

A peaceful Net?

Intergroup contact and communicative conflict resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict on Facebook

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Abstract

The paper assesses the Internet's prospects for peace and communicative conflict resolution based on a case study of intergroup communication between Israelis and Palestinians/Arabs on the social networking platform Facebook. The research is informed by a synthesis of literature from the fields of conflict resolution, the contact hypothesis, and online deliberation theory. The study is based on the assumptions of the 'contact hypothesis' which maintains that intergroup communication is crucial in order to transform protracted violent conflict. Content analysis of Facebook groups revealed a large but fragmented and polarized landscape with few spaces devoted to intergroup communication between Israelis and Palestinians. Overall, the study shows that virtual spaces bear a *potential* for increased intergroup communication, yet these potentials are only realized to a very limited degree.

Key Words: Communicative conflict resolution, contact hypothesis, intergroup communication, Israel-Palestine conflict, Facebook, Internet.

Introduction

In 2010, a rather unconventional candidate was among the official nominees for the Nobel Peace Prize: The Internet. Spearheaded by technology magazine *Wired*, the nomination was grounded on the conviction that 'digital culture has laid the foundations for a new kind of society', that 'this society is advancing dialogue, debate and consensus through communication' and that 'contact with others has always been the most effective antidote against hatred and conflict'.¹ The nomination reflects a whole strand of Internet enthusiasts who praise the new technology for its potentials to realize the vision of a McLuhanite 'electronic global village'.² However, not everyone shares this profound faith in technological advancements. Some point to problems of hacktivism and cyberterrorism³, others draw attention to the considerable presence of 'cyberhate'⁴ and the risks of social fragmentation⁵. Hence, opinions widely differ as to whether the Internet is indeed a force for

good, with dystopians and utopians forming the extreme, technological deterministic poles in a spectrum of views.^{6 7}

While the peacemaking prospects of offline intergroup communication have been studied extensively, the Internet's prospects for conflict resolution have so far largely been neglected, notably regarding intergroup contact spaces that are not set up specifically for peacemaking purposes. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the extent to which the Internet facilitates communicative conflict resolution of protracted violent conflict through intergroup contact in such uncontrolled virtual spaces. This question is examined with the help of a case study of the Israel-Palestine conflict on the social networking platform Facebook. After a literature review of communicative conflict resolution, the contact hypothesis and online deliberation, content analysis of Facebook groups about the Israel-Palestine-conflict assesses the Internet's prospects for intergroup contact.

Theoretical Framework

A. Communicative conflict resolution and the contact hypothesis

Since many contemporary violent conflicts are 'protracted social conflicts'⁸ that involve 'antagonistic group histories, exclusionist myths, demonizing propaganda and dehumanizing ideologies'⁹, one major challenge of conflict resolution is to construct common ground, reduce prejudices and make identities more inclusive of *the other*. Therefore, conflict resolution through communication, i.e. communicative conflict resolution is vital. As Ellis argues, 'unless two conflicting groups can retreat to idealized separate worlds, which is particularly impossible for intractable conflicts, they must communicate in order to transcend or progress toward closing the gaps that separate them'.¹⁰ Scholars of the *contact hypothesis* have made major contributions in this area.

Introduced by Allport, the 'contact hypothesis' maintains that, 'by assembling people without regard for race, color, religion, or national origin, we can [...] destroy stereotypes and develop friendly attitudes'.¹¹ Of course, contact is not a magical formula against intergroup hatred. Conditions, such as equal group status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, supportive social norms, voluntary participation, intimate contact, absence of anxiety and threat matter.^{12 13 14} However, research repeatedly shows that contact can influence perceptions, attitudes and values in ways that reduce antagonism and prejudice.^{15 16 17} The rationale of the contact hypothesis is also the basis for the various peace workshops and dialogue groups as in Israel¹⁸ or Sri Lanka¹⁹. Interestingly, Ellis and Maoz maintain that even emotional argument and 'deaf dialogue'²⁰, i.e. articulations of mutual rejection may increase tolerance by broadening horizons and exposing inconsistencies in conventional reasoning.²¹

Unfortunately, face-to-face intergroup contact is often complicated by logistical and financial obstacles and sometimes even dangerous.²² Thus, the Internet's facilitation of communication beyond geographical boundaries²³ seems to set perfect conditions for increased intergroup contact.

