Chapter 6

New Media’s Role: An Evaluation
NEW MEDIA’S ROLE: AN EVALUATION

6.1 NEW MEDIA IN INDIA-PAKISTAN CONFLICT MEDIATION

6.1.1 New Media

Present day media landscape is diverse since not only traditional media forms (newspapers, magazines, tabloids, books, pamphlets, leaflets etc) but newer and more participatory media forms such as internet, mobile phones, blogs, video-sharing websites, and social networking sites dominate the media scene. The latter are popularly referred to as ‘New Media’. New media are defined in terms of their characteristics vis-à-vis traditional media. Though restricted to technology, the term signifies contemporary cultural concepts and contexts of media practices. Some even prefer using the term ‘digital media’, though new media is encompassing and does not privilege technology as a defining aspect of the medium (Dewdney & Ride, 2006).

Media democratization is a defining feature of new media technology. Tools of media creation have become less expensive, easy to use, more participatory and accessible. For instance, use of personal computers, smartphones, digital cameras and other similar devices is on the rise. Transformation from passive content consumption to content creation by users was a defining moment in the history of mass communication (Gillmor, 2009). New media has become a virtual repository for documenting contemporary social, political and cultural realities. Shift towards ‘user generated content’¹ and new media’s role in

¹ User generated content refers to material created and posted on websites and other new media forums such as blogs. Content is contributed by amateur users – For example, Wikipedia - where any user can write on a topic of his/her choice and content is then evaluated by other users who may suggest changes in the same. User generated
mobilizing citizenry for active participation in the political process is a subject of study.

New media facilitate content creation and hence are more democratic than mainstream media, provide ease of access and immediacy of response, allow diversity of views, overcome structural limitations of traditional media and are user-friendly and interactive in nature. New media make contemporary media scenario eclectic. However, critics have expressed concerns over new media’s accessibility and ‘digital divide’\(^2\). Despite limitations, prospects for new media’s use in international conflict mediation are promising.

6.1.2 Why study new media in India-Pakistan relations?

New media’s role in international relations, foreign policy and conflict resolution demands academic scrutiny. A study on impact of new media on peacebuilding and conflict management (The Impact of new media on Peacebuilding and Conflict Management, 2011) highlighted various roles played by new media in processes of conflict and peace. Of late, new media has emerged as a tool to counter hate narratives propagated in mainstream media. In context of India-Pakistan conflict, analysis of new media offers comparative content trends found in traditional media vis-a-vis online media forums. In the past two decades, India and Pakistan have witnessed new media proliferation on a large scale. Analysis thus explores existence and nature of alternative peace media in both the countries.

\(^2\) Digital divide refers to differential access to and use of internet based on gender, income, race, location. For more on the digital divide see Ronald E. Rice in the Handbook of New Media, Sage (2002), pp 105-129. Also see Gandy, O. (2002). The Real Digital Divide: Citizens versus Consumers. pp 448-460 in the same work.
6.1.3 Criteria for new media evaluation

New media content is vast, scattered and diverse. Hence, the following criteria were devised to select content for analysis:

- Focus on user generated content by Indians and Pakistanis on new media platforms.
- Shared content creation and collaborative management of new media pages/groups by Indians and Pakistanis, interaction among users.

Content evaluation was carried out for a period from January-March 2014. It was based on major themes addressed and role of content creators. Based on this evaluation, the concluding chapter in this study presents a comparative view of role played by English press and new media; offers generalizations on new media’s role in conflict mediation. Analysis puts forth pertinent observations about nature of content and emergent themes in order to provide an overview of new media forums with reference to key research question number five.

6.2 SELECT NEW MEDIA FORUMS: AN ANALYSIS

6.2.1 Aman ki Asha (Website)

‘Aman ki Asha’ (AKA) is a peace journalism initiative managed jointly by The Times of India group and Jang group in Pakistan. It was launched in January 2010 to enable the creation of a collaborative spirit of dialogue, people to people contact and peaceful relations between the two countries. AKA is a first of its kind initiative committed to the positive use of print media space to promote benefits of peace and give space to each other’s point of views. It has organized literary and music festivals, mushairas,
editor’s conferences, trade conferences and strategic seminars to realize its vision\(^3\). Though this is primarily a print media campaign, AKA facebook group and website were selected for the study. Both draw content from news stories printed in News International (English), Daily Jang (Urdu) and The Times of India (English).

