

# Developing Media and Information Literacy Skills to harness the power of Social Media to promote Peace

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## Introduction

*“First: Let us examine our attitude towards peace itself? Too many of us think it is impossible. Too many think it unreal. But that is a dangerous, defeatist belief. It leads to the conclusion that war is inevitable-that mankind is doomed-that we are gripped by forces we cannot control. We need not accept that view. Our problems are man-made-therefore, they can be solved by man. And man can be as big as he wants. No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings.” – Former US President, John F Kennedy*

The assertion of the former US President, John F Kennedy that no problem of human destiny is beyond human beings is a negation of the invincibility of conflicts around the world which plagues harmony and peace co-existence. If as Kennedy said that problems are man-made and therefore can be solved by man, then the culture of peace will also have to be made by man himself. In this context, the 1980 Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Perez Esquivel (2015) stresses that to build a society in which peace is the foundation of life ‘we much reach out our hands, fraternally, without hatred and rancour, for reconciliation and peace, with unfaltering determination in the defense of truth and justice. We know we cannot plant seeds with closed fists. To sow we must open our hands.”

Esquivel’s thrust on the need for people to reach out for a peaceful society underscores the importance of different strategies human society has to constantly use to nurture solidarity among communities and individuals. While there are contention and contestations on the efficacy of the communication revolution as a driver for peace and nonviolent action, technological advancement offers a large number of people a space for global conversation and is one of the strategies for reaching out and nurturing solidarity.

There are examples around the world on how the new media is manipulated to incite hatred and violence, mobilize young people to terrorism, spread ill-feelings

and xenophobia. Ikeda (2007) points out that rapid advancement of media technologies have made it possible for religious and ethnic hatred to be broadcast around the globe in the blink of an eye. Hence the challenge to communications today, he says, is to address the lack of true dialogue linking the hearts of one individual to another.

Similarly, Bokova (2010) notes, "Though rapid development of information technology has multiplied opportunities for rapprochement and social interaction, it has also exacerbated misunderstandings and expressions of discontent."

Towell (2011) argues, "The digital culture is laying the foundation of a new kind of society, one marked by increased openness, communication and participation. These qualities, together with the mutual understanding fostered through cross-cultural exposure, are the basis of a culture of peace. And for those who feel passionate about contributing to peace, the expanding possibilities of our digital connectedness offer an endless field of potential, limited only by our imaginations."

The challenges and possibilities of using the new media for peace, nonviolence and greater social interaction as underlined by Ikeda, Bokova and Towell takes us to analyze the different dimensions of promoting peace using the digital space. While there are also dangers of the new media being used to propagate misunderstandings and hatred, it is critical that we promote media and information literacy amongst the citizenry especially amongst young people to able to deftly use the new media for peace.

Grizzle et.al. (2013) argues that the creation of a culture of peace and peaceful understanding between communities and people must be the ultimate principle for media and information literacy. Grizzle et.al. (2013) further notes that the promotion of media and information literacy (MIL) and intercultural dialogue for peace and sustainable development is a key approach to challenge the growing inequalities, misunderstandings and soft conflicts. They point out, "If citizens improve their media and information competency, they can contribute to representing a serious demand for the mass media and other information providers to operate in accordance with peace and harmonious international relations."

Tornero and Varis's (2010) perspectives on the new objectives of media literacy in the twenty-first century underline the significance of linking media literacy education to peace. These objectives includes: a) capacity for listening, namely for understanding, for talking; b) tolerance; c) respect for diversity; and d) ethics. They further note that the creation of a culture of peace and peaceful understanding between communities and people must be the ultimate value for media literacy.

Further, Nagaraj and Kundu (2013) argue on a framework of media and information literacy which could help facilitate dialogue between diverse communities, further positive engagement in conflict situations, promote a culture of peace and, most importantly, facilitate sustainable development in culturally diverse country like India. They use the perspectives of eminent Gandhian, Natwar Thakkar on the centrality of emotional bridge building and mutual respect in the communication praxis of India to argue their case for the framework.