B. The contact hypothesis online

Within the field of conflict resolution, there is a surprising silence regarding the Internet. However, besides some very limited attention that a research initiative called ICTforPeace has received,²⁴ some notable exceptions have suggested that the Internet can overcome practical-logistical problems of face-to-face contact.^{25 26} Ellis and Maoz studied argument interaction in online encounters between Palestinian and Israeli teenagers organised by the Israeli-Palestinian Centre for Research and Information,²⁷ Yablon examined an Arab-Jewish afterschool interaction programme,²⁸ and McKenna, Samuel-Azran and Sutton-Balaban set up and analysed a 'Good Neighbors Website' for intercultural exchange in the Middle East²⁹. However, one problem of such peace encounters is the risk that only the moderate or the already 'converted' participate. Therefore, it is important to note that the existing studies all analysed controlled virtual spaces, intentionally set up for peacemaking purposes. What happens in more uncontrolled, unmoderated spaces has so far remained unexplored.

C. Online deliberation research

Given this research gap in the field of conflict resolution, literature on online deliberation provides a valuable supplement as there has been a fair amount of research on communication in uncontrolled spaces such as Usenet-groups, albeit predominantly not regarding highly antagonistic groups at war.³⁰

Many deliberation scholars argue that the Internet causes increasing social fragmentation into 'cyberghettos'^{31 32} rather than fostering interaction among the non-like-minded. They cite studies indicating that online discussions mostly occur among people with similar views.^{33 34} Regarding identity-based conflict, this 'fragmentation hypothesis' hence draws a rather negative picture of at best little value for peacemaking, and at worst even further radicalisation of antagonistic groups. Moreover, scholars note that in places where discourse among the non-likeminded *does* occur, normative criteria of deliberation, notably reflexivity, respectful listening, inclusion and equality, are often not met.³⁵

However, Dahlberg contends that the 'fragmentation hypothesis' fails to account for the positive contributions of deliberation within like-minded

groups, vital for collective action and formation of counter-discourse.³⁶ Moreover, Witschge notes that the question must not be whether the Internet will bring about *ideal* discourse, but rather whether it can *enhance* deliberation processes as compared to the offline world.³⁷ This is an important point regarding situations of violent conflict, as communication between conflicting groups is often almost non-existent in the offline world.

Altogether, research on online deliberation confirms the prediction of intergroup contact researchers that the Internet 'will not magically transform former enemies into friends'.³⁸ Nevertheless, as deliberation scholars focus on political argument in culturally homogenous, non-violent settings, they cannot compensate the lack of research on online communication in contexts of protracted violent conflict.

Research Design and Methodology

It has become evident from the literature review that there is a research gap regarding the prospects of the Internet for increased intergroup contact in uncontrolled virtual spaces between conflicting groups that are at war. The paper's research question is thus:

To what extent does the Internet facilitate communicative conflict resolution of protracted violent conflict through intergroup contact in uncontrolled virtual spaces?

To limit the scope of the empirical investigation, the focus of this paper will be on *quantity* of intergroup contact, not quality.³⁹

A. Case study: The Israel-Palestine conflict on Facebook

The Israel-Palestine-conflict was chosen as a case study as it is one of the most protracted violent conflicts worldwide.⁴⁰ Hactivism employed by both sides has fuelled the conflict in the past⁴¹ and while only 14.2 percent of Palestinians have Internet access as compared to 71.6 percent of Israelis, Palestinian Internet usage increased by 900 percent between 2000 and 2010.⁴²

The social networking platform Facebook was chosen both because it is popular among Israelis and Palestinians^{43 44} and because Facebook explicitly states that it 'is proud to play a part in promoting peace by building technology that helps people better understand each other. By enabling people from diverse backgrounds to easily connect and share their ideas, we can decrease world conflict in the short and long term'.⁴⁵ The analysis will centre on Facebook *groups*, i.e. pages created by Facebook users, mostly containing a discussion forum and open for others to join.

