

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Effects of social media on the peaceful coexistence of African people: A critical review**

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**Adebayo Ola Afolaranmi**

Department of Peace and Conflict Studies,  
Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria.

[spiritualdigest@hotmail.com](mailto:spiritualdigest@hotmail.com)

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#### **Abstract**

There have been many ways of communication in Africa that contributed positively to the peaceful coexistence of people before the arrival of the Internet and social media as new means of communication. While these new means of communication have contributed immensely to the peaceful coexistence of people in the continent, they have also had adverse effects on the peaceful coexistence of people. This paper aims to critically review some of the effects of social media as it affects the peaceful coexistence of African people, especially those in Nigeria. The theoretical framework for this paper is based on Media Ecology Theory. It has been discovered that social media has both positive and negative impacts on the peaceful coexistence of African people. Since social media has become a significant factor in people's relationships, it is concluded that people should embrace the usage of social media and learn how to use it responsibly to promote peaceful coexistence and reduce societal conflicts.

**Keywords:** African people, Means of communication, Peaceful coexistence, Social media

#### **Introduction**

Africans have many ways of communicating with one another before the advent of modern means of communication, especially social media. Although conflict is inevitable in any society, as evident in many African societies, Africans had ways of resolving conflicts among themselves. However, the advent of modern means of communication, especially social media, impacts the peaceful coexistence of people in Africa, especially in Nigeria. The thrust of this article is not to explore the traditional ways of conflict resolution in Africa but to explore the effects of social media on the peaceful coexistence of African people, especially people living in Nigeria. These effects include some advantages and disadvantages of social media in relation to the peaceful coexistence of African people.

#### **Theoretical framework: Media Ecology Theory**

The theoretical framework for this paper is based on Media Ecology Theory. According to Moreno and Koff (2016: 134), this theory aims "to understand the social impact of technology and communication". The theory studies how media and communication processes impact human opinion, sensitivity, understanding, and value and focus on communication studies

(Islas & Bernal, 2016). There are three main assumptions that this theory upholds. They are: “media is infused into every act and action in society, media fixes our perceptions and organizes our experiences, and media tie the world together” (Moreno & Koff, 2016: 134). This has made the world become a “global village” or “digital village” where people get information almost instantaneously (Murthy, 2018: 1).

### **Social media**

Although the thrust of this paper is not to discuss extensively what the term “social media” means, some things will be said briefly about the term. Terms used intermittently with social media are alternate media, new media, and online social network services (though this term is mainly used for a type of social media) (Aslam, 2016). Other terms used with social media are Web 2.0, digital media, peer media, and “NextGen PR” (Auwal, 2018: 57). Social media can also be referred to as an expression of “participatory culture” (Solmaz, 2017: 37). Social media have been defined simply as “digital Web 2.0 platforms that facilitate information sharing, user-created content, and collaboration across people” (McFarland and Ployhart, 2015: 1655). The term “Web 2.0” means “the type of web site where people can retrieve, share, write, and store information as desired” (Ngai et al., 2015: 770). As asserted by Lin et al. (2021: 3), “With the development of [this] Web 2.0 and GNSS-enabled portable devices, social media platforms, [for example], Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have become increasingly popular worldwide for sharing feelings and discussing ‘what’s happening’.”

### **Peaceful coexistence**

Galvanek and Planta (2017) opined that peaceful coexistence is paramount to a healthy and developing society and, in the words of Adegbami (2020: 59), “the most treasured and the greatest asset of a man”. What, then, is peace, and how can it be attained and sustained? Against the backdrop that “peace has a multidimensional nature” (Ossai, 2021: 426), the concept of peace is construed differently across cultures and social values, with changeable levels of importance given to individual and communal well-being (Jeong, 2000). This concept of peace has been in existence from time immemorial. However, it became a real focus after World War II (Ogbonna, 2018). Etymologically, the Latin word for peace, “*pax*”, means “freedom from civil disorder” (Aguilar, 2013: 2). In contrast, the Hebrew word for peace, “*shalom*”, designates “not only the reduction of conflict but rightness, completeness and wholeness” (Nsengimana, 2015: 36).

