale violence		X		X				X	X	X
Non-state terror groups using social media to build support					X	X	X	X		
Government proposed social media laws to limit free speech	X		X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Government repression via social media	X		X	X	X		X	X		X
Government Troll Farms	X							X		X

A System's Approach to Social Media

The system's map below illustrates the marriage of eleven fundamental *characteristics of digital communication*, with the unique profit motives baked into *surveillance capitalism*, the *attention economy*, and the design, affordances and *algorithms* of specific platforms. These features of technology do not on their own create negative impacts.

Humans with *existing neural, societal and institutional vulnerabilities* use technology. Together, this toxic cocktail of high-powered tech and vulnerable humans seems to contribute toward an interrelated cascade of impacts including privacy violations, addiction, social isolation, depression, filter bubbles, information disorders, polarisation, democratic backsliding, dangerous speech, and violence. This report synthesises how these social media characteristics and tech engines are interacting with existing vulnerabilities in ten distinct and unique local contexts to produce a handful of positives, and a mountain of harmful impacts.
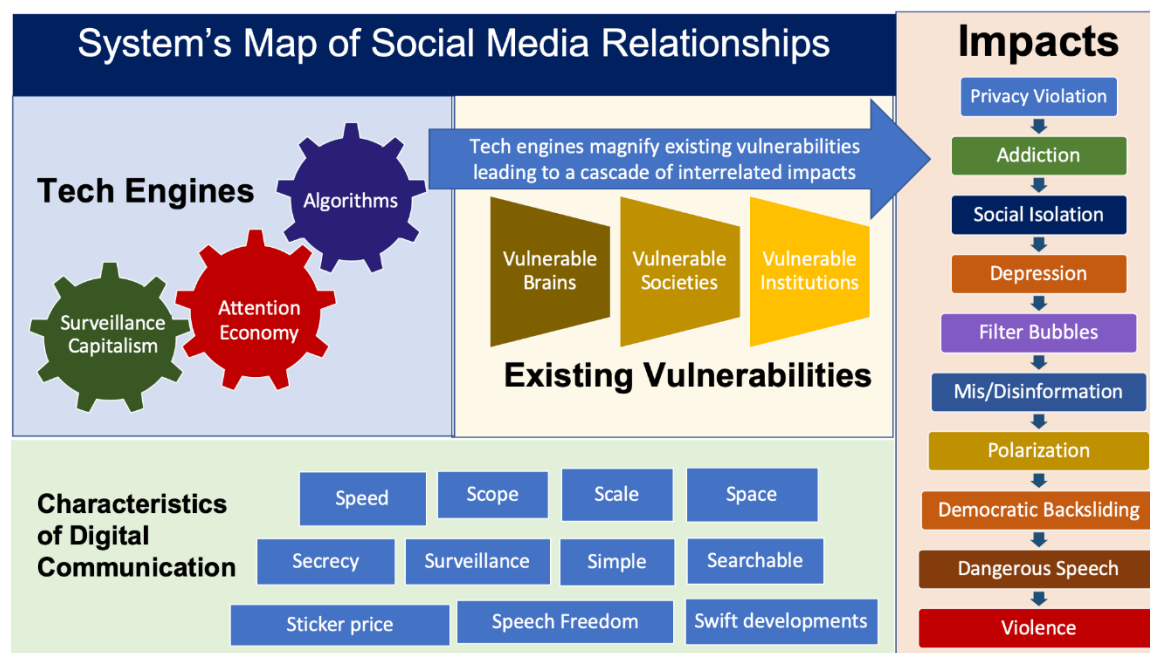

Figure 1: Systems Map of Social Media

This report pulls out anecdotes and information from ten case studies to help us better understand both the positive and negative impacts of social media.

The Good News: Civil Society and Cyberdemocracy

Techno-optimists argued social media would improve democracy by empowering democracy movements. Civil society *is* using social media to advance democracy in many countries. New voices are being heard and social media is enabling communication without elite editorial filtering. Civil society is using social media to document human rights violations and govern-

ment corruption, and to organise collective action. At least in some cases, social media platforms such as Facebook Live and YouTube videos seem to be offering some protections against attacks against civilians.

