

ICT for Peace: A Philosophical Perspective

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Abstract

Since the last few decades the civilized world has witnessed an unprecedented explosion in the field of information and communication technology (ICT). The development and use of different electronic media have made it possible for millions of people to have fast access to huge information resources stored in different places on the planet, to communicate with each other, and to handle information presented in various forms. These technologies offer brilliant prospects in the process of peace-building and peace-keeping (Hattotuwa, 2004). In fact, the role of ICT in peace-building has gained increased recognition in the last few decades. Today, ICT is looked upon as a key to a promising new era, in which important policy decisions at different levels could be made on the basis of real discussions focused on real facts. Therefore, it is believed that ICT can be a huge aid in the effort to build lasting peace by helping people to better communicate with each other, and by allowing them to have access to critical, real-time information, to make decisions, and to understand each other better.

This analytical paper attempts to discuss the role of ICT in the process of peacebuilding from a philosophical perspective. It explores the huge potential of ICT to conflict resolution by responding effectively to disputes that are created both at the virtual world as well as at the real world. And in doing so, it has also presented recent examples of using ICT for conflict resolutions in many places around the world. Besides, it informs us about some key ICT resources that could be used in the peace process. Thus, the paper is aimed at raising awareness about the possible roles of ICT in peacebuilding.

Keywords: ICT, peace, peacebuilding, conflict resolution, philosophical perspective

Introduction

The first half of the 21st century, as we all know, is regarded as the age of information (and communication). Today, unprecedented advancements in various technological and social spheres have been reshaping almost all aspects of human life. In fact, with the proliferation of new technologies, particularly information and communication technologies (ICT) some of the knowledge, skills, abilities, competencies and personal characteristics that were necessary for our life in the past have now become either irrelevant or less important. Instead, the capacity to apply

ICT in different areas of human life has become an important contributor to human well-being and social prosperity (Markauskaite, 2006). What is more significant is that ICT is now considered as an omnibus support system, which has extended its wonderful supportive services in the process of peacebuilding and peacekeeping in different regions of the world.

At present, it is believed that ICT can give our leaders and mediators a chance to interact with people of different backgrounds and faiths, promoting cultural diversity which, in turn, promotes peace. Actually, the stakeholders of peace

believe that peacebuilding is proactive; it starts with building a relationship and maintaining that relationship over time. Hattotuwa (2004) has rightly observed that by “building local, regional and national peacebuilding networks between and within governments, local authorities, political stakeholders, civil society and international support and resource institutions, ICT has the potential to shape powerful conflict transformation partnerships”. Therefore, if we are to succeed in the process of building sustainable peace, we must engage all stakeholders- donors, the private sectors, civil society organizations, governments, and of course, the common man. This is possible with the help of modern ICT tools and resources, such as computers, Internet, mobile phones, smartphones, televisions, projectors etc.

In this analytical paper, an attempt has been made to examine and evaluate the role of ICT in the process of negotiating for lasting peace with an emphasis on discussing it from a philosophical perspective. Today, ICT is looked upon as key to a new world order in which important policy decisions at the local, national and international levels could be made on the basis of real discussions focused on real facts. It is rightly said that gone are the days when people used to solve our problems for us and not with us. Naturally, “there is a need to promote general ICT diffusion and raise awareness and appreciation as well as literacy among our populations, especially children and youth” (Olekmbainei and SintimMisa, 2003).

Using ICT for Peace

There is no denying the fact that technology has a critical role to play in shaping the future strategies for peace. But to be successful in the effort we need to develop a better understanding of the potential contributions of ICT for peacebuilding. Now-a-days, disputes of various levels and degrees are being resolved with the help of a variety of technologies including, but not limited to social networking sites and SMS. There are a number of groups and organizations all around the world, who are leveraging ICT to promote peace-building in regions of conflict and tension by educating and empowering individuals. According to Weekes (2011), “ICT is a huge enabler and source of empowerment, allowing individuals to take some, albeit limited, control of their own destiny within the chaotic framework of a crisis, natural disaster or post-conflict situations”.