The AKA website can be viewed both in English and Urdu. It contains various sections such as ‘News’, ‘Blogs’, ‘Videos’, ‘Special Edition’, ‘Global Media’, ‘Articles’ etc. Focus of commentary on the website is on South Asia in general and India-Pakistan relations in particular. News stories/articles focus on themes of cooperation and conflict between the two countries. For example, visa regime, water dispute, trade, culture, Kashmir, people-to-people contact, diplomatic relations, trust deficit, cultural linkages, nationalism, experiences of visits across the border, interaction with common citizens, commentary on major events in Indo-Pak relations, conference and seminar briefs\(^4\). Video section contains videos on meetings between political representatives, series of AKA debates and AKA anthem. A section titled ‘special edition’ provides insightful perspectives on issues such as prisoners of war, condition of fishermen in both countries, policy repercussions on people, historical ties, cultural and trade ties and popular opinion. A section on ‘conversations’ highlights email exchanges among people on both sides. Global media section on the website contains news stories and commentaries on India-Pakistan published in international media such as Los Angeles Times, Guardian, Gulf News and Khaleej Times.

There are two sections that draw specific attention on the website. One is ‘Milne Do’ on issues of visa regime and other is ‘Water is Life’ on water issues. Struggles of ordinary people to obtain visas, travel hurdles\(^5\), water sharing and

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\(^4\) This is not a representative list of issues and themes addressed on the website. The list is exhaustive and my attempt has been to highlight only pertinent themes covered through the website content.

water disputes\textsuperscript{6} are described in this section. Other than this, a column called ‘Pyaar border Paar’ features love stories of cross border couples. Deliberations on issues of sports, health and human rights can also be found. The website contains a repository of literature on India-Pakistan issues. It is linked to the Facebook group and comments from readers can be seen on the bottom most right hand corner. It provides ample scope for reader’s participation, interaction and expression of their narratives.

The website serves an educative purpose for readers who are able to gain knowledge on various aspects of the Indo-Pak relationship. Website content is directed towards creation of an advocacy group that puts forth alternative narratives. Content is contributed by experts, analysts, group members and media persons associated with the campaign. It gives room to contradicting opinions thereby furthering discourse on conflict and peace. Peace engagement under the aegis of AKA is not limited to online interactions but also incorporates ground action in form of literary festivals, conferences, seminars, musical events, business meets, issue based discussions, corporate campaigns, road shows, signature campaigns, committee meetings etc.

\textbf{6.2.2 Aman ki Asha (Facebook group)}

AKA Facebook group\textsuperscript{7} is an extension of the print campaign. It is a platform meant to connect like-minded individuals willing to deliberate on issues between India and Pakistan. The group reflects ideas and activities of the print campaign. Though it is an open group, membership is subject to rules and regulations.

\footnote{\textit{The water factor} (Mattoo, 2010), \textit{A potential for cooperation} (August 2010).}

\footnote{About the Group - https://www.facebook.com/groups/amankiasha1/}
It subscribes to a separate but peaceful co-existence of India and Pakistan as nation states and does not believe in affirming superiority of any country, faith, religion, gender over the other. Posts that promote animosity or misunderstanding are strictly prohibited. Group content is jointly administered by Indians and Pakistanis. Over the years, it has emerged as a mutual space enabling people from both sides to engage with each other. As on November 24, 2014 the group comprised of 7,289 members.

Following themes emerged from an analysis of group content:

- **Shared connection about past events** - Reference to past events, historical personalities, historical factors in India-Pakistan relationship was found in the group. Content established emotional connect with the past, helped members gain knowledge about a shared bond between India and Pakistan and built a historical perspective to current events in the relationship.

- **Domestic concerns** - Group members deliberated on domestic issues (political, economic, social, and cultural) in both countries. This helped them bridge the existing gap and discuss common problems encountered by people on both sides.

- **Personal narratives** - Personal experiences about partition nostalgia, sharing of partition memories, search for cross-border relatives were among the many themes found in the group. For instance, photographs of houses in the pre-partition era were posted on January 25, 2014. Such posts connected people with the past and emphasized idea of peaceful co-existence.

- **News and events** - News about events in both countries were frequently shared on the forum. News links were sourced from mainstream media, blogs and other forums to help update members on current happenings. For example, *Gujarat girl writes to Sonia to get father’s body back from Pakistan* (February 1, 2014).

- **Culture** - Cultural practices in both countries were projected and shared through photographs, narrations and videos. Through this members from both countries were acquainted with the other’s culture, habits and life. Information
exchange on cultural indicators such as food items, dressing habits, rituals, and festivals facilitated familiarity with the ‘other. For instance, photos of fashion trends in Pakistan (February 2) and Basant Panchami celebration (February 5).

