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Final Report

Grant No 12011

Project Title

Understanding and Using the Digital Space for Conflict Resolution

Project Summary

The use of social media tools has an impact on violent conflict. However, the scientific evidence showing this is still very weak, and the debate on what effects can be attributed to social media is on-going. This project has aimed to further understand and develop the conceptual underpinning of social media networks in relation to conflict, in order to use its potential for conflict resolution. Specifically, it has explored how discussion in social media can be used for constructive consensus building dialogue.

Through its specific objectives, the project has first contributed to the conceptual clarity of the related terms and concepts. Expert seminars and workshops strengthened the overall view on the subject and assisted the project team to distil promising pilot concepts. As a result of expert interviews and workshops the project team was able to implement two simulations, which can be considered for further integration to new projects.

Involving experts from relevant fields such as conflict transformation and collaborative media in the project has helped creating a community of practice.

Activities to Date

Background research

In line with the project application, in the first phase the project team has focused on the theoretical aspects of the objectives. This has included review and clarification of relevant concepts, state of play in terms of social network use and especially social network actor analysis. We have approached the project subject using a broad trans-media perspective: The research is not primarily concerned with specific social media platforms. Rather it looks at media ecology and media ecosystems beyond specific platforms, to understand how the ensemble of social media and media activities affect conflicts. People inhabit a broader media ecology than Facebook and TV combined, and that starting point needs to be well understood. Media ecology is characterised by the political economy of the media system, technical affordances of available media platforms, levels of access and digital literacy in the population, and normative and legal constraints. Trans-media mobilization means a systematic dispersal of social movement narrative across multiple media platforms, creating a distributed and participatory movement world, with multiple entry points for organizing, for the purpose of strengthening movement identity and outcomes.[1] These digital social media concepts will need to be next associated with the conflict sphere.

The project has implemented five short workshops, one using rapid prototyping methodology. This basically means that while exploring the conceptual context, energy goes immediately also into proposing potential new methods or concepts of how to implement things differently. The first workshop took place in April in Helsinki with CMI's own R&D staff, for a general brainstorm of how we can operationalize the objectives of this project. A second workshop

[1] Based on definition by Sasha Constanza Chock, MIT. http://archiv.re-publica.de/2012/03/20/media-ecology-and-the-occupy-movement/

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took place with Stanford's peace innovation lab as well as Helsinki University staff in early May. A third workshop took place in Berlin at the re:publica conference (6.-8.5.), in collaboration with AfriLabs. AfriLabs is a network of innovation hubs around Africa. Technology innovation hubs are mushrooming around the continent and are playing a central role in the fledgling tech and entrepreurial scene in Africa. A fourth workshop via video link was implemented on 23.5. with colleagues from the Peace Lab Berlin and again Stanford University Peace Innovation Lab. In a fifth workshop, CMI has met with a broad set of experts from the United States Institute of Peace. The meeting helped identify latest findings in the field of media, technology and conflict resolution. Additional meetings, for example in Berlin and Brussels (European Development Days, EPLO Post-2015) were helpful in order to confirm our findings and suggested approaches.

Apart from desk research, this reporting period has also included first applied models of social media analysis. This is based on the thought that specific platforms alone are not carrying enough information and that the social media ecology, and people's parallel use of many platforms is essential. Moving into practical testing helps the project to fine tune potential recommendations.

Simulations and application of findings

As mentioned, the project took a hands-on approach and has aimed at applying or simulation as early in the process as possible. Two main simulations took place: 1. BSPN Foresight and 2. Social media analysis.

1. Black Sea Peacebuilding Network (BSPN) Foresight online workshops

The first simulation/application was a trial of using Internet tools to collect, rate and analyse conflict trends by involving experts from multiple countries around the Black Sea area. The process lasted from May until late 2013. Only partial costs are reported to this grant, as the main donor for this process is the Ministry for Foreign Affairs Finland. For a better understanding, the process is elaborated in more detail. The earlier first stage of the BSPN Foresight process was held in May-June 2012, when a foresight workshop was organized in each of the 7 BSPN countries. In the seminars the civil society experts of each member country assessed pre-determined trends by prioritization and cross-impact factor exercises. A trend was defined as a socio-political, economic, environmental or technical driver (variable) that may contribute to the development of a violent conflict. We defined conflicts to be either (1) interstate, i.e. state versus state, conflict, (2) intrastate, i.e. state versus community, violence or conflict, or (3) communal, i.e. community versus community, violence or conflict.

