



The Basel Peace Forum 2019 intended to inspire new and unconventional ideas for peacebuilding. About 200 decision-makers from business, diplomacy, academia and civil society from 30 countries met on 13 and 14 January in Basel to rethink peace. Linkages between peacebuilding and health and migration, architecture, digitalization, impact investing as well as risk analysis took center stage.

## BLESSING OR CURSE?

# CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE INNOVATION FORUM “GOING DIGITAL IN PEACE PROCESSES: THE POTENTIAL OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND BIG DATA IN PEACE MEDIATION”

by Simon Mastrangelo & Ursina Bentele

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## OVERVIEW

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*What can we expect from the development of digitalization when it comes to war and peace? Some fear a loss of control and unintended negative consequences of artificial intelligence and open access to big data information models. Others push for a more inclusive and transparent digital support to peace processes.*

*In this wide area, this forum gathered experienced technologists and mediation experts to focus on the role of big data and discourse analysis in mediation and dialogues processes. We wanted to explore creatively what we can learn from the combination of discourse analysis and tech tools to adapt and further develop mediation and dialogue processes. A key topic that emerged was the question of the control of information sources online and the fact checking of information circulating on the Internet. Another aspect was the question of the ownership of online data, which produces inequality among users and affects the reality offline.*

## RECITALS

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The innovation forum “Going Digital in Peace Processes: The Potential of Artificial Intelligence and Big Data in Peace Mediation” featured three speakers: **Gerhard Lauer, Chair for Digital Humanities at the University of Basel; Jerry McCann, peace engineer at BuildUp and Jon Fanzun, Special Envoy for Cyber Foreign and Security Policy.**

Gerhard Lauer provided an overview of the multiple ways with which Artificial Intelligence (AI) can prove useful for research on mediation and peacebuilding. **His presentation was structured around three categories: discourse analysis, storytelling and patterns understanding. In his input, Lauer also highlighted the shortcomings and potential traps linked with the use of AI and the difficulty to track and understand bias linked with huge datasets.**



Jerry McCann shared his experiences with peacebuilding initiatives including tech tools at BuildUp, such as a study on the polarization of US political debates on social media. He reflected on how to build a space in between so-called echo chambers of polarized debates. With this still ongoing and experimental process, the aim is to work towards depolarization online. **New technologies have in his view a great potential for mediation and peacebuilding but can only be effective through the intermediary of human mediators, some of whom come from and have a deep knowledge of the local contexts.**

Jon Fanzun, Special Envoy for Cyber Foreign and Security Policy, mentioned that AI has only recently been discussed in the framework of the Swiss foreign and security policy. **AI is a topic of geo-strategic struggle between states.** It is also a struggle of ideologies (e.g. freedom vs. state control). One crucial point is the concentration of power among a relatively small group of states. **AI has the potential to reshuffle winners and losers in global markets,** and it poses challenges in three foreign policy fields: 1) economy, 2) security & future of warfare, 3) democracy & rule of law.

These inputs nurtured the workshop discussion around the overarching question: What can we learn from the combination of discourse analysis and tech innovation to adopt in mediation and dialogue processes?

The guiding questions for the workshop leading to the overarching question were:

1. What kind of data and information is relevant and useful? What added value might it bring?
2. Who brings this kind of data and information into a process? And how? Gatekeeper: Who has access to it, who 'owns it'?
3. What are potential impacts, in terms of conflict sensitivity on the process, in terms of its political dimension and security aspects?
4. What are chances for changing and adapting in mediation and dialogue processes?

Several ideas were discussed linking to these questions. Below, we would like to highlight two themes that are closely linked to each other: **the validity of information and the question of ownership of data.**



## **CORE IDEA 1:** “DO FOR A BETTER WORLD BY SHARING DATA” – QUESTIONS OF OWNERSHIP OF DATA, A SOURCE OF EMPOWERMENT OR A TOOL FOR WEAKENING IN MEDIATION PROCESSES?

The first idea circled around issues related to ownership of digital data. Today, private companies own most of the online data and often they are the ones to grant access. Different groups produce different quantities of online data and have different presence on the Internet, most prominently depending on the level of access of groups to online platforms. This disequilibrium affects the way people view the world and how their voices are heard. Therefore, the question was raised, as to how we can address the misbalance in online data production; and how to use data as a source of empowerment for minorities? This would also have implications on definitions of ownership and copyright of online data.

**Strengthening the role of governments as gatekeepers could both protect individuals but also shape the international framing for questions related to accountability and transparency.** Eventually, this leads to the implications on the governance of mediation processes, f.e. through the implementation of transparency regulations, or in what cases and how governments could act as guards for safekeeping data.



## CORE IDEA 2: “DEVELOP AND ENCOURAGE THE ADHERENCE TO ETHICAL CODES”

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Related to the idea above, a second idea emerged relating to the traceability of information: How do we know what type of information we deal with on the Internet? How to identify reliable online sources? How to guarantee data transparency?

It is complex to determine the validity of information, even more so online where authorship can remain vague and in conflict contexts. Fake news are commonplace and rumours circulate on a large scale. Depending on the individual perspective and on the context, the way with which information is understood can vary and influence both public opinions and the way peace processes are shaped and perceived. **In the Innovation Forum, we discussed the role of mediators in this regard as well as that of international ethical codes. Who could shape such codes and who insures adherence to such codes?**



## REFLECTIONS & POTENTIAL FOR DEVELOPMENT

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Before starting to use digital tools, one needs to think of the sources these new technological tools will rely on. As discussed in this forum, digital tools can prove useless or even dangerous in case control over the sources of information is not secured.

The propagation of rumours and fake news is a critical topic relevant for peacebuilding practitioners. As we recently witnessed with the case of Facebook in Myanmar, the dissemination of fake news on social media is always part of larger biased media politics and can have a dramatic impact in the offline world. Thus, taking social media into account is a prerequisite for peacebuilding. **One challenge is to build intermediate spaces for dialogue that could counterbalance echo chambers.** Future exchanges could focus on how to develop techniques that allow to anticipate and react against the propagation of hate speech online.

**Another aspect that could be explored further is the use of artificial intelligence and data in peacebuilding, specifically big data analysis of public/social media discourse supporting mediation and dialogue processes.** This could be done in a pilot project on one case, where a specific (social media) data set is being analysed.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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\* Ursula König, mediator and consultant at Ximpulse, facilitated the innovation forum.