In Kenya, Fredrick Ogenga's policy brief Social Media Literacy, Ethnicity and Peacebuilding in Kenya describes the uptick in *citizen journalism* and *cybercitizenship* as a way of promoting *cyberdemocracy*, the participation of citizens in democratic debates by online communities such as Kenyans on Twitter or "KOT." Ogenga describes how the concept of a "*Virtual People's Assembly*" is an example of the significant role of social media in political communication, civil participation and democratic consolidation in Kenya

The policy brief Social Media in Egypt: Impacts on Civil Society, Violent Extremism & Government Control documents how Egyptian "netizens" (citizens using social media) advocate for social change on social media through the use of video streaming to share thoughts according to an Egyptian author, who chose to write under a pen name.

Medinat Abdulazeez Malefikas' policy brief Social Media Dynamics in Boko Haram's Terrorist Insurgence describes how the Nigerian populace has adopted social media 'hashtags' as a digital activism vanguard for participation, persuasion and pressure. Because it opens the door to more direct and effective communication between Nigerians and their government, Malefikas argues social media is considered to be a form of citizen's participation in security operations.

Diana Ishaqat's policy brief Social Media and Social Change in Jordan: Opportunities and Threats explains how civil society has used coordinated humanitarian assistance and the hashtag campaign #Open_the_Borders (#تحو   الـ حدود_اف) to support Syrian refugees. Ishaqat writes that,

> One of the most notable online campaigning efforts and trending hashtags in the last two years was on the current law of cybercrime, which activists believe proposes vague and loose definitions of concepts such as online hate speech and defamation, creating conditions leading to the silencing and detention of private individuals and journalists.

While several of the case studies document the positive usage of social media to advance democracy, the case studies focused more on the negative impacts of social media in each of these countries. Future research could focus more on the positive impacts of social media technology to support democracy movements.

Social Media Increases Information Disorders

The terminology related to facts, truth, propaganda and falsehoods in the media is complex. In some contexts, the term "junk news" is used to conjure the metaphor of junk food lacking nutritional content being similar to junk
information, lacking truthful content. In our workshop, participants supported the narrative shift to discussing
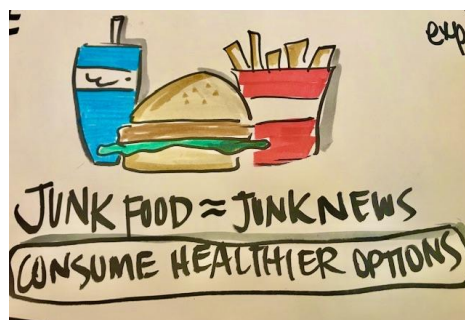
"information disorders" as useful to describe distinctions between misinformation, disinformation and malinformation; and to move away from the term "fake news," which is both imprecise and highly politicised.

The case studies document the way disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation is produced by a range of actors including economically motivated actors, domestic opposition and government actors, and by foreign state and non-state actors. Some governments are complicit, sophisticated and devoting significant resources to establishing and maintaining information
disorders. Strategic disinformation campaigns require organisation. In some countries, detailed below, government hired "troll armies" and "digital militias" mobilise citizens to spread disinformation. Several of the policy brief authors noted it is particularly challenging to combat false information when the government, including law enforcement such as police and military, are involved in propagating information disorders.

Social Media Exacerbates Existing Societal Vulnerabilities

Social media does not foment violence in a vacuum. In almost all of the case studies, a lack of public digital media literacy, and pre-existing social tensions and polarisation made it relatively easy for actors with malintent to use social media for anti-democratic and violent purposes. Participants in the workshop noted the need to map local vulnerabilities and to use traditional peacebuilding strategies to bolster social cohesion and resilience to address existing social and institutional fragility.

In a number of countries, weakened and censored traditional media makes the online channels more relevant and increases vulnerability to disinformation on social media. In Brazil, for example, Diego Casaes and Yasodara Cordova's brief [Weaponised Information in Brazil: Digitising Hate](#) analyses why disinformation on social media is such a problem.