Originally the trends were collected from the different policy papers produced by the BSPN Expert Councils for Peace Initiatives and Conflict Transformation. Later on the 7 expert councils were asked discuss the trends and provide suggestions to the CMI team.

The second phase of the process started in the regional meeting of the BSPN in Chisinau, Moldova, where almost 50 civil society experts from the Black Sea region gathered in May 15-17, 2013. The workshops of the second phase of the BSPN Foresight process were completed electronically via the Internet. The main reason for this was the vast amount of work required to complete the assessment: on the first part of the e-workshop 41 recommendations were prioritized with 5 different aspects, and on the second part of the workshop all 41 recommendations were assessed against each other (cross-impact analysis). Therefore, to complete the workshop exercise the expert had to give almost 600 quantitative assessments. This comprehensive evaluation simply would have not been feasible without electronic and online tools aiding the evaluation, collection and analysis work.

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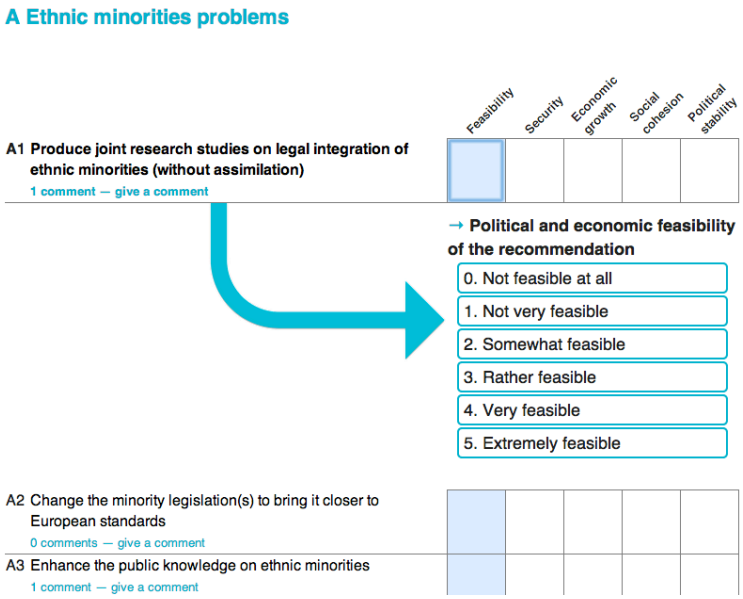
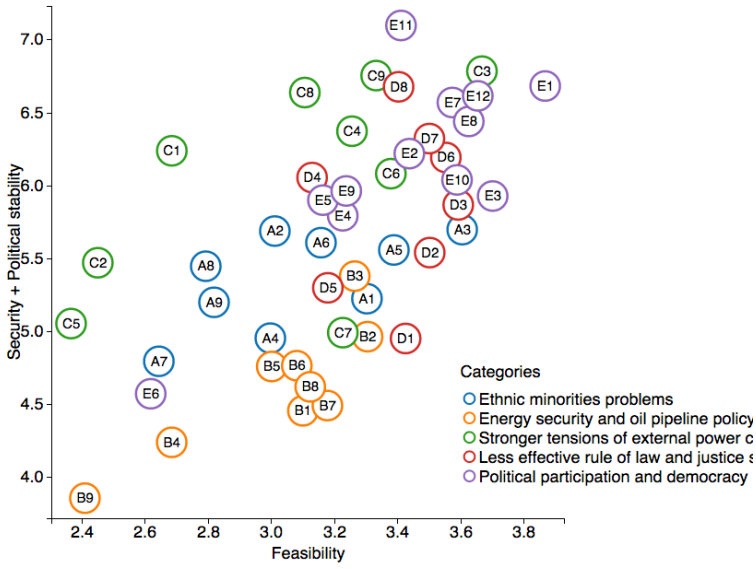


CMI developed a new web platform to smoothen the assessments. The participating experts first gave background information about themselves (age group, gender, sector of work), after which they proceeded to complete the assessment questionnaire (first items of the questionnaire are shown in the figure on the left). The questionnaire and the whole platform were designed to be bi-lingual, as the lingua franca in the Black Sea region is Russian. One of the main advantages of the online platform was that it did not require certain time and date to complete the workshop. The experts could save their tentative answers on the workshop organized by CMI and edit them later. And additional bonus was that those experts who did not manage to attend the workshop physically could enter their answers later, guided by their peers on the local expert councils who took part on the physical workshop.