Today, the World Wide Web (WWW) has turned a world divided by walls into a world linked by networks. Naturally,

more and more individuals gain access to the Internet and mobile technologies even in the relatively remote areas of the world. That is why events or incidents that would have been unnoticed a couple of decades ago, come instantly under the purview of international opinions and discussions. Moreover, the latest communication technologies such as the Internet together with its various social networking sites can support non-violent, democratic movements, promote education, capacity building, intercultural dialogue and the establishment of a global civil society (Sabadello, 2011). Indeed, the abundance and exuberance of various media resources that provide instant and massive availability of desired and required information in times of conflicts and crises could be regarded as a positive evolution.

Now, let us take a look at how ICT could contribute in the process of establishing peace. In general, information and communication technologies can be used in peacebuilding efforts in six different ways. They are discussed below-

1. **To Provide Necessary Information-** ICT can strengthen the ties between individuals and communities by improving their ability to share, learn and interact with one another. Greater sharing of information and opinions means a better ability to understand situations and act accordingly.
2. **To Help People Process Information-** With the help of web-portals, data visualization tools, virtual dispute resolution tools, and online command centres individuals can frame arguments by processing information to resolve conflicts peacefully. Besides, there are tools that help individuals to take active part in online debates, negotiations, and mediations for a peaceful solution to any issue.
3. **To Improve Decision Making-** ICT can help to improve decision making skills, as well as the ability to see the critical information and environment in which decisions are made. Virtual games and simulations that increase awareness and understanding of a conflicting situation can be used to improve decision making skills.
4. **To Reduce Scarcity of Resources-** Better communication through mobile phones and other handheld devices can greatly increase the efficiency of markets, which in turn would reduce scarcity of resources like food, water and money that are provided to the militia members during the process of demilitarization, demobilization and reintegration (DDR).

5. **To Support Relationships among People-** ICT can be a tremendous support material to those trying to maintain old relationships or form new relationships. Through the mediums of social networking sites, online collaboration tools, and telecentres like-minded people can connect and collaborate on issues and causes of common interest during conflicts with a view to improving the peace process.
6. **To Help People Understand Each Other-** Advanced ICT, especially the Internet can make distant situations more understandable and people of distant lands seem more like us. Indeed, increased understanding among people of different cultures, languages, and concerns can go a long way toward reducing conflict and increasing the prospects of peaceful habitation.

One thing is clear that the peacebuilding processes with the help of ICT could be greatly strengthened if organizations, peoples and regions are connected using effective peacebuilding networks and active and open resources. And there are several concrete ways in which ICT can be used for peace: as a tool by international organizations, as a weapon in nonviolent struggle, and as a pillar for building and maintaining peaceful societies (Sabadello, 2010). The underlying assumption is that the creative and sensitive use of modern means of ICT can encourage holistic peacebuilding practices that could be one of the key factors for establishing a peaceful and harmonious global society.

It should be remembered that technologies, however effective and powerful they could be, can't create peace. But they can certainly create an environment where people can more easily communicate, understand the current situation, visualize the implications of their actions, understand each other's points of view, and form meaningful relationships with people who are geographically or culturally distant. Indeed, by the effective use of ICT, the hype would be washed away, and the moderate majorities would probably find more voices; and hopefully, better decisions would be made in the process of negotiating for durable peace.