B. Method

Content analysis, a ‘technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages’⁴⁶ was chosen since it has proved valuable in precedent studies of online discourse and general patterns of online spaces,⁴⁷ despite some problems such as the impossibility to account for lurkers, i.e. passive participants.⁴⁸ The most serious difficulty was the danger of ‘objectifying’ highly subjective, political interpretations through quantification. As Mouffe states, any decision of what to count as ‘extremist’ is always political.⁴⁹ Content analysis was nevertheless chosen over more qualitative methods since the aim was rather an investigation of general patterns than in-depth interpretation of the subtle meanings of intergroup discourse.

C. Sampling

The sampling strategy was to gather all English, Hebrew and Arabic Facebook groups around the Israel-Palestine conflict. Facebook’s group search function posed a major challenge due to its intransparent and seemingly arbitrary rules. Therefore, a rather broad keyword strategy had to be adopted. Problematically, the broad keyword search of “Israel Palestine”, “Palestine” and “Israel” did not list all the peace groups on the conflict. Therefore, the keywords “Israel Palestine peace”, “Palestine peace” and “Israel peace” had to be added. While this strategy certainly impairs the representativeness of the sample, no better way was found to deal with the problem.⁵⁰ The sampling was conducted during two days in July 2010. After exclusion of groups with less than hundred members, groups without major focus on the Israel-Palestine conflict⁵¹, closed groups and groups not in English, Arabic or Hebrew, the final body consisted of 770 groups.

D. Coding scheme

The coding scheme contained 9 closed items. While SIZE, LANGUAGE, REGION and discussion forum ACTIVITY (divided into four sub-variables) assess general group features, TYPE, determining the group’s main purpose, and PARTISANSHIP are more subjective variables. A pilot analysis of 50 groups was conducted and coding guidelines subsequently improved (see Appendix A). For the TYPE variable, four distinct categories (see Table 2) were generated deductively. To assess intercoder reliability, 50 randomly selected groups were coded independently by the researcher and a trained second coder. Intercoder reliability of > 0.80 (percentage agreement, see Appendix B) suggests that the coding scheme is sufficiently reliable.⁵²

Results and Interpretation

The statistical analysis was conducted with SPSS 17.0. Unless stated otherwise, the 5%-significance level was used for assessments of statistical significance. Reported p-values are two-sided. All reported results are as in July 2010.

A. A fragmented virtual sphere

The very process of sampling revealed the highly fragmented nature of the virtual sphere on Facebook. Even after excluding the groups with less than 100 members, 770 groups remained, often with very similar purposes or topics. While there are significantly more Pro-Palestine than Pro-Israel groups (see Table 1; Chi-Square Goodness-Of-Fit Test, $\chi^2=456.945$, $df=2$, $p<0.01$), there are in total (not accounting for potential double memberships) slightly more members in pro-Israel than in pro-Palestine groups (Mann-Whitney-U-Test, $U=29030.500$, $p>0.01$). These figures show that Palestinian groups are more fragmented than Israeli groups.