> The economic incentive for user-generated content and widespread disinformation in Brazil is the challenge of the paywall. Even if the user is willing to use their phone credits to access the internet and check information, they face the paywall as another barrier to finding credible fact-checked information on any subject. This creates yet another incentive for users to resort to websites and blogs that host and share "alternative facts" for free. Blogs and alternative facts websites are often connected to underground networks that play a key role in spreading hate and disinformation in the country. One example was the RFA Network, uncovered by an investigation by Avaaz/Estadão. The investigation revealed that in a period of just 30 days, a network of 28 pages on Facebook connected to 15 blogs and websites managed by this group, reached 12.6 million Facebook interactions (posts, comments, shares) and had a count of 16 million people following their Facebook pages.

A combination of the digital speed, scope, scale, secrecy and speech freedom seem to be key factors in the case of this disinformation. The Facebook platform and its profit

motivated algorithms seem to have acted as a framework to link and amplify these blogs and websites to people Facebook calculated would want to see this content.

Spandi Singh's policy brief The False Information Ecosystem in India finds existing social and institutional vulnerabilities that likely apply to other countries as well. Singh writes,

> There are a number of factors which have enabled misinformation and disinformation to have a profound impact on Indian society.
>
> 1. Firstly, the country has seen a steady decline in trust in media institutions. Many citizens have turned to alternative outlets for information, such as relying on their social circles, both online and offline. Recent research has shown that media institutions themselves have also become complicit in disseminating misinformation, often due to a lack of training in content verification.
>
> 2. Secondly, most Indians lack basic digital hygiene and media literacy. New internet users who are navigating online platforms are at a greater risk for having difficulty discerning the difference between factual and falsified information. Furthermore, as users encounter vast quantities of information every day, they are also less likely to spend time verifying content.
>
> 3. Thirdly, major internet platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter, are designed to enable rapid information sharing at scale.
>
> 4. Finally, India has a long but recent history of caste and communal violence. Such social, ethnic and political tensions are still very much present in society today and can be manipulated and deepened with relative ease. This often negatively impacts communities that are already marginalised and vulnerable.

Social Media Impacts Political Processes

Diana Dajer's policy brief The use of social media in Colombian democratic spaces: A double-edged sword shares a similar analysis of how social media is impacting conflict dynamics by exacerbating social vulnerabilities in Colombia in three specific situations.

> The first case is the role of social media in the 2016 plebiscite to endorse a peace agreement between the Colombian Government and the FARC-EP guerrilla. The second case examines the 2018 presidential elections in Colombia. The last case explores the threats and crimes against social leaders since the peace agreement was signed.

Dajer concludes the following:

> 1. In each case, social media helped to trigger and shape emotions of citizens with an influence on their decisions.

2. Second, in the three cases, information and misinformation, spread through social media platforms, appeared to affect the political choices made by many citizens.
3. Third, in the three events, online political polarisation was influenced by filter bubbles and echo chambers that fed polarisation**.**

In many countries, political actors are actively using social media surveillance to segment and target voters based on characteristics such as religion, gender and age. [Singh writes](#) that political parties in India,

> are often able to construct vast databases of users for such targeted campaigns, as India has weak data privacy laws. One political party that has been particularly adept at using social media to its advantage is the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political party of Prime Minister Modi. Several researchers have indicated that in the lead up to the 2014 general elections, the BJP established cyber armies to help implement its social media strategy. Cyber armies, also known as cyber troops, can be understood as government or political party-affiliated individuals who are responsible for manipulating public opinion online. During this time, the BJP's strategy centered around building a personality following around Modi, and also around establishing a social media war room in order to track   potential voters across India's 92,000 villages.

Social Media Contributes to Violent Attacks on Individuals

[Casaes and Cordova describe](#) how disinformation on social media has led to violent attacks on individuals in Brazil.