- **Inspirational messages** - Messages of peace, love, cooperation, friendship, harmony were expressed in form photographs, quotes, videos etc.

- **Links to other information sources** - Links to information sources such as blogs, articles in international media, and interviews with experts and activists were found in this group. Diversity of information was emphasized upon to let members seek information and opinion on a wider range. Links focused on opinions not reported in mainstream media. For instance, news links on exchange of bags of letters at Attari-Wagah border, letters written by Indians and Pakistanis to their near and dear ones.

Other than above listed categories, posts in the group discuss initiatives and events in peacebuilding, human rights and India-Pakistan friendship. Discussion on human suffering due to conflict, achievements of Indians and Pakistanis, facts about prominent personalities with origins in undivided India, video clippings from Indian and Pakistani media channels can be found. Through this group, few members have attempted to re-establish contact with long lost friends and relatives from across the border by posting photographs and requesting help in locating their whereabouts. For instance, a post on February 6 reads, “Janab Muhammad Uzair Niazi of Mianwali (Pakistan) asked me on FB if I could trace Mr. Harish Chandera Nackra who had left Mianwali after partition. I have not only provided him with his whereabouts but have sent him his 33 years old picture with me. Thanks to Facebook.”

Virtual engagements are translated into real time activities through participation in events, peace rallies and other forms of support to people from across the border. The group is a personalized space where members freely share their ideas on peace, conflict, culture, life and politics. For instance, group members voiced strong opinions against the rigid visa regime and extremist elements on both sides. The group is well-coordinated with content in the print campaign and members are encouraged to comment and contribute to issues of
relevance. Members are also encouraged to provide context to their posts. Therefore, the group is well-managed despite diversity and volume of content iii.

6.2.3 Aaghaz-e-Dosti (Blog post)

Aaghaz-e-Dosti (AED - beginning of friendship), a collaborative venture between Mission Bhartiym (India) and The Catalyst (Pakistan) commenced in May 2012. It is a cross-border campaign working for India-Pakistan peace and friendship under which like-minded individuals have gathered to strengthen the power of peace. Apart from ground-based activities, the AED blog post8 is a tool to disseminate messages of peace. Two key initiatives of the campaign are ‘Aman Chaupal’ and ‘Calendar for Peace and Love’. Aman Chaupal employs traditional forms of communication (like a village meeting) to facilitate informal and educative interactions with the ‘other’. Well-known personalities in media, sports, art, literature, civil society, bureaucracy are invited to deliver lectures on issues relating to India and Pakistan to liberate the dialogue process from elitism and bring it to people. Thus far (as on November 2014), twelve Aman Chaupals have been conducted as part of the campaign. Under the ‘Calendar for Peace and Love’, select paintings of students from both sides serve as collection of shared dreams and reminder of a deeply distrustful mindset created over years of confrontation. The ‘Our Initiatives’ section

8 http://aaghazedosti.wordpress.com/
comprises of contributions by AED members in form of letters, articles and press statements. These are directed towards issues such as conditions of prisoners languishing in Indian and Pakistani jails, condemnation of border clashes, ceasefire violations and extremist activities on both sides, role of media, visa regime and issue of cultural cooperation.

The initiative is supported by journalists, lawyers, human rights and peace activists, civil society organizations. The blog invites contributions from readers in form of messages, photographs, poems, write-ups. A section by the name ‘Indo-Pak Tea Time Campaign’ exhibits peace messages and photographs by people. The blog post is a chronicler of on-ground peace activities undertaken as part of the campaign, and a forum where members can share their opinions on India-Pakistan conflict. The aim is to involve young people in delivery of peace messages and construction of alternative narratives. Through collaborative content generation and dissemination, the blog takes the shape of a forum for deliberation and advocacy of significant issues in the India-Pakistan relationship.

6.2.4 Aaghaz-e-Dosti (Facebook group)

Figure 6.5: Aaghaz-e-Dosti (Facebook Group)

9 Indo-Pak Tea Time Campaign can be accessed on https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.221196628064048.1073741842.188198404697204&type=3
Aaghaz-e-Dosti’s Facebook group\textsuperscript{10} is an extension of the campaign managed jointly by teams in India and Pakistan. It promotes messages of peace, cooperation, brotherhood and harmony among the two countries. As of November 2014, there were 3,512 members in the group.