Table 1

	Pro-Palestine groups		Pro-Israel groups		Nonpartisan groups	Total
No. of groups (≥100)	536 (69.6%)		128 (16.6%)		106 (13.8%)*	770 (100%)
	<i>Moderate</i> 403 (75.2%)	<i>Extreme</i> 133 (24.8%)	<i>Moderate</i> 80 (62.5%)	<i>Extreme</i> 48 (37.5%)	-	-
Total no. of members	280,462 (42.8%)		319,594 (48,7%)		55,784 (8.5%)	655,840 (100%)
	<i>Moderate</i> 231,954 (82.7%)	<i>Extreme</i> 48,508 (17.3%)	<i>Moderate</i> 265,394 (83.0%)	<i>Extreme</i> 54,200 (17.0%)	-	-
Mean & median of members	523 189		2497 237		526 165	851.71 187
No. of inactive** * groups	231 (43.1% within Palestine groups)		58 (45.3% within Israel groups)		48 (44.8% within neutral groups)	336 (43.7% within total)

***Inactivity only refers to inactivity on the group discussion board since July 2009, not to other group sections like the 'wall'.

B. Polarization: Few spaces for intergroup contact

Another major observation is the considerable number of members in extremist groups, expressing hateful, antagonistic positions with little tolerance for other or more moderate views. Underpinned by the findings of the *type* variable (see Table 2), this suggests that the virtual space of Facebook is rather used for intragroup mobilization and expression of support/opinion than for intergroup contact. Only 14.4% of all groups are 'peace groups', dedicated to peacemaking through dialogue or concrete peace initiatives, and the most prevalent type of group are support/opinion groups, i.e. groups whose main intention is self-expression.

Considering *language* and *origin*, the fact that at least 25% of English-titled groups were created in the Middle East illustrates that many groups are not for internal purposes only, but used to address and seek support from non-Arabic and non-Hebrew speakers.

Table 2

	Peace/ dialogue	Activism/ mobilization	Awareness/ information	Support/ opinion
Definition	A group whose main purpose is the facilitation of peace & dialogue.	A group whose main purpose is a call for action (including boycott and petitions).	A group whose main purpose is to spread information, educate and raise awareness.	A group whose main purpose is the indication of support (or non-support) for one country/policy.
No. of groups	111 (14.4%)	193 (25.1%)	148 (19.2%)	318 (41.3%)
Total no. of members	64,295 (9.8%)	271,706 (41.4%)	54,789 (8.4%)	265,050 (40.4%)
Mean & median of members	579 162	1408 223	370 193	833 187

C. Little discussion forum activity

A third major finding is the little degree of activity within the groups' discussion boards. 43.8% of all groups have not had any activity on their discussion board and of the 433 groups that had some degree of activity in the past, only 50 Percent had discussion board activity within the last year (01.07.2009 – 31.06.2010). Furthermore, half of all active groups were only active within a limited period of 1 or 2 months. After recoding the *partisanship* variable into an ordinal variable with three levels (neutral, moderate,

extreme), extremist groups were found to be less active in discussion forums than moderate or neutral groups (Spearman's rho, $p < 0.05$).

D. Promising spaces: Peace groups and nonpartisan groups

81% of peace groups were coded as nonpartisan, i.e. open to Israelis and Palestinians. As for the groups in general, peace groups also tend to have more activity with increasing size (Pearson Correlation Coefficient, $r = 0.768$, $p < 0.01$). However, as Table 3 shows, there are notable exceptions. Sadly, while many groups explicitly call for dialogue and debate, there is almost no discussion forum activity. The group description of [שלום רוצים נואנה אל סלאם זריד](#) WE WANT PEACE!, for example, states, 'just create peaceful dialogue and talk to eachother, respect eachother and treat eachother equally...', yet there are only three posts in the discussions section.

Table 3

Biggest nonpartisan peace groups						
Group name	Members	Threads	Posts	Posts/threads ratio	First post	Last post
יהודים וערבים מסרבים להיות אויבים العرب واليهود يرفضون ان يكونوا اعداء [Arabs and Jews refuse to be enemies]	16407	117	842	7.2	Dec 08	Jun 10
Pro-Israel, Pro-Palestine, Pro-Peace	6736	[no discussion forum]				
ShalomSalaam Social Movement (Global)	3112	148	1450	9.8	Aug 07	Jun 10
We Stand Up for Peace	2744	6	13	2.2	Jan 09	Jul 09
Shministim Letter 2009/10 - Jews and Arabs Refuse to Be Enemies.	1515	4	9	2.3	Oct 09	Apr 10
Smaller groups with high discussion forum activity (> 150 posts)						
The Israeli Palestinian Peace Initiative	399	170	1670	9.8	Jul 06	Feb 09
Let's talk Arabs & Israelis	305	31	452	14.6	Jan 09	Mar 09
Jews & Muslims For Peace	291	13	152	11.7	Apr 07	Feb 10