To ensure greater focus, this chapter while delving on different dimensions of peacebuilding through social media, will look at components of peace and nonviolence to be integrated in media and literacy programmes so as to enable young people to greater use of social media for peace.

### **Social Media and Peace**

Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) defines social media as 'a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content'. These Internet-based applications facilitate collaboration and interaction between people across the world and contribute to the creation of a global community. Some of these interactive applications include different social networking services (eg. Facebook), blogs (eg. Blogspot), microblogs (eg. twitter), wikis (eg. wiktionary.org), forums (eg. minecraftforum.net), video sharing (eg. YouTube), and image sharing (eg. Flickr & Instagram).

Explaining the nature of the social media, Sawyer (2011) points out, "New social media have been rapidly spreading across the globe and gaining popularity in today's society. While providing a common way of linking people together through knowledge, behaviours, and attitudes, a sense of belonging to a greater social network other than one's own local community is effectively created. The Internet exemplifies such a significant means in connecting to a diversity of people, places, ideas, and cultures. New social media have provided ways in which people can communicate and interact with others across the world, without being restricted by the limitations of time and distance."

Sawyer further talks about how the new social media is able to contribute to dialogues for peace and harmony, "Intercultural dialogue is critical today in our globalized and blended world, where different cultures encounter each other daily, especially through social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and the iPhone. Turmoil and violence would exist unless people actively promote intercultural dialogue and communication competence to achieve harmony and understanding."

How the social media can be used to promote peace can be analyzed by the following example. Here is the excerpt of this unique intervention from The Economist (2008) (<http://www.economist.com/node/10650741>)

*It was the first time Facebook, a social-networking website, has been used to organise what many have described as the largest demonstration in their country's history. On February 4th more than a million people in Colombia, and smaller groups in dozens of cities across the world, took to the streets to repudiate the FARC guerrillas. In doing so they may have changed the terms of the debate about how to free the 750-odd hostages held by the guerrillas, some for a decade.... That prompted Oscar Morales, a young engineer, to set up on Facebook a group called "One million voices against the FARC". The media took up his call for a march. The government cleverly stayed out of its organisation, although it gave public workers time off to attend. The opposition was divided, with some calling for protests against abuses by the security forces too, but in the end many of its leaders marched."*

While analyzing different news reports, it was found that Morales could use his Facebook campaign to rally around 12 million people against the guerrillas. Morales talked about the impact of his initiative, "The campaign convinced people to say: We do not tolerate the kidnappings and we want their freedom. On the day of the protest, February 4, 2008, the whole country was surprised by how many people marched. More than 500,000 people joined our Facebook group. Months later many freed hostages said they had heard our protest in captivity on a radio and it gave them hope they had survived. We showed most people do not support FARC. Many members left and rejoined society."

(<http://metro.co.uk/2010/02/08/oscar-morales-how-i-used-facebook-to-protest-against-farc-85760/>)

Thomas and Kundu (2012) cites the example of a Class XII student from Kolkata, Ananya Roy who used the new media to take up a nonviolent protest against the death of over 90 people in a fire in AMRI Hospital. They quote Roy (The Peace Gong, April 2012), "On December 12, 2011, I sent out approximately three hundred text messages to students of various schools and colleges telling them that I would be in front of AMRI, sticking a few posters and lighting a candle as a mark of a silent

protest. The message was forwarded to numerous people and I received a huge response saying that they wanted to join in too. They wanted to light a candle that would ignite the change in the prevailing darkness. I went ahead to create an event on Facebook named, 'VOICE YOUR GRIEF AND ANGER-PLAY THE ROLE OF THE YOUTH'. It was a public event open to all those with a heart and will bring about a change. Within a day we got a response from more than 200 people saying that they would be attending the gathering."