Group content comprised of:

- Information and sharing on events in both countries. For instance, \textit{Pakistan to host India show in Lahore (February 14, 2014)}.

- Positive developments in India-Pakistan relations. For example, news about release of Pakistani prisoners from Indian jails (February 27, 2014) and a bicycle rally to Pakistan organized by Delhi University Students for Peace (April 27, 2014). News about achievements of people on both sides is also highlighted. For example, \textit{Amazing Pakistanis who have made us proud (January 3)}, \textit{India-Pakistan exchange of letters in an attempt to connect people (January 21)}.

- Sharing of information about domestic political, social and cultural events in both countries. This helps members gain knowledge of happenings on the ‘other’ side.

- Information exchange on each other’s food habits, dressing styles, festivals, rituals and other cultural ethos through photographs and videos. A celebration of religious and cultural diversity can be found on the group. For this purpose, the group has niche albums such as ‘Did you know’, ‘Know your Neighbour’, ‘Exploring Indo-Pak’, ‘Indo-Pak Tea Time’, ‘City Manuals’ etc.

- Reference to historical events, images and memories from the past is repeatedly raised. This reference also serves as a grim reminder about tragic historical events that led to loss of innumerable lives\textsuperscript{11}. For example, a post on

\begin{itemize}
\item The Facebook group can be accessed on https://www.facebook.com/groups/aaghazedosti/
\item A March 29 post shares a rare clip of mass migration during the partition.
\end{itemize}
February 7 shows Muhammad Ali Jinnah reading a newspaper. Another post depicts Pakistanis reliving Bhagat Singh’s memories on the day he achieved martyrdom.

- A section by the name “Did you know” is a unique feature of this group. Here, lesser known facts and information from the pre-partition era are shared. It comes across as an effort to strengthen common bonds among people to emphasize on which, unknown facts about India-Pakistan relations, enlightening pieces of information are shared in form of graphic and text.

- Posts, status messages, photos, videos and news clippings from other peacebuilding groups are frequently shared by members. Details about flagship events of the campaign such as Calendar for Love and Peace, Aman Chaupal are also found.

  The group serves as a platform for people on both sides of the border to interact with each other, develop friendships, exchange information and question stereotypes. For instance, a post on March 29 shows lady traffic police on job in Lahore, thereby offering a glimpse of life in Pakistan. Similarly, a video about Karachi depicts a picture of the city rarely documented in mainstream media. Thus, new media is a powerful force in challenging stereotypical and mainstream portrayals. This is an interactive group where members contribute in form of poems, letters, stories and write-ups on relevant issues. The campaign’s core team also contributes actively to mainstream media discourse in order to emphasize on a shared vision for peace among two different mediums.

6.2.5 Friendships Across Borders: Aao Dosti Karein (Facebook group)

The Facebook group Friendships Across Borders: Aao Dosti Karein\(^\text{12}\) was launched on February 14, 2014 by a Mumbai-based educator. It is based on the premise of story sharing and power of cross-border friendships to transform long standing hostility between India and Pakistan. The group encourages members to share their own stories of cross-border friendships in order to demonstrate bonding and cooperation among people on both sides. This group stands out

\(^{12}\) https://www.facebook.com/fabaadostikarein
among other new media platforms examined in this study since it employs the art of story-telling to disseminate peace messages between India and Pakistan. Users/group experienced cross-border friendships. Until November 2014, twelve stories were published in this group. These stories outline aspects such as how the two friends met, evolution of their friendship, how they nurtured it and what they learnt from the course of friendship. Stories are usually accompanied by photographs and personalized descriptions of intricate issues such as commonalities, differences, nationality and stereotypes. Stories make for a rich reading since they encompass a heart-touching sketch of experience that is universal for those who have friends from a conflict zone. Stories feature people from diverse places such as Mumbai, Manipur, Karachi, Quetta, Larkana and others, foreground friendships but also engage with conflicts. The News (Pakistan) has reprinted excepted versions of some of these stories; an example of print media drawing on social media content.

In the words of the group’s founder, “The stories typically cover questions or topics such as: How did they get to know each other? How do they continue their friendship in a scenario where it is difficult for them to travel to each other’s countries? How has their friendship grown over time? What does this friendship mean to them in the context of the hostility between India and Pakistan? Has this friendship helped them see things differently? Have they faced any particular challenges?” (Sharma, 2014). The group thereby demonstrates power of new social media platforms.

