Double Disruption

Abstract This chapter examines how new patterns of conflict are disrupting both efforts to mediate ends to conflict, and the wider peacebuilding practices that support peace processes. I argue that the distinctions between conflict and peace have become very blurred. To be effective, PeaceTech practice must seek to add value to peacebuilding, but it must do so in current moment of crisis that relates to a rapidly changing conflict landscape. This landscape is one of double disruption—that is, disruption to peacebuilding from changing conflict dynamics, and disruption from the digital revolution and its impact on peace and war.

Keywords Peace process • Transition • Disruption

5.1 There's This Trick With a Knife I'm Learning to Do

There's this trick with a knife I'm learning to do. I love this title of a book of poems by Sri Lankan–Canadian novelist and poet Michael Ondaatje (1979). I can't explain why.

The phrase is really intriguing. It sounds ominous—what is he learning to do with the knife? Is he learning to cut and to hurt and be a harsher

nastier version of himself? It feels as if he could be cutting himself? Cutting something out? A good something or a bad something? Or could he be cutting free, or carving a beautiful wood sculpture, or experimenting with what a knife can do in a more artistic way, that subverts the darker side of what a knife can be?

I first heard the phrase from a peacebuilder called Ken Bush many years ago when we worked together in University of Ulster. He was presenting a paper on how we might decide what 'peace agreement success' was, and *who* should do the defining, so that we could measure delivery. He did not explain the title, but it captured how monitoring success in peacebuilding requires imposing a definition of peace to monitor against, when constructing what peace might mean in any country context, is itself the object of the peacebuilding effort. Ken presented at a small expert seminar I ran in 2008 that continues to inform our efforts to benchmark peaceful directions of travel in conflicted societies, by developing a Peace and Transition Process Tracker as described in Chap. 11.

I turn to the knife phrase because what we are doing with PeaceTech requires us to think about what peace is, what its relationship with conflict is and how technology might relate to both in ambiguous ways.

5.2   Disruption

The growing list of 'SomethingTechs' and their coining as SomethingTechs, signifies two things. First, a set of drivers of turn to digital innovation that are distinctive to different domains of application; and second, that new digital capacities often disrupt existing ways of doing business.

The SomethingTech label speaks not just to a connection between the 'something' and technology, but to how digital innovation transforms the something itself in ways that can have unpredictable outcomes for good and for bad. FinTech, for example, has enabled mobile banking that has shaped where ATMs and banks are located. It has also enabled new forms of currency such as bitcoin that float free from country monetary systems, and therefore can operate outside of normal regulatory frameworks. Or faster-than-light transactions whose speed changes the nature of speculation in ways that can destabilize financial institutions. All of these changes in a sense change what money is, how it is used, and have knock-on unpredictable changes to the financial sector, some of which seem good and some bad.

MedTech can include medical technology for hand-held pregnancy tests, or old tech such as ultrasound, but the term signifies advances that

are transformative of how medical interventions take place. This can include, nano-computers being injected into blood streams to both detect and modify things that cause disease, or robotic surgical interventions or linked screens, enabling surgery to take place with doctors in one country and the patient in another in ways that globalize healthcare and the frameworks that govern it.

The word often used to describe this type of change is 'disruption'. What the SomethingTechs have in common is that they 'disrupt' normal ways of doing business by providing alternative ways of doing business. As the word 'disruption' indicates, there is something unpredictable about what then happens.

5.3   'Change Everything Except Your Wife and Kids'

We tend to think of disruption as a 'boo word', rather than a 'yay word'. On a closer look, however, whether it gets a boo or a yay might depend on what is being disrupted. If it is something bad being disrupted—like a cycle of violence, then we might think of disruption as a yay word. Mac Ginty (2022), for example, suggests that local peacebuilding is often an attempt to disrupt conflict, and also that conflict is sometimes disrupted by events such as a natural disaster. Interestingly the Tsunami of 2004, helped create a renewed peace process in the conflict in Aceh, Indonesia, but destroyed one in Sri Lanka, while the earthquake in Nepal led political parties to finally agree a constitution to consolidate the peace process after years of disagreement. If something good is being disrupted, such as an attempt to bridge polarized views, then we think of it as a boo word. Indeed, conflict itself is a form of disruption of the prior status quo.