> Brazil has one case of violence against women every four minutes, according to official data by the Ministry of Health. Gender discrimination, misogyny and violence migrate from the offline culture to the online culture. Fabiane de Jesus was killed by an angry mob after the popular Facebook page Guarujá Alerta (then with 50,000 followers) endorsed a disinformation piece saying that a woman was kidnapping babies to perform 'black magic' rituals and provided a drawn description of the alleged woman. Some people thought Fabiane looked like the woman in question (she didn't). The mob then performed a lynching that led to her death.

In India, there have been dozens of cases where online disinformation led to fatal attacks on individuals. [Singh describes](#) the following:

> A video depicting a child being kidnapped by two helmeted men on a motorcycle went viral on WhatsApp, sparking fears that child kidnappers and traffickers were running amok in Indian cities. The video had been edited from an anti-kidnapping public service advertisement produced in Pakistan. Between July 2017 and July 2018, 33 people were killed and at least 99 injured in 69 reported

attacks   on
suspected child abductors, fueled by such WhatsApp messages.

These two examples, as well as others documented in the policy briefs, illustrate how social media technology can contribute toward mob violence against individuals.

Social Media Contributes to Public Violence

Writing about the impact of social media in Northern Ireland, a post-conflict country trying to defuse sectarian tensions, Brendan McCourt's policy brief Social Media and Conflict Dynamics on Northern Ireland's Peace Lines describes how young people in Northern Ireland are using social media to return to violence.

> Children and young people use it as a tool to socialise, but ironically also to arrange fights, video and share them. Youth aged 10-17 years old used the social media site Bebo and texting via mobile phone was used to arrange riots. The fights - between individuals - are attended by up to 100 youths and children, aged
> between 8 and 18, boys and girls. They have often been sectarian, and weapons such as knives, hammers and petrol bombs have appeared in recent incidents, alarming the community, who fear they could easily morph into more serious confrontation.

Analysing the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe, journalist Tendai Marima's policy brief Social Media in Zimbabwe: A Toxic Tool or a Future Bridge to Peace? explores the connection between disinformation spread on social media and public violence. On 14 December 2018 at the annual gathering of Zanu-PF, Zimbabwe's ruling party, President Mnangagwa called on the party youth to be vigilant and engage dissenters on social media. "*Rakashanai pama social media*" he said urging the Youth League to battle it out online and defend the party." Marima describes how this morphed into actual violence.

> False results were published online and tweets claiming victory by opposition figures… thousands of MDC supporters took to the streets in protest on 1 August. The fiery demonstrations led to a brutal crackdown by the military which resulted in seven deaths and scores of bullet injuries. An independent commission of
> inquiry into the post-election violence led by former South African President, Kgalema Motlanthe, found that "[f]ake, fabricated and biased news on social media contributed to the violence.

Terror Groups Use Social Media

In Egypt, Jordan and Nigeria, terror groups like ISIS and Boko Haram use social media to communicate. In Nigeria, [Malefikas describes](#) her contextual analysis research of Boko Haram's YouTube videos. She demonstrates how Boko Haram uses these videos as a means of passing information to members scattered across their operational cells, or as bargaining chips, such as the proof of life video for the abducted Chibok girls. In claiming responsibility for attacks, Boko Haram also sometimes talks about the reasons for such attacks and in certain cases reveals potential targets.

In Egypt, the government seemingly spends more effort suppressing social media usage by democracy activists than ISIS.

> Though Twitter managed to suspend over 170,000 accounts supportive of the Islamic State, in 2015, 381,853 sympathizers and supporters' accounts that were not suspended generated 964,828,227 tweets… While Egyptian authorities claim to be on the hunt for ISIS supporters on social media, the new law focuses more on calls for change and social or political upheavals on social media platforms, which takes away from any efforts to suppress the growing extremism in Egypt.

Governments Use Social Media for Repression of Civil Society

Government attempts to proscribe dangerous speech are being used to suppress democratic dissent. In some states, criminal law is used against activists and journalists rather than the producers of disinformation. New legislation is being enacted that does not respect international human rights standards including freedom of expression and privacy. Many countries have introduced "cybercrime laws" under the guise of combatting false information. But these new laws are being used to clamp down on free speech, journalists, activists and dissenting opinions through legal prosecution of activists and designating them as terrorists.