After the experts completed their assessment, they received the answers immediately, and they could view and review all aspects of their answers on the spot. This was widely appreciated, as the web-platform enabled visualizations that were miles ahead of the simple graphs done at the earlier stage of the process a year and a half ago. An example graph of the results is shown on the right. After all workshops had been completed, the experts also received access to a full results portal, where they could compare answers between countries, genders, age groups and sectors of work and interactively prioritise the recommendations.



2. Social Media Analysis

The second simulation exercise was prepared during the spring and took place in late August. The simulation has used publically available data and analyses, broadly the participation flow before major events. In this case, we have used the Turkish demonstrations as a 'case'. The 2013 protests in Turkey started in May 2013, initially to contest the urban development plan for Istanbul's Taksim Gezi Park. The protests were sparked by outrage at an eviction by force of a sit-in at the park protesting against the plan. Supporting protests and strikes took place across Turkey protesting a wide range of concerns, at the core of which were issues of freedom of the press, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and the government's encroachment on Turkey's secularism. With no centralised leadership beyond the small organisation organising the original environmental protest, the protests have been compared to the Occupy movement.

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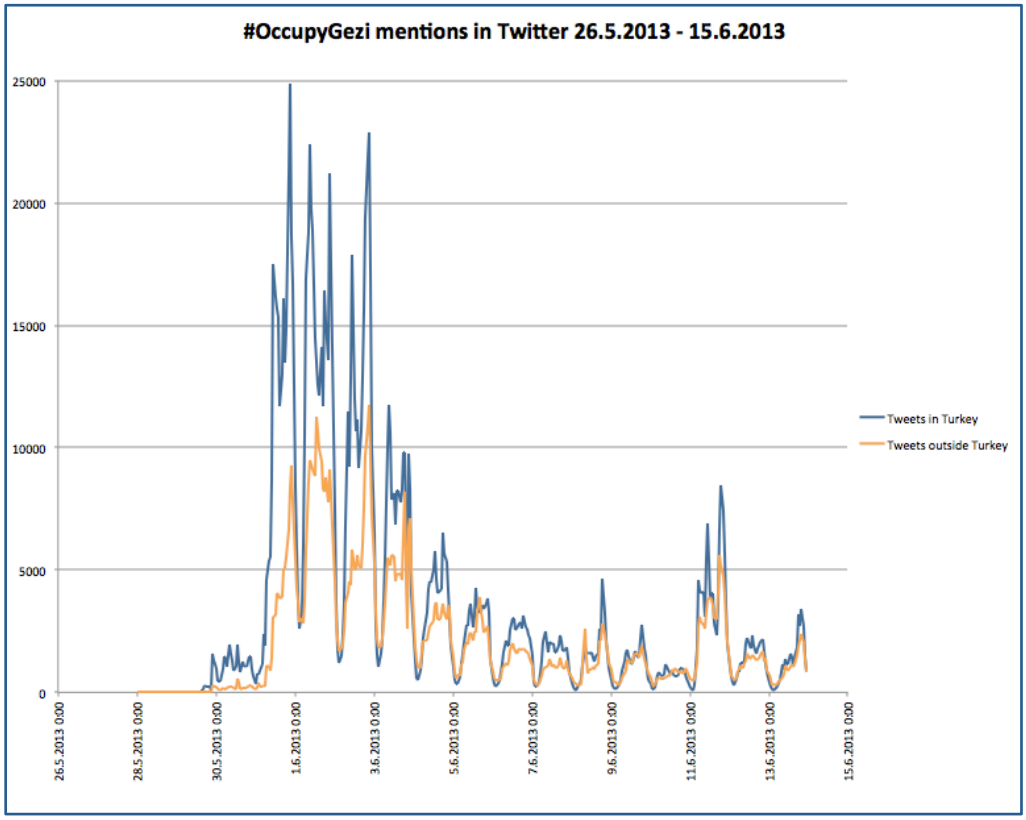
This kind of analysis provides initial information about:

- local/national "issue ownership" versus international
- sequencing of how an issue develops (local reaction triggering international reaction, or the other way around)

Further work on this allows the project team to understand better also what are the key issues of conflict situations and how they are seen and forwarded by actors to the crisis. This simulation was repeated with other commercial social media analysis tools, which are very helpful but require substantial investment.