Interpretation

At first sight, the results paint a rather dim picture of the Internet's prospects for peace through intergroup contact. It seems that Facebook groups are rather used to indicate support and opinion than to deliberate with the non-like-minded. The high number of groups and the small amount of nonpartisan spaces confirm Sunstein's fragmentation hypothesis.⁵³ Moreover, the considerable presence of extremist groups puts into question any peace-facilitating prospects of the Internet. Noting the little degree of discussion forum activity, Sunstein's fear of opinion reinforcement leading to more extremism seems somewhat exaggerated regarding Facebook groups, but the findings nevertheless confirm Gerstenfeld et al.'s observation that extremists appreciate the Internet as a means for mobilization and self-representation.⁵⁴ The high prevalence of partisan groups also indicates that the virtual space of Facebook is a political space, a battleground for the control over meaning. While the results strongly confute utopian views of the Internet as an inherently positive force, they do not automatically prove the dystopians right. The results actually do not only give reason for pessimism; they can also be interpreted in a more positive light.

First of all, the high number of groups can also be read as a sign for the appreciation of alternative channels of meaning creation, identity formation and opinion expression. The prevalence of support/opinion groups indicates that the groups themselves carry meaning. Through the mere act of joining a group, a group member is given a voice to communicate a certain position or view to the outside. Such alternative spaces, circumventing traditional media, may help shift power relations and facilitate emancipation.⁵⁵

Secondly, regarding extremist groups online, Brinkerhoff argues that the Internet might 'channel frustration into verbal debates [...] and counter the marginalization conducive to violence'.⁵⁶ From this perspective, although racism online may also be psychologically harmful,⁵⁷ the presence of hate groups online *might* reduce their need for expression through physical violence. This is, of course, a sensitive claim, which needs further investigation.

Third, the prevalence of partisan groups must not only be interpreted negatively. Recalling Dahlberg's critique of the fragmentation hypothesis, intragroup deliberation is vital for democracy, and by extension also for conflict resolution.⁵⁸ Hence, besides the potentially empowering character of mobilization and awareness groups, spaces for moderates to meet are important in that these help break what Noelle-Neumann calls a 'spiral of silence'⁵⁹ in the context of public opinion formation. The Internet provides a means of finding people with similar views, and this can be important in situations of 'normalized culture(s) of violence'.⁶⁰

Lastly, the probably strongest evidence against dystopian views of the Internet is the fact that there *are* spaces that embrace intergroup communication. However, concerning these potentially peacemaking virtual spaces, further research of the *quality* of discourse is needed since even groups with a potential for diversity 'often simply develop into ideologically homogeneous 'communities of interest''.⁶¹ Nevertheless, the mere fact that peace groups exist, suggests that some people make use of the Internet for intergroup contact.

Overall, the empirical investigation has disproved both dystopian and utopian accounts, suggesting that the Internet can *create* or *inhibit* possibilities but not *enforce* action. The mere existence of a virtual space where intergroup contact is *possible* is not *sufficient* for the realization of an 'electronic global village'. To borrow Dahlgren's terminology, 'civic cultures of participation'⁶² must be developed for conflicting groups to actively seek intergroup contact. This also implies that other online spaces might display considerably different communication patterns. Similarly, different offline conflict dynamics may change dynamics and patterns of online interaction.