Jonah, Abdullahi and Olawale (2018: 80) have generally defined peace as “freedom from disturbance, tranquility, absence of war, fear, conflict, anxiety, suffering, violence, and about peaceful coexistence”. Likewise, Chukwu (2021: 255) defined it as “justice, development, respect, tolerance and love among people”. Furthermore, Enaigbe and Igbinoghene (2016) described peace as a manifestation of harmony with the absence of violence, conflict behaviours and freedom from fear or violence. It also means a state of quiet or serenity, freedom from uproar or protest, general order or tranquillity, freedom from violence or uprising, a state of reconciliation after conflict or hostility. However, Blumberg (2006) argued that peace does

not mean the absence of conflict but the absence of *violent* conflict. Albert (2021: 5) corroborated this by asserting that peace is “the absence of physical, psychological and structural violence with justice presence”.

There is another argument that peace is more than where there is no physical violence. The proponents of this argument believe that “a deeper or 'positive' peace includes changes in the attitudes of conflicting parties and the transformation of the systemic and structural elements that form part of the reasons for why the tensions that are present in every society spill over and become violent” (“Promoting Peace through the Sustainable Development Goals”, 3). Arifeen and Semul (2019: 234) argued that “peace as an opposite of war is easily recognized; however, it is peace as the prevalence of justice that is harder to achieve”. So also, Samson and Dauda (2021: 25) viewed peace sociologically as “a condition of social harmony in which there are no social antagonisms, there is no social conflict and individuals, and groups are able to meet their needs and expectations”. Nevertheless, in the words of Kaur (2021: 51):

Peace is a universal and wide-ranging value. It has no religion. It takes place in humanity, fraternity, and harmony. Peace is of two types that are internal peace and external peace. Internal peace involves the peace of mind, thinking, knowledge, and understanding and believes etc. External peace is in relationships with the humanity and adjustment in the society.

### **African people**

African people live in the continent of Africa or descendants of any African society, culture or language living in any other part of the world. However, the description of African people is broader than that simple definition. A broader definition or description is beyond the scope of this paper. There are many peoples in different parts of the continent. Therefore, for this paper, the term “African people” refers specifically to people in Nigeria.

### **The use of social media in conflict resolution**

It was the opinion of Denskus (2019) that there is no particular or general way that social media has contributed to peacebuilding. However, Aslam (2016) argued that social media networks are fastly modifying war and conflict reporting philosophies and procedures. This is against the backdrop, as Tarmaeva and Narchuk (2020) asserted that conflicts are essential to communication in social media. Technological tools have changed the information space around conflict by providing an increasing number of people with the instruments to record and share their experiences with others in the world (Widmer & Grossenbacher, 2019). Esberg and Mikulaschek (2021: 1) have identified and explained four areas where social media, in particular, is influencing conflict dynamics. These areas are: “incitement to violence; the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda; recruitment into armed groups; and the growing role of social media to suppress opposition”. Nonnecke et al. (2021: 1) opined that “...while social media platforms hold great promise for promoting an inclusive public sphere, they are simultaneously susceptible to nefarious manipulation, including rampant harassment and echo chambers that silence political debates and amplify the spread of disinformation”.

Furthermore, Achkar (2021) made a distinction between misinformation and disinformation. While misinformation is “when false or out-of context information or facts are shared and reported as truth,” disinformation, in contrast, is “the deliberate fabrication of information designed for nefarious purposes” (Achkar, 2021: 2).