Some visualization below:



In the graph on the left, it is clear that certain topics are dominated by Turkish tweets, although there has been an increase in international attention as well. In comparison (graph next page), the discussion related to Pussyriot[2] in Russia, while being a Russian topic first, receives more international than national attention. This is basically recreating some of the critique against any so-called "Twitter revolution" in Iran 2009-2010, claiming that it was mostly international actors and not national ones pushing for change. More in the full report.

[2] Pussy Riot is a Russian feminist punk rock protest group based in Moscow. Founded in August 2011, it has a variable membership of approximately 11 women who wear brightly coloured balaclavas and use only nicknames during interviews. They stage unauthorized provocative guerrilla performances in unusual public locations, which are edited into music videos and posted on the Internet. In late October 2012 two band members were separated and sent to prison. The trial and sentence attracted considerable criticism.

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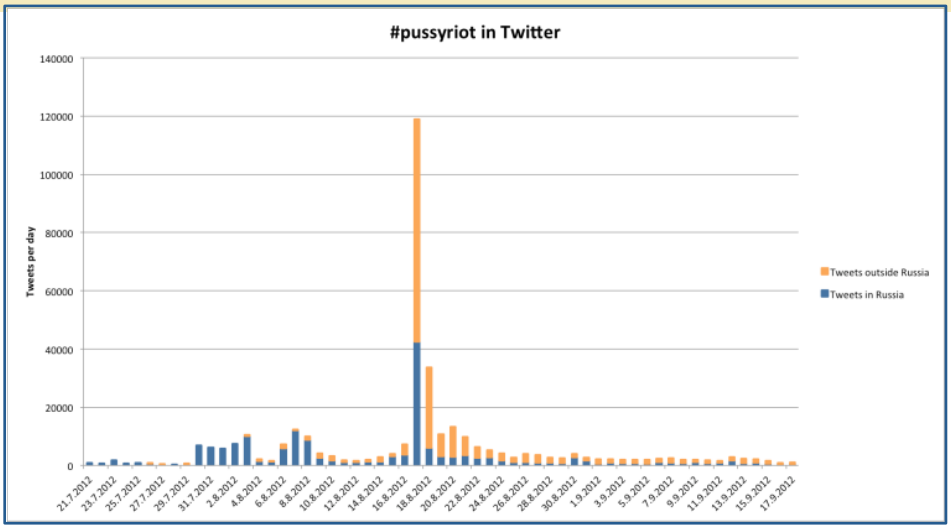

Project Results in summary

- Input for background analysis collected using desks study, interviews and lectures.
- Several expert interviews completed
- Five workshops implemented all generating concrete suggestions on what could be done
    - CMI internal workshop
    - Open data workshop at re:publica, with AfriLabs, iLab Liberia
    - Two workshops with Peace Innovation Lab, Stanford
    - Discussion with USIP – Peace Tech Lab
    - Results sharing at international conferences such as re:publica, European Development Days and with multiple agencies such as USIP.
- Initial idea on a potential pilot sketched, with pilot cases identified
- Social media analysis simulation completed and a BSPN Internet tool developed

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Background analysis

Reflection on initial hypothesis

The project has started with four distinct hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Social media channels have supported transition from conflict to peaceful societal change. However, they might also contribute to triggering conflict.

Social media channels can be used as a tool, by anyone. They can be used to plan activities, engage large crowds, attempt "viral influencing", in other words create messages that engage a considerable amount of people, to an extent that they are willing to socially share those messages. Social media networks are complex communications channels, enabling all kinds of messages to get a global audience.

Based on the background analysis, there was no indication that social media networks and tools are more suited to resolve conflict than they are suited to create and increase conflict; examples can be found for both transition out of conflict and for triggering conflict.

