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On Gaza and a decade of digital peacebuilding

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by Helena Puig Larrauri

In just a few weeks, we will be holding the 10th Build Peace conference, marking a decade of gatherings to discuss the intersection of technology, the arts, conflict and peace. It's set to be another vibrant gathering, and as we get closer I've been reflecting on what we have learned over the past ten years of digital peacebuilding. That reflection has become all the more poignant as the war in Gaza escalates: more than any other conflict I have witnessed, this war is playing out in digital spaces and foregrounding tactics of information warfare, citizen journalism, internationalized advocacy and censorship, and divisive discourse at a new magnitude of scale. From this, I think we can derive five important lessons for digital peacebuilders that both apply to the war in Gaza and reflect what we have learned over the past decade.

1. Dehumanization online & platform design

Dehumanization of Palestinians and Israelis on digital media spiked soon after October 7, and has continued to proliferate at an alarming rate. Immediately following Hamas's attack on October 7 and Israel's military retaliation on the Gaza strip, both anti-semitic posts and hatespeech / incitement against Palestinians increased on many social media platforms, and this was especially pronounced on Twitter / X. Organizations such as 7amleh (the Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media) and the Anti-Defamation League have continued to monitor growing hateful / inciteful narratives online, many using dehumanizing language towards Palestinians, Israelis, Arabs and Jews.

Many organizations have called for greater content moderation to quell this wave of online hate, but we know from other crisis situations that content moderation will never affect more than a small amount of objectively policy-violating content, and taking this down will not significantly improve the overall online narrative. Fear-inducing statements, for example, often lead to dehumanization of a group, but are notoriously hard to moderate as Ravi Iyer points out in this excellent piece. Instead, social media platforms need to consider what design affordances would reduce the algorithmic amplification of harmful narratives. Ravi and his team at the USC Neely Center have suggested a design code that codifies best practices for online platforms that would go a long way toward addressing the kind of dehumanization we are seeing in respect of the war in Gaza.

> *Lesson one: to quell dehumanization in future conflicts, focus now on conflict prevention by changing the affordances and design of digital platforms rather than relying on on content moderation as crisis response.*

2. Power, bias, and the information war on Palestinians

One reason design codes are a great solution is that they are content-neutral. This is especially important because content moderation practices are often biased to the hegemonic culture, language and values that train the (automated or human) systems to operationalise them. This bias is playing out very clearly in the moderation of online Palestinian voices discussing the Gaza war. Many Palestinian activists are reporting unwarranted censorship and shadow-banning (deprioritizing content so it's not visible), which should come as no surprise given that an independent report commissioned by Meta last year concluded that the company had over-moderated Arabic content and under-moderated Hebrew content during the last Israeli offensive on Gaza in May 2021. Perhaps most outrageous was an instance in mid-October where for a brief period of time Instagram users whose profile bio in Arabic included the word Palestinian, the Palestinian flag and the word "alhamdullilah" had the word "terrorist" added to their bio when it was auto-translated to English. Instagram has apologized, but failed to explain exactly how this happened.

This bias on social media is matched by a bias in mainstream, Western media reporting on the war. Mona Chalabi, winner of this year's Pullitzer Prize for illustrated reporting, has documented a "fundamental asymmetry" in Israel-Palestine coverage. Using data collected by a researcher at UC Berkeley, Chalabi shows that there is disproportionate coverage of Israeli deaths compared to Palestinian ones in major US publications, showing for example that the New York Times has consistently mentioned Israeli deaths more often than Palestinian deaths since October 7, and their coverage of Israeli deaths has increased, even though Israeli deaths have plateaued and Palestinian deaths have skyrocketed. Although some media outlets have made commendable contributions to balanced accounts — e.g. this piece from Channel 4 — these are few and far between.

Mixed in with these dual biases on social and mainstream media is an enormous amount of disinformation that is becoming increasingly complicated to sort through. Critically, some of the more pervasive disinformation campaigns are originating from outside the Middle East, mostly from Russia and India. While disinformation has targeted both sides, the amount of disinformation targeting anti-Palestinian sentiment (often combined with Islamophobia) is staggering, and being spread by people in positions of power.

These three biases — in content moderation, in mainstream media and in the spread of disinformation — amount to an information war on Palestinians that is distorting the narrative in very dangerous ways, fueling tensions and violence.