There have been arguments about whether social media is good, bad, or neutral. This is against the backdrop that social media “can be used for social good, such as overturning oppressive regimes or bringing income inequality to the forefront of national and international discussions. At the same time, there will always be those who leverage technology in ways that were unintended by the designers” (Hemsley et al., 2018: 3). In supporting this, Lunga (2020) chronicled some illustrations of activities on Facebook and Twitter that demonstrated how social media is an abode for both positive and negative conflict resolution. These illustrations include “the Arab Spring (2011), #BlackLivesMatter (2013), #BringBackOurGirls (2014) and #MeToo (2017), among others” (Lunga, 2020: 6). The most recent one is the #EndSARS – a protest against Police ruthlessness in Nigeria – that almost paralysed the country in 2020. (Being a recent event, many articles, opinions and commentaries exist on the #EndSARS movement – a movement against Police brutality in Nigeria that started on Twitter – on many prints and social media platforms. However, among the earliest scholarly written articles are Uwazuruike (2020), Dambo et al. (2020), Ojedokun et al. (2021), Talabi et al. (2021) and John et al. (2022). In a recent study about the role of social media, especially Facebook, on the #EndSARS protest, it was revealed that social media has become a major means of disseminating information (especially about conflicts) (John et al., 2022). Furthermore, it was recommended that social media users be enlightened on how to use social media responsibly so that it will not escalate the conflict it has been used to report (John et al., 2022).

Recently, a study was carried out to understand how “the interplay of online and off-line dynamics creates opportunities for social media narratives to gain traction and contribute to conflict” in some countries, including Nigeria (Proctor, 2021: 3). Parts of the findings of the research are: threats of social media are not limited to users of social media; trust in social media narratives are usually informed by offline social networks; and access and vulnerability to social media vary across class, age, gender, and geography (Proctor, 2021). Another research discovered that social media could play a more significant role in building peace in many ways (International Alert, 2020). Among these ways are providing new perceptions in understanding conflict contexts and informing how interventions are designed; magnifying peaceful voices while influencing the public and political description; and forming new spaces for people to connect, coordinate and mobilise around peace (International Alert, 2020). Nevertheless, another research discovered that print and digital media contribute positively and negatively to conflict resolution (Mbima, 2021). As Musaeva (2021) summed up, media, generally, and social media, particularly, have both positive and negative roles in escalating or de-escalating conflicting situations.

### **Advantages of social media**

Iroka (2016) gave some advantages of social media concerning conflict resolution. Among them are:

- i. social media prevent possible physical combats during conflict resolution,
- ii. social media allow people to be bolder in expressing their grouse as social media reduce open confrontation,
- iii. social media are becoming more popular means of communication, though not necessarily the “best communicative means”,
- iv. the fact that people can conceal their real identity on social media makes social media means of expressing one’s opinions to the higher authorities without the fear of being known,
- v. social media have turned many media stations from one-way communication channels to interactive channels where people can express their views about any conflict through the social media platforms of such media stations, and
- vi. social media have become so exceptional as a place where people appear freer and settle the slightest conflict with their antagonists as fast as possible (Iroka, 2016: 16-17).

Baytiyeh (2019: 76) also asserted,

Social media can facilitate a resilient people-centered approach to conflict prevention and enables people around the globe to share firsthand witness reports of violence, social unrest, human rights infringements, election fraud, and political instability, empowering them to become agents of change within their own communities.

Tarmaeva and Narchuk (2020: 84) have also written extensively on how to “use tactics of justification, consent, persuasion, switching attention, suggestion, jokes and postponement of conversation to finish conflict situations” through social media.