Hypothesis 2: Social media channels in themselves are not sufficient to trigger or drive societal change. However, they can be catalysts for change as well as support and organization mechanisms for change. They can also form a barrier against societal change if used by governments.

This hypothesis is supported by several cases. Having said that, complex change processes have a variety of drivers, and again it is challenging to prove that change would or would not happen, or would happen faster or slower with the help of digital tools such as social media tools. Especially mainstream tools such as Facebook and Twitter are used in any bigger demonstration, uprising, or crisis. In case of national "change processes" or uprisings, people seem to select any tools that are available to them and help them to reach a certain goal. In countries or regions with high Internet penetration, those tools include social media tools naturally.

Hypothesis 3: While social media channels tend to polarize discussion, these tools can also lead to constructive consensus building dialogue.

It seems social media tools and networks are more structured in terms of online identity and own digital tribe. Those networks are often quite coherent. As a drastic example it was found that Democrats and Republicans in the US are quite disconnected in terms of digital "friendships", so disconnected that they don't even see / 'hear' each other's arguments. While there are some positive attempts, very little evidence can be found of groups actively engaging with opposing group's arguments, statements, etc. similar findings are expected in Finland, looking for example at the political parties True Finns ('Perussuomalaiset') and the Greens of Finland ('Vihreät').

Attempts for more inclusive dialogue include, for example, the "Israel loves Iran" campaign and peace.facebook.com (friendships across conflict lines). Having said that, the effects, outcome and impact of those are likely to be very limited.

One idea that might need further follow up is trying to investigate online services that have little to do with conflict resolution, but might have underlying technology in place that might still be relevant. This is for example true for (as absurd as it sounds) online dating software, often having the purpose to analysis how well people might fit together and to eventually try and bring them together.

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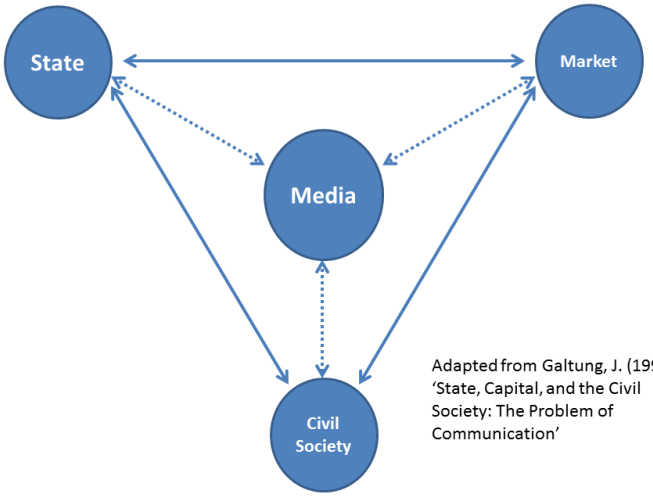
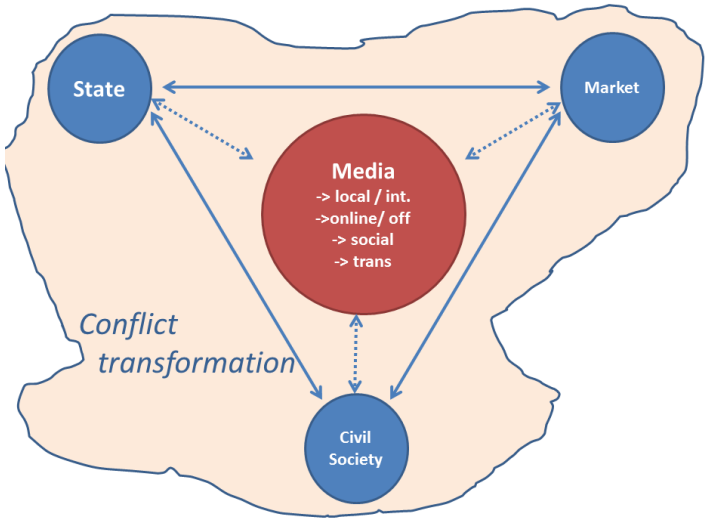
There are certainly barriers of certain social media channels: In Facebook, for example, people tend to subscribe or 'friend' only people that they are generally agreeing with, share values and have something else in common. 'Friending your enemy' seems to be a challenge for many; it would be nevertheless a prerequisite for engaging with people you disagree with.

