

NATIONAL PEACE ESSAY CONTEST 2011-2012 TOPIC AND QUESTION

The Impact of New Media on Peacebuilding and Conflict Management

Across the globe, innovations in technology are changing the way people consume information and communicate with those around them, and consequently, are influencing peacebuilding and conflict management. Traditional media, like television and radio, once dominated mass communication and information flow. However, we are now witnessing a “new media” revolution: social networking websites (Facebook and Twitter), participatory media (YouTube and blogs), and mobile phone technologies are the new face of global media. Individuals and groups are leveraging these tools to connect and collaborate together to develop novel approaches to overcome violence and build a sustainable peace.

For example, these tools have been used to hold governments accountable and protest violence. In the wake of Iran’s recent elections, activists mobilized a resistance movement through mobile phones and Twitter, while exposing regime violence on platforms like YouTube. The “No Mas FARC” Facebook group sparked worldwide protests against kidnappings and killings by the Colombian rebel group. From Sri Lanka to Sudan, citizen journalists have used their cell phone cameras, their blogs, and their intimate knowledge of local realities to fill in vital information gaps in conflict zones.

These tools are also helping to meet post-conflict reconstruction and development challenges. They are improving coordination between humanitarian groups, creating access to public health, and delivering innovative educational programs. In Haiti, humanitarian organizations used these tools to coordinate earthquake relief efforts, and mobile phones are helping patients in remote parts of Afghanistan get the healthcare they need.

The use of new media, however, has not always yielded results that further equality, civic participation or peacebuilding. In response to the prevalent and effective use of new media by protesters, the Iranian government blocked the use of cell phones and Facebook. It has also been used to thwart peace movements, fuel hatred, and promote the agenda of violent actors in fragile societies. For example, Al Qaeda and online hate groups like Stormfront have been able to bypass national restrictions on media and reach new audiences through new media.

How can new media best be leveraged to help build peace and prevent conflict?

In 1,500 words:

- Choose, and briefly describe, two foreign (non-U.S.) cases from the past ten years of countries in transition from violent conflict to peace, where new media played a role. The two cases may be from one country or two countries that face ongoing violent conflict or are in a post-conflict environment.
- Analyze the ways that new media, including relevant technologies, were used. If use of new media changed the conflict environment, explain what it changed and how. If not, explain why not.
- What are the risks, trade-offs, and/or limitations involved in using new media as a peacebuilding tool?
- What recommendations would you make to policy makers for how new media can best be leveraged in building peace?