### **Negative effects of social media**

Social media has adverse effects on its users in general and conflict resolution and peacebuilding in particular (Mensah et al., 2017). The adverse effects of social media on their users, especially youths, cannot be ignored. According to the Nigeria Internet Registration Association (NiRA) (2018), if not controlled, social media can have dangerous effects like:

1. Lack of control of and over personal information: Youths post private information online without realising the associated risks.
2. Cyberbullying,
3. Mental Health issues,
4. Lack of Morals,
5. Spread and ability to amplify Fake News,
6. Exposure to adult information,
7. Indirect encouragement of high rate of scams on social media,
8. Poor grades from the academic pursuits,
9. Long hours on Social Media platforms,

10. Peer pressure,
11. Addiction to social media.

### ***Hate speech***

Uzuegbunam and Omenugha (2018) have discussed these social media menaces in Nigeria with specific examples. Some particular ways social media negatively affect conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Nigeria are fake news and hate speech. Auwal (2018) extensively explained the term hate speech. In his words,

Hate speech denotes any speech, gesture, conduct, writing or display which could incite people to violence or prejudicial action. Essentially, such speeches rob others of their dignity, including: (a) all dissemination of ideas based on racial or ethnic superiority or hatred, by whatever means; (b) incitement to hatred, contempt or discrimination against members of a group on grounds of their race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin; (c) threats or incitement to violence against persons or groups on the grounds in (b) above; (d) expression of insults, ridicule or slander of persons or groups or justification of hatred, contempt or discrimination on the grounds in (b) above, when it clearly amounts to incitement to hatred or discrimination; (e) participation in organisations and activities which promote and incite racial discrimination. Additionally, hate speech refers to all communications (whether verbal, written, symbolic) that insults a racial, ethnic and political group, whether by suggesting that they are inferior in some respect or by indicating that they are despised or not welcome for any other reasons (Auwal, 2018: 58).

### ***Fake news***

As extensively defined by Herrero-Diz et al. (2020), fake news is

...an information disorder with different formal characteristics and intentions: satire/parody (ridicule and irony content to criticize elements of society without the intention to harm), false connection (headlines, images, or captions do not confirm the content), misleading content (misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual), false context (genuine content shared with false contextual information), imposter content (when genuine sources are impersonated), manipulated content (genuine content manipulated), fabricated content (new content 100% false to deceive and to harm), clickbait (tabloid or misleading headlines), and propaganda (true or false information spread to persuade an audience with economic, political, religious, racist purposes among others) (Herrero-Diz et al., 2020: 1).

The fact that the reach and impacts of information spread are considerably intensified and happened at such a fast pace on social networking websites makes fake news and hate speech remarkably possible to cause significant influences for countless social media users within minutes (Figueira & Oliveira, 2017). Pate and Ibrahim (2020: 91) thought that “fake news and hate speech ... are gaining ground in the Nigerian polity, especially in the social media and

broadcast media spheres”. This is so “because of the de-centralised nature of the social media platform [which] has become a perfect place for amateurs and professionals alike to create and share ideas, information, images, videos, art, [and] music” (Auwal, 2018: 55). However, as Figueira and Oliveira (2017) noted, the Federal Government of Nigeria has started a campaign against these social menaces. A report specifically has it that “In August 2017, the Nigerian government announced the monitoring of social media to identify and deal with hate speech, anti-government and anti-security information” (European Asylum Support Office, 2019: 53).

Fake news is also referred to as “misinformation” and “disinformation” (Herrero-Diz et al., 2020: 1-2), “malinformation” (Khan et al., 2021: 7) or “various forms of harmful content” (Ceron et al., 2021: 1). It is regarded as “a global phenomenon” (Esberg & Mikulaschek, 2021: 2). It is being encouraged on social media, especially on WhatsApp Messenger, because of the easy-to-read opportunities that many social media like the WhatsApp instant messaging service give in that “text, photos, memes, audio and video notes, files in different formats (Word, Excel, PDF), emoticons, stickers, GIFS, contact numbers, and even geolocation, or direct access to the camera of the mobile device from which it is used” can be easily manipulated on these social media (Herrero-Diz et al., 2020: 3).