Clarification: what to look at when discussing about conflict resolution in the digital sphere



Adapted from Galtung, J. (1999) 'State, Capital, and the Civil Society: The Problem of Communication'

Having a broad subject such as conflict resolution in the digital sphere requires first initial comments on what the scope of this analysis can be. Traditionally speaking, in any society, may it be conflict affected or not, societies can be described by the interplay of state, business and civil society. It has been noted, especially from communication's point of view, that media can be described as the fourth pillar, often linking the other societal building blocks. However, as many models, also this model oversimplifies: We are living in times in which private companies and non-governmental organisations are strongly involved in producing security, developing public infrastructure or delivering public goods; in which state and business have agreed that it is acceptable to spy on citizens and customers, either openly or secretively, in order to gain business benefits or using arguments such as improving security. This picture needs to be adapted to include both violent conflict and the additional element of social media.



To get started, we now would need to understand the difference between traditional media and the so-called social media. Similarly here, there is no clear line between media and social media: traditional media is using social media channels for stories and news, both in researching new stories as well as distributing and further commenting own stories through social media channels.

The notion of social media use also requires further comments: As it happens, the single person's use of media and social media differs not only from country to country and region by region, but also for example depending on age group, gender, and other socio-demographic variables.

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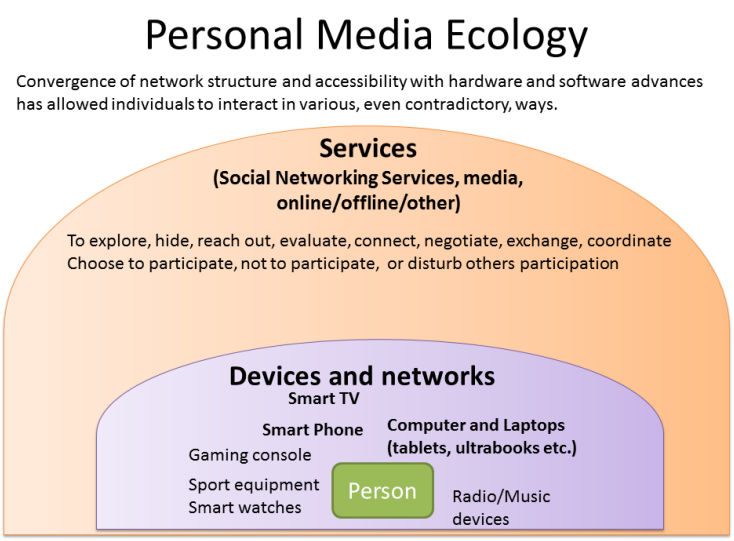
Having said that, it is fair to say that there are a certain amount of mainstream media and social media tools that are common. For example, in Europe you would find probably a mixture of TV, newspaper and radio, both online and offline consumption, additionally various use of Facebook and Youtube, some Twitter perhaps. In the younger generation you would find on the other hand that TV is much less important and social television, for example Youtube plus commenting much more important.



All of this suggests that in order to understand media and social media in the context of conflict resolution, the differences in media access and usage should be understood. This is what I call "personal media ecology", because it reflects on how differently individuals are receiving media message and participating in media 'production'.

Success stories, promising practice and example burnout

The following observations can be highlighted:

Progress on the understanding of network structure, composition, and ways of working: Slowly both academic research and applied project knowledge are becoming available. This is also due to ever more sophisticated social media analytics, maybe it be through 'big players' directly (such as Google trends) or specific analytic tools (for example www.topsy.com).

Consensus building dialogue is possible (although from different fields): There are rare examples that consensus building dialogue is actually possible over the Internet. One example includes the constitutional review of the Republic of Iceland, which used crowdsourcing and broad social media discussion to come to an agreement. Some of the Facebook discussion and results actually made it into the revised draft text of the constitution. Having said that, there are very little other references to consensus building dialogue, as social media networks are more likely to polarize discussions.

This means that groups with different political agendas (for example, environmentalists versus car lobby) have very little exposure to each other's arguments and interact very little. The same goes for example for US Democrats and Republicans.