Social Media platform like Facebook offers great opportunity to individuals, institutions and groups to construct peace messages, initiate dialogues, share information of peace initiatives, recognize peacebuilding efforts, promote rapprochement and reconciliation and facilitate networking amongst groups/individuals/organizations involved in peacebuilding. There are large number of pages, groups and events related to peace in the Facebook. For instance the page of Global Peace Index regularly updates visitors on measurements of peacefulness. The page of the Global Campaign for Peace Education shares information on different initiatives on peace education across the world. The Peace in your lifetime- I'm a Dreame AND- we're creating it NOW has interesting insights on different dimensions of peace. Similarly there is large number of groups which comprises of individuals working on peace. These are also sites for dialogues and sharing of information. Some of these groups include Transcend Peace University, Tools for Creative Peacebuilding, Teachers without Borders Peace Educators, Peace Journalism, Soldiers for Peace International, Aman ki Asha etc.

A case in point on how dialogues for peace are constructed in social media can be gauged by the following example in The Peace Gong page in the Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/The-Peace-Gong-187829521307498/>):

A poem, The Confession by Syeda Rumana Mehdi, was posted in the Page which eloquently portrays how we humans are responsible for conflicts around the world and the essence of individuals to practice humanism.

The sand is slipping slowly,  
Grain by grain,  
In the hourglass,  
Time is passing,  
Yet we stand still,  
The perfect picture of misery,

We fought with sticks, guns, bombs,  
And then with the mighty nuclear bombs,

Yet we lost,  
We lost the battle of trust and humanity,  
We secured wealth for our children,  
But we cannot tell them,  
Stories of our selfishness,.....

My daughters are not safe,  
Neither are my sons,  
Nor my honor,  
Spasms of agony,  
Rip my core,  
As I write this confession,  
I call out,  
To Madiba and Bapu,  
To help us,  
Bless us,  
Help us find ourselves,

Lose yourselves in the sea of humanity,  
And find yourselves,  
In the smile of an orphan,  
In the happy gurgle of a baby,  
And in your heart.

While the poem was shared in more than 45 groups, about 50 comments were posted on the poem. An analysis of the comments in general pointed out on how people themselves were responsible for conflicts, as these were all made by human. Majority of the comments argued that it was not impossible for resolving these conflicts through nonviolent means. The comments underscored that all conflicts and disputes could be resolved through dialogue and peaceful means. It was pointed out that 'human-to-human contact was extremely important in today's world of conflicts, it is critical for global peace.' For instance one comment pointed out that human are not born with a tendency to consider violence as a normal phenomenon.

*@ Ruby Rajawat: Violence is no more than just an impulse. Very oft we consider it as a normal human tendency to get impulsive on things and acts those irritate us, hurt us or harm us. But we seldom give a thought to the very concept of humanity. We tend to relate it with religion but we don't pay attention to the fact that it's more of spiritual being. Humans*

*are not born with a tendency to consider violence a normal thing. But we as a society impart these attributes to a child. Sharing, patience, and determination we are getting sans of these human traits gradually. Media is highlighting violence in each form. Why are we not focusing and propagating news that have peace in them? Why do we see just blood and murder of humanism everywhere?? Is our world really like this???*

Meanwhile Dinan (2009) shares an interesting example of Twitter contributing to peace dialogues:

“On Tuesday, May 19th, 2009, Deepak Chopra (@Deepak\_chopra) offered a simple 88 character tweet on Twitter “Please take the vow of non-violence with me today:<http://www.itakethevow.com> Please RT!”