Examples of Using ICT for Peace

Over the past few decades there have been increasingly innovative and open-source ICT initiatives in the events of crises management and peace-building along with other humanitarian emergencies. For instance:

- Tools like 'Crowdsourcing' and 'Crisis Mapping' have been used on numerous occasions, such as during the post-election violence in Kenya (2008), earthquakes in Haiti (2010), Japan (2011) and New Zealand (2011), floods in India (2008), Columbia (2011) and Indonesia (2013), and various hurricanes in the U.S.A.
- Large scale demonstrations organized via cell phones and SMS were one of the major factors in forcing the Philippine President Joseph Estrada to resign from his office (2001), thus bringing about change in the country without large-scale violence.
- During the civil war (1993-2005) in Burundi, online discussion groups hosted by **Burundinet** and the **Burundi Youth Council** allowed Burundian people of different backgrounds to discuss the situation, debate the root causes of unrest, and fight out ways to move forward as it was quite difficult for them to meet physically.
- The website **Videoletters.net** captures video messages from former neighbours and friends and broadcasts them via public access channels throughout the countries of the formerly Yugoslavia, allowing those who lost contact during the military conflicts (1991-1999) to reconnect.
- Following the presidential election in Iran (2009), a wave of protests emerged in the country, with the goal of challenging the result of the election as well as the political establishment in general. In this movement, rightly labeled as "Iran's Twitter revolution" by Washington Post, social networking sites like Twitter and other blogs played a major role by publishing information and political messages to the movement's members and international supporters.
- The official media website of Sri Lanka, **Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC)** allowed the Sri Lankan people to generate a lot of public debate both within and outside the country, causing a peaceful outcome in Sri Lanka's post-conflict reconciliation.
- During the recent large scale public demonstrations for democracy in the Middle-East, better known as the 'Arabian Spring', and the Civil Society Movements in India latest ICT services like SMS, Tweets and other blog posts played a major role in generating

public opinions with a view to bringing about positive changes in a peaceful, non-violent manner.

Key ICT Resources for Peace

At present, there are so many software/IT services that are somewhat useful to help people stay connected, up-to-date and informed, that are a pre-requisite in today's peacebuilding process. Many of these services are better known as social networking sites that help individuals and organizations to communicate and exchange ideas and viewpoints.

1. **Facebook**- An extremely popular social networking site, where millions of people all over the world share views, opinions and pictures that cause better understanding among people across borders. Besides, there are a number of parallel sub-groups specifically devoted to promote the concept of peacebuilding.
2. **Twitter**- A service for individuals and organizations to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent messages, called 'tweets' of 140 characters or fewer. There is a sub-group of bloggers (PCDN) for Peace and Social Change.
3. **SKYPE**- A wonderful service that allows one to call, chat, conduct a video-conference to any other online device (for free) that also has Skype.
4. **NING**- A platform for users to create, customize, and share their own social network in seconds. By creating a sub-group on this site, one can easily attract more users and share experiences.
5. **CF Sites**- a simple, free way to create a website within minutes with a custom look and broadcast it live on the Internet for non-profit or other good cause.
6. **NETSQUARED**- An online technological site to help non-profit use for learning skills, sharing experiences and developing expertise with the objectives of changing the world.
7. **ShareThis**- A wonderful tool that allows for democratizing sharing across various social networks. Here the members or visitors can instantly share any page on the network via their own social networks that can help increase communication for better understanding.
8. **ICT for Peacebuilding Blog**- A blog devoted to the open discussion of ICT for Peace issues.

9. **ASANA**- A very good service (that is free for up to 30 members) that provides an online platform for collaborative projects
10. **GOOGLE Grants**- A unique in-kind donation programme awarding free AdWords advertising to select charitable organizations working for community services to help the world in areas like science and technology, education, public health, environment, youth advocacy and the arts.
11. **Ushahidi**- A non-profit software that develops free and open-source software for information collection, visualization, and interactive mapping. It uses the concept of crowdsourcing for social activism and public accountability.
12. **TV Channels**- A number of TV channels, such as Peace TV, Aastha, Peace of Mind TV, Veda TV, Peace Channels, and others that broadcast programmes on spiritual awakening, meditation and harmony among people. These channels, popular worldwide among religious minded people help to promote inner peace through knowledge and awareness about spiritual well-being, morality and wisdom, and work as a media for international co-operation and understanding.