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13 Anybody with a cross border friend (either Indian of Pakistani) is invited to share his/her experience of friendship on this group. All stories are available at friendshipsacrossborders.wordpress.com
media technology by disseminating real examples about friendships across conflict zones. The group is also involved in activities on peace related advocacy and engagement. Stories are shared virtually and ground activities are carried in form of workshops, seminars, training sessions, networking with civil society activists and non-governmental organizations. Through use of films, audio-visual media and other art forms, the group engages with teachers, school students, parents and other stake-holders on issues of India-Pakistan conflict. These sessions specifically target young people who do not carry the baggage of partition and can be encouraged to think critically by questioning stereotypes.

A few thematic features related to group content are:

- Sharing and dissemination of information links from other peace networks to strengthen voices of peace\(^{14}\). For example, *Lessons for the Largest Democracy from a Much Smaller One* (April 16), shared from The New York Times blog, a story of Indian and Pakistani cricketers bonding off the field (February 28).

- Details of workshops, training and interactive sessions carried out under the banner of the group. For instance, *Healing the Wounds of Partition – workshop conducted with school children*, to help explore alternative narratives to hate and hostility (April 12).

- Videos and films on partition, India-Pakistan conflict, human suffering, and friendship are few themes that have been addressed. For instance, a film titled ‘Mukand and Riaz’ demonstrates power of friendship during partition, (March 2), a film by the name ‘Little Terrorist’ depicts worth of humanity and friendship over divisiveness and hatred (March 4).

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\(^{14}\) A post on February 19 shares a drawing made by a school student, showcasing unity between India and Pakistan. A February 24 post shares a link about bonding between Indian and Pakistani students at a youth exchange program through Citizens Archive of Pakistan.
• Group members contribute messages through their experiences, poems, narrations, comments etc. Thus, sharing and interaction extends to indigenous contributions from group members\textsuperscript{15}.

Each story shared on the forum accounts how cross-border friendships have led to a change in perspective and questioning of ingrained stereotypes. These narrate how people discover common ground after they enter into friendship with presumptions about the ‘other’. As some members recall, “These friendships are special in their own way. It's good that I have friends from across the border because it shows that not every Indian is anti-Pakistani and vice versa.” (March 15) and “I had never imagined that a Pakistani national would become such a close friend of mine. He is one of my closest friends now. I share everything with him. I feel as though I have known him for ages” (March 8). The group bears a neat and rich look in terms of content and facilitates users in building and sharing personalized accounts of friendship.

6.2.6 Building Peace Project: 2014-15 (Facebook group and participant blogs)

The Red Elephant Foundation’s flagship initiative launched in 2014, namely, The Building Peace Project (2014-15)\textsuperscript{16} brings together youth from different countries for a peace dialogue. Presently, a total of eighteen participants from India and Pakistan are part of this project. After a year of virtual connectivity, participants will come together at a peace summit and agree on a ‘peace manifesto’ based on which they will suggest recommendations for enhancing peace between the two countries. Each Indian participant is paired with a Pakistani counterpart and communication takes place through E-mail, Skype, Whatsapp and other technology driven devices subject to preference, availability, ease and convenience of the participants themselves. A set curriculum is devised

\textsuperscript{15} FAB Question of the Week: What does ‘friendship’ mean to you? We would love to hear your answers. Please leave your comment on this thread to participate. (February 21). This ensures a stream of ideas from group members.

\textsuperscript{16} For more on the project visit http://www.redelephantfoundation.org/p/building-peace-project.html
for participants to carry out relevant discussions on pressing issues. Project participants are required to maintain a peace journal (blog) of their interactions. Idea behind the project is to harness power of technology to transcend borders, connect with the ‘other’, deliberate on contentious issues and generate innovative peacebuilding solutions. The project engages young people from both countries.

Communication as part of the project takes place through Facebook\textsuperscript{17} and participant blogs. Each participant pair has their own blogging space and peacebuilding ideas are adequately projected on the Facebook group. With an emphasis on indigenous content generation, participants use the Facebook group to discuss aspects present in the curriculum and share ideas/information on peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Every month, reading and viewing material on a wide range of issues is shared to help participants place their thoughts in perspective. As the founder of this project opines, “countries that have a history of differences end up not just stereotyping the ‘other’ but are also filled with a sense of demonization, fear and mistrust. Letting people from these countries talk and engage with each other leads to a discovery of mutual respect and bonding” (Lazarus, 2014).