Traditional legacy media censorship is becoming old fashioned since disinformation and propaganda appears to be more effective. The eleven characteristics of communication on the internet create a variety of new opportunities and challenges for societies.

In a growing number of countries, governments seem to be sharing a playbook of tactics to suppress their political opposition, minority groups, and democracy and human rights activists. While legacy media outlets could have "gatekeepers" and "fact checkers" to maintain coherent public information, governments can now hire trolls to create fake news websites, publish millions of pieces of deceptive stories and memes, and never be held accountable.

More importantly, because social media technology platforms like Facebook collect information on each individual user, political advertisers can now target particular messages to particular groups of people. Government strategies include the following:

- Surveillance of opposition groups, minority groups, and democratic activists.
- New "cybercrime" bills that impact freedom of speech.
- Government controlling social media access to fact-based news.
- Government targeting opposition groups by applying terrorism laws to civil society.
- Government use of biometric cards and data tracking to threaten access to government services and humanitarian aid.
- Government intimidation by encouraging citizens to "like" political parties or retweet government statements in order to feel safe or access government services.
- Government planting of disinformation to distract attention away from political issues.
- Government shutting down the internet.

Some Egyptian social media users believe al-Sissi's digital army of hired social media trolls and monitors "had one main goal and that was attacking social media users and subverting any remaining chance of freedom of speech." The Egyptian author writes,

> Digital censorship then turned to penalization… when a number of activists were falsely accused and imprisoned for spreading false news, insulting the president and inciting violence through their social media activity, despite the lack of substantiating evidence.

Egypt's 2018 Anti-Cyber and Information Technology Crimes Law censored individuals' personal social media account if they had over 5,000 followers. The author writes,

> This drowning out of activists and journalists was also accompanied by hacking activists' social media accounts in a bid to intimidate and silence them, such as in the case of Esraa Abdel Fattah when they posted photos of her without hijab to shame her… While Egyptian authorities claim to be on the hunt for ISIS supporters on social media, the new law focuses more on calls for change and social or political upheavals on social media platforms, which takes away from any efforts to suppress the growing extremism in Egypt.

According to Iria Puyosa's policy brief Venezuela's 21st-century authoritarianism in the digital sphere, the Venezuelan authoritarian regime is characterised as follows:

> [It] deploys armies of trolls and bots to flood social media platforms with pro-government propaganda, influence online discussions, harass dissidents, and spread disinformation. Venezuela pioneered the use of automated Twitter accounts in Latin America as early as 2010. The purpose of disinformation strategies is basically to contaminate the climate of discussion, generating informational chaos that can inhibit public debate and hinder the organisation of pro-democratisation political mobilisations… A leaked document from the

Ministry of the Interior and Justice, "The Bolivarian Revolution's Troll Army" ("Ejército de Trolls de la Revolución Bolivariana"), contained information on the government's Twitter strategy. The document explained that the Troll Army must be divided into five squads: Pro-Government, Opponents, Neutrals, Distraction, and Fake News. Fake News and Distraction trolls hijack opposition hashtags to distort their messages, while the (False) Opponents deploy the strategy of interference and infiltration.

Puyosa shared about the strategy of linking social welfare programmes and services to identification cards introduced by the Venezuelan government in 2017. The card provides access to users' personal data in a government database, and, through Quick Response (QR) codes, it connects cardholders to digital platforms". Voters are encouraged to use the card when they vote, raising the concern that this form of digital surveillance enables the possibility of bribing voters.

Recommendations to Key Stakeholders: A Peacebuilding Plan for Tech?

Most conversations about social media impacts on society focus on changes to government regulation, or changes to tech companies' platforms and moderation. Our research suggests the challenges of social media impacts on society are too big and too complex for any one actor. While the profit models and algorithms of social media giants like YouTube and Facebook exacerbate some of these negative impacts, the speed, scale, secret spaces, and freedom of choice basic to communicating on the internet mean that any social media platform can lead to negative impacts.