In fact, there are many other sites and software services that could be used for creating, transmitting, and disseminating contents and opinions that result in improved understanding among the individuals and organizations through sharing news and views. Thus, these tools and services can play some catalytic role in the peacebuilding process.

Philosophical Perspective to Using ICT for Peace

There are a number of ways to understand the current practice of using information and communication technologies (ICT) for Peacebuilding. There is no commonly accepted definition, but most would agree it involves the use of a variety of ICT tools and services to support the processes and activities involved in resolving violent conflict and establishing a sustainable peace. According to a document of the World Bank entitled 'Civil Society and Peacebuilding' (2006), the term 'peacebuilding' has been defined as "activities aimed at preventing and managing armed conflict, and sustaining peace after large-scale organized violence has ended." It further says that "Peace-building should create conducive conditions for reconstruction and development efforts, but should not be

equated and thus confused with these concepts. Peacebuilding differs from peacemaking (the use of force to end violence), and peacekeeping (the threat of the use of force to prevent actors from re-engaging in armed conflict).” The report maintains that there are three phases of peacebuilding: prevention prior to the outbreak of violence, conflict management during armed conflict, and post-conflict peace-building for up to 10 years after the conflict ends.

In all these three phases of peacebuilding ICT can play a crucial role because with the widespread availability of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) such as the Internet and mobile phones, it appears that the potential for interactions among peoples and cultures is now greater than ever before. In today’s context, ICT is indeed a powerful asset for fruitful dialogues between individuals, nations and cultures.

As with all technologies, the ICT tools are not an end in themselves, but they are just a means to achieve an end. According to Cole and Crawford (2007), in order to effectively employ the ICT tools and services for peacebuilding, it is important to start by thinking through the goals of our peacebuilding efforts. What type of peace are we trying to build? With whom do we want to build the peace? Where do we want to focus our efforts? When is the most appropriate time to intercede? What do we want to achieve? How best can we reach our target audiences?

A number of stakeholders argue that it is possible to transcend conflict if parties can be helped to analyze, explore, question and then reframe their interests and positions in an atmosphere of mutual co-operation. For this, the process of peace-building should take into its purview the participation of third parties- the ‘impartial’ outsiders, who can play a catalytic role towards constructive outcomes by replacing mutual antagonism through new ways of thinking and creating new relationships that transcend old stereotypes and barriers (Burtoin & Azar, 1986). In this context, Boulding’s views in his book ‘Peace Culture’ (2008) could be revoked- “Secrecy and control of information by those in power is replaced by the free flow and sharing of information among everyone involved.”

However, the effective use of ICT for peacebuilding depends largely on people’s having more and more access to the Internet and mobile technologies in remote areas of the world. For this, the collection and dissemination of information prior to and during a crisis should be standardized so that more effective decision-making and

timely delivery of essential services could reach to those in need of help. This is because the availability of more authentic, accurate and real time information can contribute to improving public communications and media reporting, which in turn could increase public awareness and public support during a crisis. Therefore, the use of the social, communicative applications enabled by advanced ICT has the potential to build, maintain and strengthen communication between and within societies, with the goal of building lasting and positive peace that is more than just the absence of war.

Thus, we see that there is an unprecedented advancement in the field of using ICT in the process of negotiating for peace. However, in today’s age of terrorism and numerous violent conflicts all over the world, the importance of educating children about the values of peace and co-operation should be given utmost importance. It is well known that the school setting provides an ideal space for exploring ideas of peace through critical analysis, reflection, dialogue, and collaborative learning. It is a safe space where students can experience new ideas and develop insights and understandings of complex values like peace (Song, 2012).

Experts believe that a constructivist approach is the best way to create, transmit and disseminate knowledge and information that are necessary in the peacebuilding process. And modern means of ICT are very much helpful in this endeavour. For example, Skelly (2002) argues that choices of certain ways of communication technologies constitute different versions of the world and influence actual practice and the ways in which people think. Consequently, building an atmosphere of peace becomes more accessible through the constructivist approach using ICT that encourages better and real-time communications among people.