> *Lesson two: the ways power plays out in digital spaces critically impact conflict dynamics.*

3. The value of multi-partiality

As we recognised the biases affecting Palestinians in digital spaces, Build Up endorsed a statement put out by 7amleh calling tech companies to respect Palestinian digital rights in times of crisis. This is not something we typically do: Build Up does not put out statements about digital space and its impact on violent incidents in the many places we care about or work in — Sudan, Kenya, the USA, Somalia, Mali, Guinea Bissau, or Syria, to name a few. That does not mean we do not condemn incidences where digital space impacts violence, or the violence itself: we condemn all harm to civilians and any online polarization that contributes to dehumanization. We adhered to a statement on this occasion because genocide is of a different magnitude. Discrimination against Palestinian content and anti-Palestinian racism is disproportionately increasing in online platforms. We know there's a link between the digital realm and the reality on the ground: online narratives that dehumanize Palestinians enable mass ethnic cleansing. This is a dynamic that is crucial to understand for those working hard towards peace.

Taking a stand on this information war erodes our impartiality — but we have never wanted to be impartial peacebuilders. One of the first principles we adopted as a collective was multi-partiality. Unlike impartiality, where an actor remains neutral and detached from all parties, multi-partiality involves actively engaging with and understanding the perspectives, needs, and interests of everyone with respect and consideration. Multi-partial peacebuilders come as they are, with experiences and background worn openly, and consider that every opinion is an invitation to a conversation, not an attack on a person or a group. I've often thought of multi-partiality as the peacebuilder's application of Chantal Mouffe's agonistic politics. Mouffe differentiates between antagonistic conflict (which is destructive, where one argues that the other is outside the polity or even outside humanity) and agonistic conflict (which is constructive, where opponents treat each other not as enemies to be destroyed, but as adversaries who will fight for the victory of their position while recognising the right of their opponents to fight for theirs).

Multi-partiality, then, is the way towards a peace that is plural and open to change, rather than imposed through a hegemonic narrative. Over the years, I have come to realise that multi-partiality is intrinsically entwined with digital peacebuilding as a practice. In fact, we adopted this principle from a digital peacebuilding trailblazer: Soliya, whose entire facilitation of difficult conversations is founded on multi-partiality. The work Build Up has done or supported to intervene in polarized digital spaces has also taken the practice of multi-partiality as a starting point, and encouraged interventions that complicate narratives and humanize experiences.

Critically, multi-partial (digital) peacebuilders have an ethical responsibility to prevent the manipulation of narratives, and that includes standing up to censorship and bias. In the current context, this means protecting Palestinian voices when they are censored in the name of "peace" interpreted as normalization or acquiescence. For example, statements which call for freedom and autonomy for a Palestinian State as it once stood are anti-Zionist but not anti-Semitic. They express a difference of opinion that is an invitation to speak; they are not an attack on anyone's person or personhood. Yet for Jews who have heard or been taught that Palestinian liberation goals are anti-semitic, and act from trauma, it is understandable why these statements threaten. Multi-partiality calls on us to not censor such statements; multi-partiality also requires that we exercise curiosity and care for the fear they may elicit. It is through this practice that calls for a nuanced conversation on inclusive nation building that we can penetrate the lens cast by trauma.

> *Lesson three: channel multi partiality in digital space, foster digital spaces that can hold multi partiality.*

4. Trauma & the human conditions for misinformation

Holding a multi-partial digital space is no easy feat, especially in the midst of a conflict: multi-partiality breaks down when we cannot listen, and we cannot listen when we are traumatized. The inability to hear empathy for ones own side is one of the first things that goes. Yuval Harari has written about the need for outsiders to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to hold the space for peace, recognising that both Israelis and Palestinians are too immersed in their own pain to empathize with the pain of others. On a WhatsApp group discussing a pro-Palestine demonstration, one poster wrote of mourning "innocent lives lost on both sides" and received a response saying "not seeing anyone talking about the murdered and kidnapped Jews". This situation is repeated in comment threads and WhatsApp groups where, triggered by a position that signals support for the other, one or more respondent is incapable of reading empathy for their person or group. The more of these interactions I read, the more it seems that we are watching collective trauma unfurl and amplify online.