A "peacebuilding plan for tech" builds on the best practices of peace processes to solve intractable conflicts. Peacebuilding requires a multi-stakeholder inclusive effort involving multiple approaches at all levels of society. Governments and tech companies have a significant role in solving these challenges. But civil society holds power to collectively take action as well as to protect ourselves, our communities and democratic principles and processes.

These ten Toda Peace Institute policy briefs offer recommendations for a wider group of stakeholders, including governments, tech companies, legacy media and diverse civil society actors, including universities, religious leaders, youth, and other nongovernmental organisations. Here is an overview and sample of some of the diverse recommendations emerging from these policy briefs.

1. **Governments**

While some governments are actively seeking to address social media threats with new regulations and initiatives to support digital literacy, other governments are actively using social media to consolidate their power and repress civil society. Governments hold a range of responsibility to address these challenges:

1. Develop global regulatory policy and frameworks to address the relative unchecked power of the tech companies, some of which act with impunity.

2. Ensure global humanitarian principles for digital space so that any new legislation is respectful of human rights and freedom of expression recognising that many governments are using new cyber laws to further repress civil society and shrink democratic freedoms.
3. Support public digital literacy.

2. Tech companies

Internal dynamics at technology companies are challenging. Some refer to their isolation and elitism to the rest of society as the "Silicon Tower." There are forces for and against ethical standards within technology companies. There are many well-meaning employees and others focused mainly on profit. For a variety of reasons, many technology companies are slow or unresponsive to civil society. Some still cling to their old quip to "move fast and break things rather   than embrace a more deliberate "do no harm" approach. Tech companies bear the responsibility to address these challenges:

- Define socially responsibility as it relates to social media impacts on conflict.
- Offer stronger transparency and accountability to society on algorithms, bots, and automation policies.
- Collaborate to improve cross-platform moderation and high-volume fact checking, such as taking down duplicate posts on multiple sites.
- Add some level of difficulty to decrease rapid sharing of content driving hate or information disorders.
- Add features to improve digital listening, digital dignity and digital common ground[4].
- Include human rights defenders and social activists as protected categories.

3. Legacy Media

Legacy or traditional media such as newspapers, TV, and magazines have an important role in addressing social media threats to society. While social media has undermined the economic feasibility of many legacy media outlets, the importance of professional journalism and fact checking is now more important than ever. Legacy media bears the responsibility to address these challenges:

- Enable free public access to critical information by dropping paywalls during elections and other critical times to enable more people to access fact-based reporting.
- Collaborate with other media outlets in debunking false news.
- Reinforce journalistic professionalism and ethics.
- Invest in coverage of the impacts of disinformation on victims.
- Train reporters to operate in contexts with high levels of information disorders.

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[4] The Toda Peace Institute 2020 work focuses on elaborating on what this type of digital peacebuilding will look like.

- Make true coverage at least as attractive as false narratives.
- Avoid hyper-partisan coverage.

4. **Civil society**

Civil society includes a wide range of groups, including universities, religious groups, community-based organisations, tribal or Indigenous groups, and many other nongovernmental organisations. Civil society must become more active in addressing social media threats to society. Too often, civil society groups place the onus on tech companies and governments to address social media threats. And the lack of coherence in civil society recommendations has created a cacophony of voices and recommendations that seems to be undermining any strategic message.

This section includes more detail, as each of the ten authors in these case studies explored social media challenges from the perspective of civil society peacebuilding. Civil society needs to collaborate with tech companies and democratic governments where possible in a broad agenda including:

A. **Coordinate Civil Society to Engage Tech Companies**
- Coordinate within civil society to develop consolidated, coherent recommendations to address technology threats to society.
- Engage tech companies on both the design side and the UX (user experience) side.
- Find ways to maintain ethics and integrity while working with tech companies' demands and tight timelines for work.
- Map and monitor local vulnerability through local collaboration between civil society academic institutions and technical experts.
- Ensure that diverse groups are able to voice their concerns to technology companies to challenge cultural assumptions of the primarily white, male, tech-educated staff who need to be more attuned to the real threats facing people of other religions and skin colours.