In a case study, Song (2012) has described how students can use art and technology to overcome spatial barriers and exchange creative ideas with students of other countries. This approach is sure to increase students’ understanding of peace through “collaboration, dialogue, and creation of artworks that represent their ideas” of peace. Moreover, Constructivism considers knowledge to be socially as well as individually constructed. Therefore, the acquisition of knowledge by students depends on creating a suitable environment for the construction of knowledge. In such an environment the use of advanced ICT could help learners to realize the authentic and meaningful understanding of peace.

Major Challenges

It is evident that using ICT for peacebuilding is a relatively new and emergent field; and despite having some great potential, every new field is faced with some key challenges that every organization must overcome to make it more effective and to realize its full potential. Despite the huge potential benefits of using ICT for peace, it does not always work as promised or expected due mainly to technical problems, the reluctance of individuals to share information and complex information management architectures that severely withhold vital information flows (Ahtisaari, 2011).

According to a report commissioned by the United States Institute of Peace (2011), there are four major challenges, namely- (i) the challenge of collaboration and management of information flow, (ii) the challenge of credibility, trust and validation, (iii) the environmental factor, and (iv) the challenges of privacy, security and ethical considerations.

With the unprecedented explosion of interconnectivity and the flow of large quantities of information one of the biggest challenges is information overload, which should be dealt carefully with the help of responsible leadership and adequate training. Then, the accuracy and validity of the continuous flow of information should be verified by organizations and individuals before taking any firm step towards negotiating for peace. Again, the concerns regarding poor connectivity, ICT literacy levels and costs of access to web-based communication systems need to be overcome in order to successfully use ICT for peacebuilding. Lastly, there remain the major questions of ensuring the security and privacy of individuals and communities along with managing the ethical codes of conduct for making the use of ICT more effective without causing any physical and moral harm.

In a study on ICT for peace, Hattotuwa (2004) has also acknowledged that there are limitations of using ICT. He has argued that if ICT is “used in isolation and without any supporting structures and holistic frameworks necessary for facilitating conflict transformation,” the effectiveness of ICT interventions will be undermined and it might even serve to worsen the existing conflicts by creating new rifts within and between the conflicting communities. In this context, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan’s statement is worth mentioning- “The same Internet that has facilitated the spread of human rights and good governance norms has also been a conduit for propagating intolerance and has diffused information necessary for building weapons of terror.” In fact, ICT tools and services

are as good as those who know how to use them effectively, understand their importance and leverage them to enhance their efficiency and usefulness for humanitarian aid in the peace process. It needs a lot of caution, a lot of sensitivity, and a lot of awareness on the part of all to make ICT truly effective.

Conclusion

Thus, we see that ICT tools and services that help people communicate, understand data, and learn, via computers, the Internet, mobile phones, and more - could be a tremendous help in implementing various peacebuilding practices. For this, collaboration and learning across individuals and organizations through the integration of ICT are necessary. It is true that measuring the real impact of ICT in the peacebuilding process is difficult. Being a relatively unexplored area of research, there is hardly any concrete evidences of the effectiveness of ICT in enhancing the peace process. Therefore, the key measure should be whether ICT improves the lives of individuals and communities that are affected by conflicts, either directly or indirectly. We must not over-estimate the impact of ICT in negotiating for peace, which is not established with a one-time effort. True peace is built over time, with a variety of processes and approaches that move conflict into lasting, peaceful resolutions (Cole & Crawford, 2007).

Therefore, it must be admitted that ICT does not promise a pre-defined goal; it only fertilizes the process of peacebuilding itself by energizing the creative dynamics of societies for visualizing a future world which is expected to be much more humanitarian, democratic and peaceful. ICT is, in fact, an important aid in the peacebuilding process, as we move, one step at a time, towards a world of lasting peace. Now, we need to see in the days to come whether ICT interventions for a successful peacebuilding effort remain a utopian dream, or whether it becomes an attainable reality.

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