What followed offered a fascinating experiment in this medium’s capacity to be a catalyst for something quite noble — the spreading of peace on earth. Within one hour, there had been one hundred retweets of his post and by the end of the day, over two hundred. Each retweeter offered their encouragement to followers to join them in the vow of non-violence in thought, words, and actions. Hundreds did so. Many more watched the inspiring music video and the story of the origin of the global movement, which has resulted in close to 20,000 people taking the vow since it began in November of 2008.... The vow also includes a commitment to encourage two others to join you in taking the vow. It’s thus designed as a simple viral strategy to create peace on earth, with a goal of eventually having 100 million people take the vow. That sounds audacious until we look at the current rate of growth. From 450 people who took the vow in November to nearly 20,000 who have done so six months later, the spread has been rapid, with close to a doubling of signatories each month. If the current rate of growth continues at the same pace, I Take the Vow would reach 100 million signatories by mid-June of 2010. I believe this can be a powerful demonstration experiment of the deepest spiritual purpose of Twitter: for us to evolve our culture rapidly and to create major change on the planet with ease. Taking and then spreading a powerful vow that can truly lead to peace on earth takes only personal willingness, a few minutes and a few dozen words.”

By examining several examples of social media and peace including that of Morales, Ray (2010) articulates, “There is no question that social media can bring great and positive change in our world, but here’s the problem: It cannot do it alone. In each of the examples above, it was not Twitter or Facebook that created change but the

action of people (or the threat of action of people) that did so.” The examples of Morales and Ananya Roy are in sync with Ray’s articulation on the importance of action by individuals and groups who through the deft use of the social media can contribute to positive change.

Further Mehdi (2013) talks about how the social media can be used creatively by young people to promote a culture of peace in her editorial for the children’s newspaper, The Peace Gong to mark the International Day of Nonviolence on October 2, 2013, “Let every dream become Martin Luther King’s dream, let every step towards peace become Mahatma Gandhi’s Salt March and let every obstacle in your path become Nelson Mandela’s painful twenty-seven years in prison. Promise yourself that you will contribute your best to make the phenomenon of violence outdated, promise yourself that you will try to motivate your friends to walk on the path of nonviolence.”

### **Using Media and Information Literacy skills to use the social media for peace**

Iflah Javed Qureshi’s (a former editor of the children’s newspaper, The Peace Gong) perspectives encapsulate the importance of promoting media literacy education for peace among young people. She (2013) says, “Our aim is to bring together children from different parts of the world to work for global peace. Through The Peace Gong we will try to promoting diversity and encourage dialogues among children from different cultures and communities..... Our goal hence is to use our skills in communication and media so that we connect children from different cultures and share our values, ethos and concerns. We hope to use our understanding of media to work to make the phenomenon of violence outdated.”

Renee Hobbs (1998) underlines the importance of media literacy education which helps young people to negotiate challenges in their daily lives, “Media literacy practices help strengthen students’ information access, analysis and communication skills and build an appreciation for why monitoring the world is important. Media literacy can inform students about how the press functions in a democracy, why it matters that citizens gain information and exposure to diverse opinions, and why people need to participate in policy decision-making at the community, state and federal levels. Secondly, media literacy can support and foster educational environments in which students can practice the skills of leadership, free and responsible self-expression, conflict resolution and consensus building, because without these skills, young people will not be able to effectively engage with others in the challenges of cooperative problem-solving that participation in a democratic society demands. Third, media literacy skills can inspire young people to become more interested in increasing their access to diverse sources of information.”

Tornero and Varis (2010) explains how media literacy can enhance critical faculties of individuals and how they can use new technology with diligence, “Media literacy entails the acquisition of a new culture in which technology and human beings are in harmony with and complement one another. It is a culture poised for dialogue that is itself the outcome of dialogue and communication, a culture whose ideas is a type of person who is flexible, intelligent, diligent and prepared to interact meaningfully with others through technology and with technology; a critical person who knows how to debate and discuss messages and proposals reaching them from the outside, who knows how to reveal their interiors and their hidden agenda. Through this capacity, they gain the ability to imagine alternatives, changes and new courses of action. In short, they know how to be creative and productive.”

Talking about new emerging values of media literacy, Tornero and Varis further argues, “The new media literacy movements stress the value of understanding and respect for cultural diversity and dialogue among cultures. The new media literacy respects the autonomy and uniqueness of each culture, but it builds bridges in order to construct a universal dialogue among them that fosters the spirit of understanding and the gradual, painstaking construction of shared values. In this way, the media literacy movement is against stereotypes and prejudices and in favour of the potential of the media and ICTs to build a universal culture of peace.”

