

## Social Media and Peace-Building: Friends or Foes?

When asked to describe social media, many words likely come to mind. Unfortunately, “peace-building” isn’t usually one of them. Social media sites are often places of dissent, where people argue passionately for their beliefs, sometimes using name-calling and less-than-civil language to get their points across. Misinformation and conspiracies abound on these platforms, generating conflict between people of different opinions using evidence that isn’t even true. Worse yet, people can selectively only choose content by people similar to them that appeals to their own beliefs, creating echo chambers. Seeing all the deleterious effects social media can have on peace-building efforts makes it seem like a force fundamentally designed to drive humans to conflict; however, like all the other methods people use to discuss their opinions, social media can just as easily spread peace as limit it. By focusing on achieving the former, humans can harness social media to its fullest peace-building potential.

One way through which social media can be a tool in bringing about peace is by allowing people to witness other people’s cultural experiences at a scale that isn’t possible in real life. Even for those who live in relatively diverse communities where they can find people of different backgrounds and worldviews easily, there are always going to be some groups of people that are simply not represented. This becomes an even greater issue in more monolithic communities. Social media does an amazing job of bridging this gap: it provides people glimpses into the lives of others and allows them to explore more deeply when they come across a perspective that intrigues them. YouTube has certainly done this for me through its video recommendations. Every so often, YouTube automatically recommends videos it thinks that I would like from

channels I haven't seen before, and, if the thumbnail piques my interest, I take a look. Such recommendations have introduced me to many videos by people from completely different walks of life from me, and these videos, in turn, have diversified the cultures and viewpoints that I have been exposed to. For example, Uyen Ninh's hilariously relatable sketches about her experiences as a Vietnamese student studying in Germany have shown me at least one person's take on what being Vietnamese, living in Germany, and finding a balance between these two identities means, all ideas that I (as someone who has never been to Germany or met anyone Vietnamese) would likely never have been exposed to offline. These videos also demonstrate Vietnamese and German customs that are completely foreign to me (like the German tradition of going on nature hikes all the time, even on first dates) as well as ones surprisingly similar to my own (like the Vietnamese practice of adding spices to everything they eat). In doing so, they teach me the alternate ways that people different from me approach the same scenarios, while simultaneously demonstrating that others are not as different from me as they may first appear. Though Uyen's videos are only intended to be chronicles of her personal day-to-day experiences, they and other similar videos on social media play a pivotal role in peacebuilding as well. Xenophobia, racism, sexism, and all the other ways in which people form prejudices against one another stem from an ignorance of and lack of appreciation for differing perspectives. In introducing people to other cultures, professions, and nationalities, social media can prevent all of these peace-threatening phenomena by giving people a better understanding of those different from themselves.

Similarly, social media also plays a pivotal role in educating people on the problems facing the world, which can foster peaceful discussions of the solutions to these problems. Prominent examples of this include channels like TedEd and Kurzgesagt, which release beautifully animated, well-researched videos on topics ranging from global warming to

vaccination efforts, and everything in between. These videos serve as excellent introductions to important topics for those unfamiliar with them, as well as helpful sources of information for those who want to dive deeper. Through their thoughtfully planned-out videos, these channels combat the misinformation that abounds elsewhere on social media, thus giving people the facts they need to advocate for the changes they want to see in the world to build peace. Additionally, the comment sections of these videos provide a place for people to issue corrections to the video or bring up points the video failed to address, as well as discuss the video's topic in greater depth and detail than the video alone ever could. Of course, it is very easy for these social media discussions to devolve into mud-slinging instead of providing educational discourse. When done right, however, these discussions can address the complexity of an issue peacefully, and in turn, allow people of different opinions to collaborate to bring about peaceful resolutions to the problem.

Similar to the problems discussed on social media, social media itself is not completely good or bad. In fact, it is neither; it is only what we as individuals and organizations choose to make of it. Those who seek to divide and threaten peace can easily do so using social media by promoting false information and refusing to interact with people of different opinions/backgrounds, or interacting with them only through bitter arguments. Those who seek to unite and maintain peace can do so just as easily by purposefully seeking out other perspectives and engaging in civil discourse to come to peace-promoting compromises. It is up to each and every one of us to choose which camp we will fall under.