Conclusion

Based on a theoretical framework of communicative conflict resolution, the contact hypothesis, and online deliberation studies, this paper has empirically investigated the Internet's prospects for peace and conflict resolution by analysing intergroup contact of Israelis and Palestinians on Facebook. The case study revealed a highly fragmented, polarized virtual sphere with little intergroup interaction. Thus, while virtual spaces bear a considerable *potential* for intergroup communication and communicative conflict resolution, conflicting groups only make use of it to a limited extent. Nonetheless, keeping in mind that the Internet's prospects for peace must be assessed in relation to offline realities, even the limited observed intergroup contact may make important contributions to the resolution of violent conflict.

Considering the rapid growth in Internet users, the Internet can be expected to play a role in future conflicts, be it positive or negative. Therefore, a better understanding of the online dynamics of online intergroup communication is crucial to improve strategies of conflict resolution. Given the limited potential for generalization of case studies, further research is indispensable. Interviews, for example, may help to understand why online intergroup communication is limited, how it may be increased, and whether communication occurs through more indirect, 'invisible' channels as in the case of lurkers.

Finally, the question that remains is: Did the Internet receive the Nobel Peace Prize? No. Would it have deserved it? Considering this paper's findings,

the answer is ambivalent. If assessed only by its *potentials* for increased intergroup contact, the answer is yes. However, as has been shown, granting possibilities does not imply that conflicting groups make use of them in ways conducive to peacemaking. Thus, whether the Internet will in the long-term serve the purposes of peace and communicative conflict resolution depends on what we, as humans, make out of it.

Notes

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Appendices

Appendix A: Coding scheme

Variable	Description and coding instructions	Levels
SIZE	How many members does the group have?	
LANGUAGE	What is the main language of the group? (based on the group title)	1 English 2 Arabic 3 Hebrew 4 Multiple
REGION	Does the group have an explicit geographical origin?	1 Middle East 2 West (Europe, US) 3 Other 4 No explicit mention
ACTIVITY	ACTTHREADS. Total of threads in discussion section.	
	ACTPOSTS. Total number of posts in discussion section	
	ACTFIRST. Date of first post	
	ACTLAST. Date of last post	
TYPE	<p>What is the predominant nature of the group, i.e. what is its main purpose (based on the <i>title</i> and the <i>group description</i>)?</p> <p>Peace/dialogue group: A group that explicitly calls for peace and/or intergroup dialogue.</p> <p>Activism/mobilization group: A group that calls for action, including online petitions, boycott, demonstrations.</p> <p>Awareness/information group: A group whose main purpose is education, either factual or normative, usually with rather long group descriptions.</p> <p>Support/opinion group: A group that mainly just indicates an opinion, including groups in support of one country/policy, expressive and opinionated groups. Contrary to awareness/education groups, support/opinion groups usually do not have a very long group description.</p>	<p>1 peace / dialogue group 2 activism / mobilization group* 3 awareness / information group 4 Support / opinion group 5 other / can't determine</p> <p>*if boycott group, please note.</p>

PARTISANSHIP	<p>What is the group's partisanship? (based on title and group description)</p> <p>Only code 1 or 5 if the group can be classified as "extremist", indicated by the use of words like fuck and hate or denial of existence of the out-group. If a group uses extreme words but explicitly self-reports in the description not to be racist, do <i>not</i> count the group as extreme but as moderate.</p>	<p>1 The group is extremely pro-Palestine (and anti-Israel).</p> <p>2 The group is moderately pro-Palestine.</p> <p>3 The group does not take sides (nonpartisan).</p> <p>4 The group is moderately pro-Israel.</p> <p>5 The group is extremely pro-Israel (and anti-Palestine).</p> <p>6 Can't determine</p>
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General instruction: Coding should be based on information given in the group title and description.

Appendix B: Intercoder Reliability

Sample: 50 groups.

	Percentage agreement
SIZE	1.0
LANGUAGE	1.0
REGION	0.9
ACTTHREADS	1.0
ACTPOSTS	1.0
ACTFIRST	1.0
ACTLAST	1.0
TYPE	0.82
PARTISANSHIP	0.80