In the backdrop of the social media being the site of propagating violence, hate and conflicts, Webb et.al. (2009) talk about the goals of the media literacy education: to reduce exposure to media violence; to change the impact of violent images that are seen; to locate and explore alternatives to media that focus on violence to solve conflict; to uncover and challenge the cultural, economic, and political supports for media violence and; to introduce skills of media advocacy and organizing for change.

On how media and information literacy when combined with information, media and technology provides new opportunities for dialogue and a culture of peace, Grizzle (2014) lists out the following possibilities:

- i. To reduce intolerance and increase understanding across political or cultural boundaries.
- ii. For citizens from all around the world to easily communicate thus enabling more cultural exchange.
- iii. For social vigilance and critical faculties at a time when anyone can post anything on the Internet. Some challenges if not effectively remedied by media and information literacy could undermine the freedom of expression in virtual spaces.

- iv. To overcome disinformation but also stereotypes and intolerance conveyed through some and in online spaces.
- v. To empower citizens with competencies to hold media and other information professionals accountable.

On the framework of media and information literacy for peace and intercultural dialogue, as discussed above, Nagaraj and Kundu (2013) talks of senior Gandhian Natwar Thakkar's perspective on emotional bridge building amongst different cultural groups. Discussing Natwar Thakkar's approach, they point out, "He is of the view that the communication praxis of India should not only encompass a deep understanding of each other's culture and tradition but also do the work of emotional bridge building and thereby connect people of diverse cultures. He observes that unless pluralism and mutual respect becomes centre to one's communicative abilities, one cannot reach out to diverse communities across the country. These, he opines, have to be part of any communicative message, be it person-to-person or via the mass media or the social media."

In the context of the social media, where negative propaganda and hate comments can be easily propagated, media and information literacy programmes incorporating communication approaches of seers of peace like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Daisaku Ikeda offers great hope for more positive use of the social media for a culture of peace and nonviolence.

Natwar Thakkar's perspective on emotional bridge-building on communication takes us to the nonviolent approaches to communication of Mahatma Gandhi which can be a powerful tool in media and information literacy education to promote initiatives for peace and intercultural dialogue in the social media. Borde (1995) lists out the different aspects of nonviolent communication of Mahatma Gandhi, "The nonviolent communication theory consists of four theoretical units: (1) nonviolent speech and action; (2) maintenance of relationships and enrichment of personhood; (3) openness; and (4) flexibility. To carry these units further: Gandhi predicted that from violent communications harm would result, and that nonviolent communication contributes to the maintenance of peaceful relationships and to the enrichment of personhood. The theory of nonviolent communication recommends means (flexibility and openness) of achieving the end. For Gandhi, the goal of communication was to build and maintain human relationships and thus enhance personhood."

The Gandhian theory of nonviolent communication offers great opportunity to users of the social media to experiment and practice nonviolent action. The possibilities of integrating this theory of nonviolent communication in media literacy curriculum

were discussed in the Peace Gong's Facebook page. (<https://www.facebook.com/The-Peace-Gong-187829521307498/>). This attracted interesting comments. Waynad Shishu Panchayat commented: "The media literacy curriculum should focus on studies of peace movements and tolerance and how these used different tools of communications and media. For this we have to look beyond our shoulders and go thorough lessons of history where great events happened and go through great lives of Gandhiji, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Daisaku Ikeda and John Lennon. Incredible movements like the anti- racial struggle of South Africa, Ahimsa and Satyagraha movement. To learn and share knowledge, students should be given practical exposure. Let scientists, farmers and even beggars (if the system can be that much magnanimous) should enter the campus of schools as resource persons through methodologies like Living Books. Students should be encouraged to learn and write about the lives of these true examples from real life and practice these in action."