It's also made me wonder whether we need to be paying more attention to the human conditions that lead to the spread of misinformation. I wrote a while ago that most disinformation is aimed at alienating a person or a group — in other words, disinformation uses a lie to close debate, to simplify the narrative rather than allow for plurality. But then that lie spreads, it becomes misinformation, because our brains kind of love heuristic simplicity. I now wonder whether as digital peacebuilders we need to dig a bit deeper into why our brains love heuristic simplicity, and why they love it more in certain situations: when we are afraid, when we are traumatized. No amount of digital literacy is going to work in these conditions; perhaps trauma healing would be a better strategy to address the spread of misinformation.

> *Lesson four: address the human conditions for misinformation, including trauma.*

5. Online deliberative spaces

One of the hardest things for digital peacebuilders is how to foster a digital space that is both safe and engages with difference. I've seen many digital peacebuilding programs that run digital "peace campaigns" sharing common ground positions that can foster unity across dividing lines. While there is certainly a place for these campaigns, my experience is that at best they can create some thin engagement across division that has a limited impact on (online or offline) behaviors and at worst they are stuck in echo chambers and preaching to the choir.

Peace campaigns can also feel like peace washing or self-censorship. Frankly, they can be predictable, and the interesting conversations are happening elsewhere. It's connected to another reason why I've advocated for a long time against over-zealous content moderation on social media platforms: when people express polarizing views, our job as digital peacebuilders is to engage with this signal of conflict. Problematic, harmful exchanges on digital spaces are also the ones where engagement with difference is most important.

I feel like we are still finding our way towards best practices for holding this kind of multi-partial, deliberative online space. These need to be spaces where personal transformation is possible, and that means they need to allow for individual connection and deliberation. Maybe we need new deliberative platforms like pol.is that enable individuals to meaningfully interact with the opinions of many others and find many common grounds and interlocking positions. Maybe we need community stewards or digital peacebuilders to turn the digital platforms we already inhabit into deliberative spaces, and along the way recommend how social media designs need to change to facilitate their work.

What I do know for sure is that if there is already limited space for a dialogue-biased, inclusive nation building process to move forwards towards a peaceful and just solution for Palestinians and Israelis, the digital space is even narrower — and to change that is going to take courage and a transformation of (digital) peacebuilding into a more radical field. To me, a radical peacebuilding field is one that is simultaneously non-violent, anti-racist and decolonial. It's going to require holding both digital and offline spaces where we can openly talk — without fear of censorship, canceling or criminalisation — about what personal transformations are needed, what compromises and changes, so that a peaceful solution for Palestinians and Israelis is also a solution that undoes the colonial harms that have led to this war.

> *Lesson five: engage with difference, foster online deliberative spaces.*

In conclusion: be a poet, be an untamed fool, engage

So that's my hope for Build Peace 2023: to have difficult conversations about bias, censorship, multi-partiality, trauma and engaging with difference, and to do so both without looking away from the genocide unfolding in Palestine and in learning and solidarity with underreported conflicts peacebuilders are working to transform. I want to close this somewhat long reflection with two quotes (one short, one long) that have kept me going these past weeks.

First, Angela Davis during a lecture she gave in 2014: *"You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time." – Angela Davis*

Second, Judith Butler in this recent article on Gaza: *"Without equality and justice, without an end to the state violence conducted by a state, Israel, that was itself founded in violence, no future can be imagined, no future of true peace — not, that is, 'peace' as a euphemism for normalisation, which means keeping structures of inequality, rightlessness and racism in place. But such a future cannot come about without remaining free to name, describe and oppose all the violence, including Israeli state violence in all its forms, and to do so without fear of censorship, criminalisation, or of being maliciously accused of antisemitism. The world I want is one that would oppose the normalisation of colonial rule and support Palestinian self-determination and freedom, a world that would, in fact, realise the deepest desires of all the inhabitants of those lands to live together in freedom, non-violence, equality and justice. This hope no doubt seems naive, even impossible, to many. Nevertheless, some of us must rather wildly hold to it, refusing to believe that the structures that now exist will exist for ever. For this, we need our poets and our dreamers, the untamed fools, the kind who know how to organise." – Judith Butler*

So whether you're about to leave a comment on this blogpost, or we're engaging on WhatsApp or in person in the coming weeks, or you're sharing on social media or participating in online forums, show up as you are. Be a poet, be an untamed fool, engage with difference. We can hold that space for each other.

Gaza Peacebuilding

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Written by Build Up

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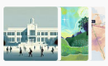

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