Figure 6.7: Facebook group and participants’ blog of Building Peace Project (BPP)

\textsuperscript{17} Facebook group of the project can be accessed at
https://www.facebook.com/groups/277381442421047/
Few thematic features related to group content are:

- Participants share information about their city of residence, cuisine, culture, religion, festivals and various other topics. This facilitates each one in knowing where the ‘other’ belongs to and what his/her life values are. They also contribute in form of poems, articles, write-ups, commentaries and any other form of creative expression on issues related to India and Pakistan.

- Participants share write-ups/links from their blogs, information in form of images and videos on local cultures and rituals to develop a sense of bonding in the group. For instance, video clipping about food in Lahore (April 4).

- Discussions on reading and viewing material are undertaken every month wherein participants are invited to share their perspectives. For example, a discussion on how soft power can build bridges between strangers from different backgrounds (April 15).

- Participants’ blogs comprise of interactions with their counterpart, glimpses from their lives and their experiences in peacebuilding as part of the project.

The Building Peace Project thus offers a platform where participants engage in sustained and substantial interactions, explore lifeworlds of the ‘other’ and develop sensitivity and respect towards varying opinions. Though the project was initiated with a structured schema of communication, it allows ample scope for participants to gradually discover the ‘other’ through freewheeling interactions.

6.2.7 Romancing the Border (Facebook group)

Romancing the Border (RTB) is an India-Pakistan citizen’s group to disseminate messages of peace, influence opinions and behaviour of people on both sides of

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18 Analysis of content for this group was carried out for a period from April-June 2014 (since the project itself was launched in March 2014).

19 Video of a Sindhi song from Pakistan’s Sindh province was shared on April 16. The song represents aspirations and dreams of a young Sindhi girl from Pakistan. The aim is to present a positive picture of the ‘other’. Another instance is video about a Pakistani motorbike driver on a peace journey.
the border. The idea behind this initiative is to highlight similarities between Indians and Pakistanis. RTB provides an opportunity to people from both sides of the border to interact, befriend each other, discuss their apprehensions and eventually let go off their hatred. It was conceived by Indian and Pakistani university students who came up with the idea of building a people to people movement on social media in 2012. With only a logo and basic idea in mind, RTB’s first testimonial received an overwhelming response. In its attempts to disseminate messages of peace and love across the border, RTB was supported by Stanford University's Peace Innovation lab.

Few thematic features related to group content are:

- RTB’s Facebook group invites testimonials\(^{21}\), peace messages/slogans from across the border, thereby providing Pakistanis and Indians with a platform to interact with each other. It has collaborations with ‘Aman ki Asha’ campaign for publication of these testimonials in The News and Daily Jang. This collaboration reflects shared commitment between traditional and new media forms to promote peace.

- The group has several other innovative campaigns such as video greetings, smile for peace, photo booth campaign in form of colourful and appealing images and messages contributed by members.

- The group has emerged as a think tank and advocacy forum on India-Pakistan issues.

- RTB is well-connected with other peace networks and members share links, stories and updates from other platforms. Content posted therefore reflects

\(^{20}\) RTB group page had 6,099 likes as on November 2014. It can be accessed at https://www.facebook.com/RomancingTheBorder

\(^{21}\) Peace testimonials’ are statements, experiences and narratives of peace by Indian and Pakistani members of the group. Through these, members reinstate their belief in the cause of peace. These are accompanied by photographs and text with phrases such as ‘Not my war’, ‘Not my fight’.
diversity as it is a combination of indigenous content as well as that sourced from other groups.

The RTB experiment proves the positive potential of online, interactive forums in letting enemy populations engage with each other. It functions on inputs of young people from both countries, those who are keen for cordial bilateral relations and a peaceful sub-continent. In the words of a member, “the way this forum engages youth in peace-making through personal messages on social media is what makes it stand out from among scores of platforms on the same theme”\textsuperscript{iv}. The founder cum creator of this group affirms, “interactive pages such as these have successfully brought together Indians, Pakistanis and foreign nationals with a stake in the conflict. Such new media initiatives may not deliver immediate results, however they encourage enemy populations to look beyond official narratives fed to them by their respective country. Young people chatting and interacting freely on these forums can effectively contribute to dispelling hatred and animosity. However, since new media space is innovative and ever-changing, diversification in terms of content, followers, associations and new media technology would decide the future of such forums in the India-Pakistan conflict discourse”\textsuperscript{v}.