In the business world, digital disruption is viewed by some as yay—it presents new business opportunities that they capitalize on, and by some as boo—it can appear that the new opportunities often arise because of capacity to circumvent fairer more regulated practices.

Disruption can be both good and bad for particular businesses. For those that adapt, new lines of work may emerge that are very lucrative. Samsung is best known for phones and electronics. However, it began in 1938 as a grocery store in Korea, trading noodles and flour. Who knew?

And yes: someone in Samsung actually said 'change everything…' to his senior executives: Lee-Kun-Hee, son of Lee-Byung-Chull who founded

the grocery store. Lee-Kun-Hee masterminded its electronics division and the rise of the Samsung the electronics giant we know today.

Digital disruption, however, is also high risk for businesses—particularly if they stick to their old ways. Famously, Kodak who held the biggest market share in cameras and film for decades, dismissed digital innovation in both. By 2012, the unthinkable had happened: Kodak filed for bankruptcy. It is one of the most famous stories of failure to respond to disruption, although even digital cameras were ultimately somewhat displaced by smartphones.

5.4   PeaceTech and Disruption

Is PeaceTech disruptive? If so, how? There are a number of quite different possibilities, some yay and some boo.

PeaceTech could be adding value to peacebuilding enabling new or more efficient modes of disrupting conflict, and therefore better peacebuilding. The Arabia Felix games to support peacebuilding in Yemen mentioned in Chap. 4 and examined further in Chap. 8, for example, enable forms of communication between young people who cannot meet, regarding 'peace' in a country where even the word 'peace' is contentious between different groups.

Or, PeaceTech could be disrupting peacebuilding in a way that leads to unpredictable results, which means also some bad results. For example, remote connectivity of conflict parties might enable peace talks to take place because it deals with security and logistical issues of in-person meeting, but could it have knock-on effects for trust-building—something that seems to happens in a unique way in face-to-face human encounter.

So is PeaceTech a yay word, or a boo word, or somewhere in-between? EUI scholars have suggested a tendency to approach PeaceTech from two different converse perspectives, that captures an ambivalence (Nicolaïdis & Giovanardi, 2022, p. 10). The first perspective emphasizes human agency and views Tech as 'just another tool' that humans use in bad and good ways. The second perspective is 'tech determinative', and views the use of the technology chosen as determining the outcome in ways that the user did not contemplate. They suggest a kind-of middle ground perspective that views technology and politics as interacting to shape and reshape each other in complex and unpredictable ways—sometimes termed the study of 'technopolitics' (Cf., Fritsch, 2014). What then are the unpredictable outcomes of PeaceTech for peace processes?

5.5   Double Disruption

The question of whether and how PeaceTech disrupts traditional approaches to ending wars, has an additional complication. As alluded to earlier, peacebuilding as a practice of actively mediation ends to conflict by constructing peace processes finds itself in a contemporary moment of fundamental disruption.

Conflict is changing shape, and interventions to end it are struggling to respond. Peacebuilding in the sense of a practice of trying to end wars stands somewhat confounded. Digital innovation, I suggest, has played very little role in this more fundamental disruption, despite how it now stands tied up with it. If relevant at all, it is an accelerator rather than a cause.

To understand the current disruption of peacebuilding as active attempts to end conflict, it is useful to sketch out a short history of how peace processes and peacebuilding developed (see further, Bell, 2017).

5.6   A Potted History of Peace Processes

In the last three decades, peace mediation has been directed primarily at violent conflict within states. In its contemporary form, the 'peace process' in its current form came into being in the early 1990s. Peace and transition processes proliferated due to three main factors relating to the end of the Cold War.

First, a rise in intra-state conflict and associated peace efforts to resolve it. Data shows that conflicts within states reached a peak post–Cold War in the early 1990s, typified by the Balkans conflicts.

Second, alongside this spike in conflict, new possibilities for ending long-standing conflicts with geopolitical dimensions appeared to exist. Peace processes began to take shape in places like Central America that had previously seen conflict locked-in by the tensions between West and East and the geopolitics of the Cold War in ways that began to change.