Abhshek Bharanwal commented: "Mahatma Gandhi's Nonviolent Communication theory should be used to bring different sections of the society together. The common conflicts are due to the difference in status and money and most of the antisocial activities are also due to negligence of weaker sections. The higher-ups look down upon those who are below their status. Use of nonviolent communication and mutual respect, we can try to balance between different sections and it would bring peace and harmony in the society."

Mahatma Gandhi had said, "My writings cannot be poisonous, they must be free from anger, for it is my special religious conviction that we cannot truly attain our goal by promoting ill will...There can be no room for untruth in my writings, because it is my unshakable belief that there is no religion other than truth...My writings cannot but be free from hatred towards any individual because it is my firm belief that it is love that sustains the earth." (From *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, R K Prabhu and U R Rao, Navjivan Publishing House) This approach of communicating in the social media without being poisonous and free from hatred can contribute towards a global culture of peace and reconciliation. Students of media and information literacy need to develop their skills to restrain from poisonous writings and posts which can contribute to conflicts.

Using these approaches to nonviolent communication, users of the social media can develop relationships even amongst opponents. In this context, Himelfarb (2012) discusses the emerging trends in the field of using social media tools to manage conflicts and contribute to peace. These trends include fostering inter-ethnic dialogue, managing elections, preventing gang violence, preventing resource disputes, constitution-building, platforms to protest against violence. On how social media

fosters inter-ethnic dialogue, he talks about a conflict resolution curriculum and evaluation platform underpinning the Salam Shabab online youth network in Iraq, showing shifting attitudes about ethnic diversity. He also discusses 200,000-member YaLa-Young Leaders network that is there in the Middle East between Israelis and Palestinians, creating a growing lobby against violent conflict.

Meanwhile Ikeda (2011) argues that the fragmentation of the society is a result of communication breakdown. He cautions on the dangers of communication in the digital age being bereft of a human face. He notes, "It is true that the development of information technology presents opportunities for people to forge new connections. However, relations formed online will have no human face if they are limited to anonymous, depersonalized exchanges. Such interactions can only be inorganic and neutral, far removed from the refreshing wonder, tangible response and satisfaction that come from the effort to realize face-to-face, soul-to-soul communication. It is only when immersed in words and dialogue that human beings can become truly human; one cannot mature into a complete and full-fledged human being without such experiences."

Incidentally this views of Ikeda was also shared in The Peace Gong's Facebook page as part of its *'There is No Alternative to Nonviolence'* campaign. The post attracted interesting comments. For instance the children's group, Children of Nature commented, "A nonviolent approach to media literacy enables users to use the social media with a human face. It enables new forms of communication which furthers mutual respect and compassion. Groups or communities when are trained in nonviolent media literacy programmes even if they are opposed to each other will make efforts to reach out and promote harmonious relationships."

Martin Luther King's meaning of nonviolence also offers important dimensions to media literacy training programmes. By integrating it in curriculum, users of social media can be motivated to practice nonviolent action in their daily usage and for taking up causes. King said, "Nonviolence is the relentless pursuit of truthful ends through moral means.... the practitioner of nonviolence will say to his opponent, 'We will meet your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, we will still love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, throw us in jail and as difficult as it is, we will go to jail and still love you. We will still love you, but be assured that we will wear you down by your capacity to suffer and one day we will win freedom for ourselves; we will so appeal to your heart and your conscience that we will win you in the process and our victory will be a double victory.'"

## **Conclusion**

Mahatma Gandhi's theory of nonviolent communication, Ikeda's soul-to-soul communication and the importance of dialogue, King's perspectives on nonviolence and Esquivel's thrust on the need for people to reach out for a peaceful society when combined with Tornero and Varis's objectives of media literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century gives media and information literate citizens tools to contribute to a culture of peace and nonviolence using the social media.

The challenge however is to actually integrate these in the curricula across the world so that more and more people imbibe these while using the media. As the social media is growing using these approaches to nonviolent communication can help these sites to not only challenge false propaganda and hatred in the digital sphere but as several examples show actually contribute to reconciliation and peaceful co-existence.

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