Figure 6.8: Screenshot of RTB (Facebook group)
6.2.8 Romancing the Border: India-Pak Peace and Love (Facebook group)

The objective of this group, Romancing the Border: India-Pak Peace and Love\(^{22}\) is to spread peace, love and brotherhood in the antagonistic relationship between India and Pakistan. As a part of its objectives, the group underlines the importance of peace, solidarity and unity in a sub-continent plagued by animosity and war. Emphasis is given to common challenges faced by Indians and Pakistanis in form of hunger, poverty, illiteracy etc. The group operates on the premise of peaceful solutions to the conflict. This is an open group with 241 members as of November 2014. Group content comprises photos, messages, updates and links from other peacebuilding networks, expression of strong sentiments against use of violence, support to resolution of issues through sustained dialogue, depiction of shared cultural aspirations between both countries (for example, photographs of celebration of festivals on both sides), photographs and description of shared historical legacies (photos depicting human suffering during partition as a reminder to the tragedies borne by people), critique of a false sense of nationalism that advocates hatred of the ‘other’ and positive developments related to India-Pakistan relations (Google reunion advertisement showcasing power of new media in nurturing cross-border connections).

6.2.9 India Pakistan Families Solidarity Association (Facebook group)

The objective of this group is to enable regular contact among family members divided between India and Pakistan as a result of the partition\(^{23}\). It has chapters in important cities of both countries and serves to strengthen people to people contact among families that were divided during partition. Primary members of this association are divided families who encounter difficulties in meeting their relatives on either side of the border. It serves as a contact point for such families and also helps people who have inadvertently crossed the Indo-Pak border. As on November 2014, it comprised of 502 members.

\(^{22}\) https://www.facebook.com/groups/424946120884717/

\(^{23}\) https://www.facebook.com/groups/ipfsa/
Group content is driven by a fervent critique of the visa regime that acts as a hurdle in people to people contact. The group therefore advocates easing of visa restrictions in order to let divided families on both sides meet up each other. Focus is on people to people contact, exchange of information among divided families and highlighting problems faced by family members. Partition related memories, violence and stories can be found in this group. People-centric issues are also at the forefront of discussion (for example, a post on pitiable condition of fishermen on both sides, February 4). Members post stories and links related to issues of peace, cooperation, cultural commonalities etc. For instance, a post from February 18 highlights commonalities in languages across Asia. Group members also engage in a questioning of historical events, distorted versions of the past and attempt to provide a context to alternative readings of history. Through the group, members also try to locate lost friends and relatives on either side of the border. This helps re-establish contact with long lost affiliations, re-energize familial and friendship bonds. For instance, a post from November 24, 2013 shared by a member on behalf of someone else reads, “I have lost half of my blood relatives after 1947. Since my father died there is not much information except the two names of my paternal uncle's daughters. They both are Bukhari ... Last I knew, they lived in Amritsar, a place called Chatta Khata. I looked for it over the internet, but couldn't find it ... Looking at your efforts to re-join and fill the divide, I would request: Please help me and guide me to find my roots...”.
6.3 NEW MEDIA CONTENT: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

6.3.1 Emergent themes from new media content

Preliminary analysis of select new media content, with focus on collaboration, shared content creation brought to fore common themes emerging as result of the analysis. The groups under study though different in terms of content and presentation\textsuperscript{vi}; operate with a similar goal to promote peaceful relations between India and Pakistan. Ideas of peace, cooperation, religious harmony, unity, brotherhood are reflected through content posted in these groups. These forums employ technology as a tool to develop, nurture and sustain cross-border connections. These are not however solely technology-driven. There is more to these than the use of new media technology. Instances from these forums ably demonstrate new media’s capacity in building real-time bonds among enemy populations\textsuperscript{vii}. The table below enlists themes extracted:
Table 6.1: Themes emergent from select new media content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peace, cooperation, friendship and trust building</th>
<th>Eradication of stereotypes</th>
<th>Diversity in content, alternative narratives</th>
<th>Networking and advocacy for peace</th>
<th>Peace activism on the ground</th>
<th>Mobilizing public opinion, content generation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core themes that these groups address are positive values associated with India and Pakistan relations. Content emphasizes peaceful and harmonious relations. Creation and sharing of content is driven by motivation to highlight commonalities in people, culture, to emphasize South Asian unification led by India and Pakistan.</td>
<td>Primary aim of these new media groups is to let people know the ‘other’ and depict the unknown side of the ‘other’. Members are encouraged to look beyond narrow perceptions and ‘enemy related frames’ to present a more holistic and humane view of the ‘other’.</td>
<td>Content in these new media groups is diverse, rich and is sourced from variety of platforms. Since focus is on user generated content, members are encouraged to post content that is reflective of multiplicity of views. These forums try to offer an alternate frame of understanding the ‘other’, different than what the mainstream media presents.</td>
<td>Beyond sharing and posting content, these groups also contribute to enlarging the peace constituency, advocating a more positive role for media and emphasizing people to people contact. A growing network of peacebuilding groups can be found on new media</td>
<td>These new media forums have ventured beyond technology to empower people in both countries develop sustainable bonds. Activity in these groups is translated into peace activism by members in various spheres of the India-Pakistan relationship.</td>
<td>These groups seek engagement with other stake-holders in the peace process such as mainstream media, civil society, peace activists, NGOs and political leaders. Personalized content, capacity building, scope for deliberations and innovative solutions are key features of these forums.</td>
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6.3.2 New Media: Problems and Prospects in India-Pakistan Conflict Mediation

