

COVID-19: Cyber security and peacemaking

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Digital threats and opportunities

COVID-19 is placing tremendous stress on societies and political systems around the world, generating significant insecurity and creating the potential for deepening structural and systemic violence (poverty, racism, hunger, extreme inequality, xenophobia, political repression, weakened human rights protections), as well as new or more virulent outbreaks of direct violence (war, domestic violence, militarized policing, gang and drug-related violence, gun violence).¹ Efforts to navigate the pandemic have exposed serious cyber-related threats, as well as a number of digital opportunities to protect or promote just peace.

For example, digital technologies are improving the collection, organization, analysis, visualization, storage and distribution of data key to peacebuilding processes. This enables more effective early warning of and response to violent conflict, facilitating the protection of vulnerable people and communities. According to the World Economic Forum, “The international system needs a global insecurity monitoring system to track grievances and signal unrest before they escalate into violence.”² A shared platform for analyzing conflict risk could benefit from real-time mapping, remote sensing and digital data needed for a comprehensive assessment tool. Other early-warning systems, such as for food insecurity and hunger, could also benefit.

The internet and digital tools are being used successfully in nonviolent strategies to prevent or transform violence and to build just peace. Many of these are small scale, local projects using technology from the bottom up; others are larger projects that include digital technologies to enhance potential effectiveness, accountability or transparency.

In response to the trauma generated by COVID-19, local peacebuilders are offering online sessions on self care in the framework of integrative community therapy and circles of empathy, while young peacebuilders are helping to innovate new online peacebuilding technologies.³

As cases of the coronavirus multiplied in Kenya, Map Kibera⁴ launched the Kenya COVID-19 Tracker using [Ushahidi](#) open-source platform and worked with the Kibera News Network⁵ to map in the Kibera slum new COVID-19 cases, as well as resources available⁶ to protect over 200,000 densely packed residents. They also addressed rumors and shared accurate information about the virus using Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.

During this crisis, online platforms have demonstrated their ability to reduce disinformation, as well as to be forces for the common good⁷ and in many countries, social movements are using digital tools more often amid new strategies to push for social change,⁸ including digital rallies, teach-ins, webinars, tweetstorms, information-sharing and more.^{9,10}

But digital technology can also pose serious threats through, for example, recruiting extremist sympathizers, facilitating targeted cyber attacks and flash mobs, raising funds for violent organizations, highlighting and inflaming grievances or fomenting violent conflict. Now, the threat of worsened digital authoritarianism¹¹ is

growing as extraordinary restrictions deemed necessary to control spread of the virus are likely to be kept in place when the COVID-19 threat subsides.

Technology-aided contact tracing, which is also identified as an important strategy for controlling COVID-19, raises concerns about both equity and privacy rights.¹² “Technology may make it possible to monitor almost everybody, almost everywhere, almost all the time. In other words, the corona panic and pandemic may let us slide into a world of global surveillance.”¹³

With countries around the world placing severe restrictions on the movement of many population sectors, digitalization of the workplace, the classroom and the living room have become the norm for billions of people, but, according to the World Economic Forum, 3.7 billion people have no internet access, highlighting a massive, worldwide digital divide.¹⁴

Even now, autocratic governments are using internet shutdowns, digital surveillance, online censorship, cyberattacks and hacking, disinformation, targeted arrests and detentions of internet users to sustain concentrated power. Many governments, businesses and powerful organizations are using digital tools for security or marketing purposes, raising questions about confidentiality, privacy and personal security and for many people, coronavirus phishing and scams¹⁵ are a significant threat.

Digital ethics and tools for the Common Good

In a world beset by overwhelming violence and injustice, digital technologies used to manage the pandemic could simply compound and institutionalize in new and dangerous ways our persistent culture of violence. Hence the need to affirm a rigorous commitment to digital ethics consistent with a universal ethic of active and creative nonviolence, which provides a powerful lens for discerning the common good.

To be consistent with Catholic Social Teaching, digital technology must be used in a manner that is culturally and contextually appropriate - doesn't exacerbate violence, existing inequalities, social or ecological injustice or human rights violations. When applied for the common good, digital tools, for example,

- can facilitate participation of ordinary people in addressing the violence that impacts their lives and communities, foster collaboration and transform attitudes;
- enable more voices and alternative narratives to enter the conversation around violent conflict and peacebuilding, help heal trauma, challenge divisive or violent narratives and counter sectarian rhetoric, false or misleading information, or extremist ideology;
- create alternative spaces to encourage collective action for human rights and just peace and hold to account political decision-makers or parties in conflict.

¹ International Crisis Group, Crisis Watch, interactive map, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/about-crisiswatch>

² Robert Muggah, David Steven, Liv Torres, World Economic Forum, *We Urgently Need Major Cooperation on Global Security in the COVID-19 Era*, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/we-need-major-cooperation-on-global-security-in-the-covid-19-era/>

³ Crisis Direct, *COVID 19 and the Impact on Local Peacebuilding*

<https://www.peacedirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-and-the-impact-on-local-peacebuilding.pdf>

⁴ Map Kibera, <https://mapkibera.org/>

- ⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/user/KiberaNewsNetwork>
- ⁶ June Mwangi, Map Kibera on COVID-19 Incident and Resources Mapping in Kenya, <https://www.usahidi.com/blog/2020/04/16/map-kibera-covid-19-incidence-and-resource-mapping-in-kenya>
- ⁷ https://ict4peace.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/When-going-viral-can-be-lethal_v31-3-4.pdf
- ⁸ Erica Chenoweth, Austin Choi-Fitzpatrick, Jeremy Pressman, Felipe G Santos and Jay Ulfelder, *The Global Pandemic Has Spawned New Forms of Activism – and They’re Flourishing*, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/20/the-global-pandemic-has-spawned-new-forms-of-activism-and-theyre-flourishing>
- ⁹ Earth Day Live, <https://strikewithus.org/>
- ¹⁰ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/coronavirus-protest-chile-hong-kong-iraq-lebanon-india-venezuela/2020/04/03/c7f5e012-6d50-11ea-a156-0048b62cdb51_story.html
- ¹¹ Jonathan Pinckney, U.S. Institute of Peace, *Amid Coronavirus, Online Activism Confronts Digital Authoritarianism* <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/04/amid-coronavirus-online-activism-confronts-digital-authoritarianism>
- ¹² Susan Landau, Christy E. Lopez, Laura Moy, *The Importance of Equity in Contact Tracing*, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/importance-equity-contact-tracing>
- ¹³ ICT for Peace Foundation, *Corona Pan(dem)ic: the Gateway to Global Surveillance?* <https://ict4peace.org/activities/corona-pandemic-the-gateway-to-global-surveillance/>
- ¹⁴ World Economic Forum, *Coronavirus has exposed the digital divide like never before* <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-digital-divide-internet-data-broadband-mobbile/> 22 April 2020
- ¹⁵ COVID-19 Security Resource Library, <https://staysafeonline.org/covid-19-security-resource-library/>