Referred to as junk news by Savolainen et al. (2020), fake news is also easily spread on Facebook because of social media’s accessibility. While Ceron et al. (2021) thought that there seems to be no simple antidote to this information menace, to curb this menace, Goolsby (2013: 7) advised, “All social media users need to develop a healthy skepticism about the messages that they receive, learn to check sources, and refine their skills of discernment”. Another particular way that social media are having negative effects on conflict resolution and peacebuilding is that social media are making real-time friends less realistic as many social media users “are more concerned with Facebook friends, videos on YouTube, posts, twits and other online communication than they are with face-to-face friends” (Ngonso, 2019: 32).

### ***Cyberbullying***

Cyberbullying (or digital bullying) mentioned above, as one of “dangerous effects” of social media, is “an act of being mean to others by using information and communication involving electronic technologies to facilitate deliberate and repeated harassment or threat to an individual or group which can be done by an individual or group” (Balogun et al., 2017: 102). Cyberbullying (also referred as “online harassment”) has been described as “purposefully abusive, unwanted, often repeated interactions with another person online” (Cross, 2019: 327). In the words of two scholars, “Cyberbullying can occur in different ways be it online harassment, posting offensive or abusive messages or pictures, privacy violations, and exclusion from online platforms/groups” (Nazir & Thabassum, 2021). Cyberbullying has negative effects on conflict resolution and peacebuilding as shown in a study that even though most people who use social media in Nigeria do so to “keep in touch with family and friends” (Balogun et al., 2017: 103), many of them are ending up being cyberbullied. A law was enacted to combat this social menace in 2015. The law is known as the “Cybercrimes (Prohibition,

Prevention, and many more) Act, 2015”. Nwufu and Nwoke (2018) have also given some recommendations to curtail the menace.

### ***Misuse of information***

Moreover, if mishandled or not handled carefully, the Internet generally and social media specifically can expose users to great risks of exposing private information. Farrah et al. (2018: 1) corroborated this by noting that “information stored on cell phones, laptops and social media accounts can – if stolen, lost or inadvertently leaked – expose sensitive and extremely private information to large audiences”. Thus, carefulness in using the Internet generally and social media specifically is the watchword. However, this information exposure may not be due to the carelessness of the users, but the “increasingly sophisticated methods of government censorship and surveillance” of the Internet and social media in some countries, thereby putting the Internet users at risk because data might be revealed that could compromise the safety of these users (Widmer & Grossenbacher, 2019: 9). Kirea et al. (2018: 89) reiterated this by concluding

... information credibility is essential if social media as a tool is to be effective in conflict prevention and peace building. The nature of social media which allows for anonymity of identity gives room for unverified information to be floated around the social media networks; this can be detrimental to the conflict prevention and peace building initiatives. There is therefore need for information verification and authentication by a trusted agent, to offer information appertaining to violence, conflict prevention and peace building on the social media platforms.

Schlichthorst et al. (2019) have indicated growing evidence that social media in particular and the Internet generally influence suicide-related behaviour both positively and negatively. These scholars gave many factors responsible for this. They later gave some remedies to the negative effect (Schlichthorst et al., 2019).

### ***The weaponization of social media***

Furthermore, Schlichthorst et al. (2019: 3) have tagged social media “an information confrontation battlefield”. This is against the backdrop that social media could be useful to support military operations. This has made Fisenzou (2019: 65) refer to social media as “a modern weapon”. This “weaponization of social media, which means transforming social networks into a field of hostile information activities carried out on target audiences in the gray zone between peace and war” (Biały, 2017: 6). The weaponization is “from disinformation campaigns to electoral manipulation and online recruitment by violent extremist organizations, digital threats exacerbate conflict drivers, open new avenues for spoilers, and increase polarization, complicating efforts to prevent or counter violent conflict” (Proctor, 2021: 3). Biały (2017: 76) has identified six ways of doing this thus: “intelligence collection, (geo-)targeting, cyber operations, command and control, defense, and psychological warfare (inform and influence)”. Moreover, against this trend of the activities of “bad actors” on social media, Biały (2017: 87) gave some recommendations:

1. Be present on vsocial media with attractive, well-tailored content,

2. Use what technology offers,
3. Advance your own narrative and develop attractive branding,
4. Build your brand and narrative advocacy,
5. Immunize your audience against psychological operations.