Third, with the Cold War gone, increased international attention became focused on conflict *within* states, and new possibilities emerged for using tools such as peacekeeping that Cold War tensions had limited. Over time a new international architecture of support for intervention, mediation and implementation of peace agreements was built (see Bell, 2008, pp. 28-31).

A practice of ending wars through negotiation took hold, and typically involved the following common elements.

Face-to-face talks between states and their non-state armed opponents. These replaced mediation tactics that sought to work with 'moderates' to marginalize groups using armed violence. Talks focused on tying commitments to a ceasefire, to a revised more inclusive state structure involving elections.

Formalised peace or transition agreements. These saw armed opponents make public the commitments they had agreed to in formally written agreements. These agreements typically put in place elaborate implementation institutions involving a range of international actors in implementation roles as 'third parties', from joint monitoring commissions to international 'guarantors'.

Governed by human rights and humanitarian law. International norms relating to human rights and humanitarian law were viewed as relevant to what was negotiated. Over time the idea grew that they should constrain *what* was agreed between the parties, and also *the process* by which they were agreed.

Peace processes based on formal negotiated ends to conflict were surprisingly extensive, and surprisingly successful over time. Our own PA-X Peace Agreement Database indicates that since 1990 over 2000 peace agreements across all stages of a peace process have been signed in over 150 different conflicts. There is debate about the measurement of success and what it shows, but on one estimate over 70% of agreements were successful in ending violent conflict for over five years—a political science threshold of success (Suhrke & Samset, 2007; Krause, 2019). Between 1990 and 2012 deaths in conflict and other conflict indicators fell fairly steadily (Global Peace Index). Peace processes, therefore, were good at achieving reduced deaths in conflict—what we might term negative peace, and this is no small matter. However, they were less successful in building functional stable states that could continue to transact political relationships non-violently through political institutions, so as to deliver good public services and social justice. These sorts of outcome are often called 'positive peace'.

Over this same time-period, the international infrastructure to support peace processes proliferated and peace processes were increasingly internationalized and legalized. New UN Departments and units were created, for example, a Peacebuilding Commission, a UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), including a Policy and Mediation Division with a Mediation Support Unit, to mention a few. New international legal standards, such as the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security, started to further

'regulate' how peace processes should ideally be designed and what peace agreements should include.

States too adopted support of peace processes as key foreign policy objectives, and a concept called 'private mediation' was born which involved essentially diplomatic type mediation functions being produced by non-governmental organizations, notably the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, and Independent Diplomat.

However, from 2012 on, this way of doing business had begun to unravel, and deaths in conflict in Syria alone, reversed previous downward trends. Indeed, figures across different measurements of peace all started to reverse (World Bank, 2018, p. xvii).

As a result, the practice of using peace processes to end conflict is somewhat in crisis. Partly this reflects an internal crisis of peacebuilders. With contemporary peacebuilding practices over 30 years old, the failure to deliver positive peace, and instead deliver 'un-ending transition' of a 'no-war-no-peace' nature, has increasingly triggered serious introspection on the reasons for lack of deeper success.

Two issues have come to the fore. First, the question of 'inclusion' in peace talks and agreement outcomes seemed to be part of the problem. The focus on armed actors, rather than those engaged in building civicness, prioritized their needs above those of ordinary civilians who had always been committed to peace, and constituencies such as women that tended to work in non-violent ways. Empowering armed actors in the new political dispensation, created government mechanisms that over time proved difficult to make work.

Second, unease existed regarding peacebuilding being 'done from and by' the global north, 'on or to' the Global South. In other words, peacebuilding seemed 'supply-led' from the global north, more than 'demandled from the Global South. As a result, peacebuilding organizations have mounted initiatives to try to respond (see for example, the Principles for Peace Initiative).

However, the crisis is not just one of apparent failure after a long period of success. It is more profound. The crisis emerges from a number of disruptive realities, related to how conflict patterns are changing in some of the most protracted conflicts—Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen. There are several elements to this disruption.