While new media has certainly broadened the arena of conflict mediation, there are few challenges that confront its role. Below outlined are problems and prospects in new media’s role with respect to conflict mediation between India and Pakistan.

Problems:

- New media content is vast, scattered and diversified, owing to which systematic analysis is difficult.

- Owing to scope and vastness of content, assessing its veracity is also a difficult task.

- Since these forums are managed by users themselves, sustainability is a concern. Content generation and sharing depends on members for which constant momentum is required.

- Irrelevant content is also generated in these groups and moderators are required to strictly ensure an adherence to rules and regulations. This may limit the nature of debate in such forums.

- Critics contend that virtual engagement is inadequate in dispelling stereotypes and hardened attitudes imbibed through years of confrontation. New media engagements cannot replace sustained meetings and interactions with the ‘enemy’.

- These forums run the risk of being elitist in their discourse and excluding narratives of those who cannot access the internet. Hence, a reflection of popular sentiments is limited to urbane, elite and English-speaking populations in both countries.

Prospects:

- Vastness and diversity of new media content is an advantage since it offers broader perspectives of peace and conflict issues.
• Through new media, users channelize their energies in form of active creators of content as against being passive consumers.

• Linkages among various such peacebuilding forums on new media ensure that the peace constituency augments its ambit of operations.

• New media empowers users to shape their own narratives of peace and conflict. Scope for feedback, creation of ‘local’ content and creative experiments with content are possible on new media.

• Consolidation of peace opinions on new media is carried out through engagement in ground based activities as by members.

• These forums can serve as interest groups mobilizing public opinion by engaging multiple stakeholders and initial venues for people from both sides to initiate interactions.
References


Notes

1 Group members expressed pride in India born Satya Nadella’s appointment as Microsoft CEO and a Pakistani woman making it to the top ranks of chefs in New York. Achievements of Indians and Pakistanis in different parts of the world instil a sense of South Asian pride among members.

2 When Kiran Somroo, a Pakistani girl arrived for medical treatment to India; members of this group helped arrange for her stay in Mumbai and Bangalore. Thus, spirit and desire to maintain peaceful relations was translated into real life. The group therefore serves as a tool for mobilization on peace issues.

3 For an analysis of the Aman ki Asha initiative in context of the peace movement between India and Pakistan, see Akhtar, S. (2013-14). India-Pakistan Cross-Border Peace Initiatives: Challenges & Prospects. *Regional Studies, XXXII*(1), 3-20. The paper discusses role of the AKA initiative in terms of advancement of economic ties between India and Pakistan, deliberation on bilateral contentious issues, criticism of the rigid visa regime and promotion of humanitarian issues such as those in health, human rights, water and cultural cooperation. According to the author, AKA has specifically contributed to bridging the trust gap through campaigns such as ‘Milne Do’ (Let people meet) and Youth Exchange Programmes (pp 8).

4 Inputs derived from an email conversation with a group member who contributed to the forum through photographs, messages and comments on posts. Conversation dated March 27, 2013.

5 Inputs derived from an email conversation with the founder cum creator of RTB, then student at The University of Hong Kong. He contributed to content creation and analysis. Conversation dated: March 29, 2013.

6 Group pages bear an informal and appealing look, make use of photographs, videos, text, documents, discussions, events, uploading of informative files to share relevant information on India-Pakistan relations.

7 Members in these groups have not only developed virtual friendships, but have translated the same into real life bonds. Few members undertook visits across the border to meet their online friends, few provided assistance in locating long lost relatives, some hosted friends and acquaintances on visits to India and Pakistan. Thus, virtual connections were transformed into real life ones.