### **Cyber peace**

Because of many of the aforementioned cyber vices in and through cyberspace, many scholars and stakeholders in world peace and information communication technologies have started arguments that brought about the concepts of “cyber security” and “cyber peace”. These stakeholders are the World Federation of Scientists, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), and Suzanne Mubarak Women’s International Peace Movement (SMWIPM) (Wegener, 2011). Another organisation is the CyberPeace Foundation (CPF) of India that “...is an award-winning civil society organization, think tank of CyberSecurity and policy experts with the vision of pioneering CyberPeace Initiatives to build collective resiliency against cybercrimes & global threats of cyber warfare” (CyberPeace Foundation, para. 1). According to Gençoğlu (2021), the most recent organisation is the Cyber Peace Institut which was founded in Geneva in September 2019.

Of concern to this study is cyber peace. Since it is difficult to define peace clearly, scholars have also found it difficult to give a precise definition of cyber peace. Instead, attempts are being made to describe it. As cited in an online source, cyber peace is “a universal order of cyberspace built on a wholesome state of tranquility, the absence of disorder or disturbance and violence” (Shackelford, 2013: 3). While Inversini (n.d.) discussed how cyber peace could be achieved globally, the World Federation of Scientists determined some essential operational elements of cyber peace in August 2019 (Gençoğlu, 2021). These elements are:

1. The free circulation of information and ideas guaranteed by international law to individuals also applies to cyberspace. Restrictions should be within the legal process and to the extent necessary,
2. All countries should work together to develop a common code of cyber conduct and a harmonized global legal framework, including provisions on judicial investigation cooperation that respects confidentiality and human rights,
3. All users, service providers, and governments should work to prevent the use of cyberspace, especially young and vulnerable users, in a way that could lead to violence or exploitation,
4. The private sector, including governments, organizations, and individuals, should implement and maintain comprehensive security programs that leverage privacy and security technologies based on internationally accepted best practices and standards,
5. Software and hardware developers should strive to improve resilience and develop secure technologies that are resistant to vulnerabilities,
6. Governments should actively participate in the efforts of the United Nations to support global cybersecurity and cyber peace, as well as prevent the use of cyberspace for conflict (Gençoğlu, 2021: 247).

### **Some recommendations**

As part of the recommendations extracted from the proceedings of a conference held recently, social media was recommended as “a space for dialogue” (Trowbridge et al., 2018: 124). These recommendations were made:

1. When seeking to promote dialogue on social media, we need to focus on building bridges through compassion and peaceful communication,
2. Information, media literacy, ethics and critical thinking are prerequisites for responsible social media use,
3. Social media is just one tool in the communications toolbox. Therefore, it is also important to network with other institutions with common areas of interest, including traditional media and education,
4. We should work to develop strategies to pressure online platforms to act in socially responsible ways,
5. Ignorance is the main cause of hate speech. It is caused by a lack of information, misinformation/disinformation, and cognitive dissonance
  - It is important to know the who, what, where and how of communication, including the issues at stake, the narratives addressing them, the influencers involved, and the channels and tools available for use.
6. We need to build credibility as voices of peace. One should listen before engaging, piggyback on multipliers, and then finally contribute with one’s own message,
7. It is important to build capacity through the use of marketing skills, analytical tools, the engagement of creative communities, and the involvement of schools and universities (Trowbridge et al., 2018: 124).

### **Conclusion**

Conclusively, social media has become a constant phenomenon. It will continue to have an impact on the way people relate with one another. While people should be encouraged to embrace social media use, it should be used responsibly. The “e-illiterate or “e-semi-literate” people should be trained to become “e-literate” people. This training will be a conscious effort of the people. Through this, social media will enhance the peaceful coexistence of African people instead of promoting or escalating conflicts among them.

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