Change in conflict patterns sees multiple conflicts within countries operate to create a complex conflict system. The peace process model no longer seems to map-on to the new conflict dynamics. Peace process

design has focused on achieving a deal between an authoritarian and violent state that was 'owned' by a dominant political grouping, and one or several major armed opponents. The peace process tried to bring them to a mediated solution that would encapsulate a new more inclusive political settlement. However, conflict does not look this way anymore. It is characterized by fragmentation, with multiple armed groups who come together and fall apart in strategic alliances. This was brought home to us when we began to find and collect 'local peace agreements': it was sometimes difficult to judge when a local agreement was a 'peace' agreement because it appeared to focus on alliance to stop fighting between two groups, so they could unite and fight even harder against others (See, Bell & Wise, 2022; Bell et al., 2021).

Second, conflict is also much messier in terms of whether it is 'within states', or 'between states'. The conflict in Ukraine illustrates. It is a conflict between two states—Ukraine and Russia. However, the conflict takes place almost entirely within Ukrainian territory. Previous agreements between the two countries addressed not just inter-state arrangements but also internal conflict in Ukraine, and internal issues were then used by Russia as justification for invasion in 2022 (see e.g. Minsk I Agreement, 2014). The dynamics are different in different conflicts, but as Burke's reflection on the conflict in Sudan illustrates, conflict within states is now characterized by the connectedness of local, national, transnational, and geopolitical inter-state conflicts, and armed actors that move easily across these levels to leverage their position (see Burke, 2023). This dynamic makes it harder to resolve conflict with an in-country mediated agreement.

Third, there is a break-down in the international consensus—fragile as it has been—that—put broadly—mediating ends to war within established international legal rules is a 'good thing'. While international organizations such as the UN used to have central responsibility, now a range of mediators—often neighbouring states—all intervene in overlapping, competitive ways, often with motives that are unclear (Carothers & Samet-Marram, 2015). Local armed groups 'mediation shop' over who will mediate, and non-rules-based mediators are often attractive to conflict actors (Lanz, 2021). Indeed 'peace mediation' itself is now a space of geopolitical contestation (see Peter and Rice, 2022).

These external challenges mean that a peace process model which looks for an state / non-state elite deal to end 'the conflict' often fails to map onto how conflict is conducted. Conflict in many states is better thought of as a

complex conflict system involving local, national, transnational and even geopolitical conflict, that cannot be resolved by focusing on one level only.

Some 30 years on from its inception, a profound problem of managing enduring transitions now exists and is fundamentally disrupting both formal institutionalized peacebuilding and the efforts of peacebuilding non-governmental organizations.

To make matters worse, the new conflict dynamics are not what continues when peace processes fail: they seem, in part, to be a by-product of past peace process failure. Conflict fragmentation has been accentuated and propelled by peace process nation-state-building projects that have been tried and failed. New transitions and processes are overlaid on earlier ones, and new armed groups form as earlier ones are demobilized, because being armed seems to be the way to gain entry to the peace process.

Digital technology is tied up with this new world, as the practices of conflict themselves are constantly being transformed digitally, as the example of Syria and shows (as per the SalamaTech initiative). It would be wrong, however, to view the above dynamics as driven by the digital revolution, it is more an accelerant in particular through use of disinformation and cyberwarfare.

Yet, both digital disruption and peace-conflict disruption involve a form of 'blurring' in ways that are becoming increasingly interconnected. The digital revolution blurs the connections between people, things and computing, while the conflict and peacebuilding revolution blurs the relationship between conflict and peace. That is a lot of blur.

5.7   Conclusion

The label PeaceTech is an attempt to capture a distinctive domain of digital transformation—that of peacebuilding. PeaceTech aims to disrupt war, but also may carry consequences for disruption of peacebuilding that we should consider and try to manage. Yet both these disruptions occur alongside a more fundamental disruption of peacebuilding caused by the changing nature of contemporary conflict.

For me the commitment to peace means trying to find new ways of working in this newly fragmented conflict world. In one sense that drives my own instinct to explore what technology can offer to map, track and respond to the new forces of change that seem to be carrying us in a negative direction.

However, engaging in PeaceTech also involves asking: how do digital and peacebuilding disruptions entangle and what are the overall consequences?

What trick with the knife are we learning to do?

Questions

1. What is a 'complex conflict system'?
2. Do you see links between disruption of peace processes and peacebuilding, and disruption due to digital innovation?
3. Do you agree that digital innovation is merely an accelerator of the new conflict and peace context?

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