B. **Mobilise Civil Society for Collective Action**
- Recognise the way technology can assist social movements.
- Mobilise people power to encourage government and tech companies to "design for human rights" and be accountable for social and political harm.
- Mobilise civil society, including tech company staff, to protect net neutrality.

C. **Conduct Research**
- Explore innovative strategies for quelling information disorders.
- Study digital identity formation and cohesion strategies.

D. **Foster Public Digital Media Literacy and Digital Peacebuilding**
- Educate and mobilise citizens to provide leadership to improve public digital literacy, to improve cyber security awareness, to prevent disinformation and change public information consumption habits.
- Develop Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) on digital literacy.
- Support victims of disinformation and dangerous speech.

- Increase public upstanding and digital peace narratives to combat online bullying and hate speech.
- Foster public conversation about "digital or cyber citizenship" to maximise how civil society uses technology to support democratic dialogue.
- Monitor online narratives to listen to community perspectives and grievances.
- Use non-militarised narratives to describe social media threats.
- Explore community health and community security models to the digital space.
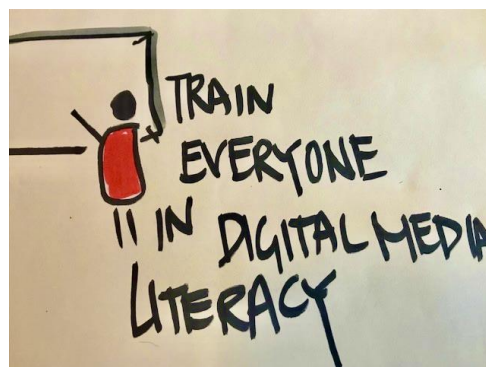
In addition to the ten policy brief authors who presented excerpts from their case studies, listed below are the workshop participants who contributed to the ideas in this report. USD stands for University of San Diego.

1. Lisa Schirch, Toda Peace Institute
2. Satoko Suzuki, Toda Peace Institute
3. Helena Puig Larrauri, Build Up
4. Jacob Lefton, Build Up
5. Kate Mytty, Build Up
6. Hana Ivanhoe, Just Peace Labs
7. Monica Curca, Activate Labs
8. Thor Morales, Activate Labs
9. Joanna Lovatt, BSR
10. Necla Tshirgi, University of San Diego (USD)
11. Philip Gamaghelyan, USD
12. Rachel Locke, USD
13. Jay Rothman, USD/Aria Group
14. Guisel Hernandez, USD
15. Peyton Cordero, USD
16. Zoya Sardashti, USD
17. Natalie Calderon, USD
18. Bridget Mundy, USD
19. Nicole Munoz-Proulx, USD
20. Jessica Blandon, USD
21. Daisy Crane, USD
22. Althea Middleton-Detzner, PeaceTech Lab
23. Caleb Gichuhi, Peace Tech Lab
24. Ayan Kishore, Creative Associates
25. Tonei Glavinic, Dangerous Speech Project
26. Theo Dolan, FHI360
27. Giselle Lopez, Integrity Global
28. Lauren Hyde, PeaceGeeks
29. Jonathan Stray, Partnership on AI

The Author

Lisa Schirch is Senior Research Fellow for the Toda Peace Institute where she directs the Institute's "Technology and Peacebuilding" programme to explore the impact of social media technology on conflict dynamics and its potential for improved social cohesion. Dr. Schirch is also a Senior Fellow with the Alliance for Peacebuilding and Visiting Scholar at George Mason University's School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution. A former Fulbright Fellow in East and West Africa, Dr. Schirch is the author of ten books and numerous peer-reviewed chapters and journal articles. In 2018, Dr. Schirch published an edited book on *The Ecology of Violent Extremism* which builds on her previous work to explore tech-assisted dialogue and coordination to improve state-society relationships and social cohesion. She holds a Ph.D. in Conflict Analysis and Resolution from George Mason University and an Honors B.A. in Political Science and International Relations. In her teaching work as professor of peacebuilding at the graduate programme at the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University and dozens of other universities around the world, she uses scenario-based, interactive pedagogies to foster innovation, improvisation, and skill-building in negotiation and problem solving.

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