

1 Introduction

As with many areas of scientific endeavour, intellectual and policy attempts to make peace after war have recently been enthused by the implications of new data-driven, remote, and even automated possibilities and technologies.¹ This Element intends to explore and outline the prospective debates about peace and peacemaking in the new digital frameworks emerging in International Relations (IR).² It offers a critical evaluation of the digitalization of peace efforts in the context of changing trends of war and violence.

From a practical perspective, exploiting innovations related to the emergence of new capacities and technologies, networks, and communications, makes strategic and tactical sense for peacemaking, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and for civil society approaches.³ However, through a critical lens some such ‘innovations’ appear to be displacement activities, whilst some are contradictory in that they offer advantages and disadvantages simultaneously. This study intends to explore these tensions from the perspective of the evolving concept of peace and its place in IR. This is necessary because international relations are increasingly marked by a distinction between ‘analogue’ (characterized as intensely geopolitical, elite-oriented, and power-based, operating in standard time, and dependent on human capacities and knowledge) modes of statecraft, diplomacy, and military action, and new ‘digital’ innovations (which are connected to new technologies and their powerful owners, marked by speed, remoteness, lessened risk, and enormous datasets).

New technologies of war and violence have marked conflicts from Iraq and Afghanistan to Syria and Yemen, as well as impacting on, or destabilizing, peace agreements and supposedly peaceful states such as Colombia or Brazil. There is also a strong argument that they have led to ‘backsliding’ in established democracies such as the United States and United Kingdom (Haggard and Kaufman 2021). In cases such as Israel-Palestine and Afghanistan, the viability of a victor’s peace – and its collapse – seems to be seen by foreign policy elites (though not by multilateral actors) as plausible when supported by new

¹ For the UN’s interest in this new area, see for example, <https://futuringpeace.org/>, <https://dppa.un.org/en/innovation>.

² This Element partially draws on the following papers: Richmond 2020; Richmond and Tellidis 2020; Richmond and Visoka 2021a. See also: Howard 2015; Owen 2015; Monshipouri 2016; Chandler 2018; *The Economist* 2018; Zuboff 2019b.

³ This study focuses on the range of different tools that are used to make peace, including peacebuilding which has come to be seen to be a generic term incorporating a wide range of earlier approaches, including peacekeeping, mediation, diplomacy, state reform, statebuilding, stabilization, regional and international security, and development. However, we recognize the nuances across these tools, and that peacebuilding has never really proven to be an adequate conceptual umbrella.

technologies of war, diplomacy, information, and media associated with great power interests and norms.⁴

Data-driven, remote, automated capacities, operating at scale and speed over great distances, have disrupted power relations and traditional political and military affairs (part of what was referred to as a ‘revolution in military affairs’ previously) (Der Derian 2019). They have favoured innovation in geopolitics, perhaps also in related diplomatic practice and authoritarian power rather than in peacemaking. Ultimately, this points to the need to think more deeply about peacemaking in a multipolar, high-tech form of international relations, as opposed to the recent analogue and multilateral past. Either way, any developments in IR that lead to new forms of war, and new tensions, need to be responded to with reformed peacemaking systems and architectures (Hinsley 1963; Richmond 2022). These substantial developments have affected international activity, government, and the social actors in different wars, large or small, as well as in authoritarian, developing, and fragile states. So far outcomes have been overwhelmingly negative for conflict-affected populations and for peace processes (the collapse of democracy and peacebuilding in Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine in 2022 (Monten 2014; Allan 2020) being the latest examples), and at best have failed to live up to the early promise that new technologies and possibilities would enhance the emancipatory capacities of peace.

The evolution of ‘digital peace’ systems, as with other peace innovations in the constantly changing history of war, has lagged behind the evolution of violence in digital international relations (Owen 2015; Monshipouri 2016). This is of serious concern because historically a failure to respond to technological innovation pertaining to violence and war has led to systemic collapse, with subsequent recovery through innovative peace praxis following much later (but normally too late to be preventative or to stop the tragic consequences of war) (Tainter 1988). So far digital enhancements in peacebuilding, peacekeeping, and peacemaking seem to be both ambitious in practical terms and also, from a more critical perspective, represent a reduced ethical ambition. What is certain is that they have undermined human security, rights and democratization processes (see UN Security Council 2021).

New Contributions to Peace in IR

After recent failures in peacemaking, and lengthy wars since 9/11 from Afghanistan and Iraq to Syria and Yemen, it was always likely that new

⁴ See the debacle of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, or former US president Trump’s peace deal for the Israel/Palestine in 2020.

approaches to peacemaking would emerge. However, many of them are optimistic, not born out of evidence, and may have unintended consequences. There have been claims that digital peace approaches (Guo et al. 2018; Gleditsch 2019) might offer some promise in overcoming the problems, spoilers, and blockages (Stedman 1997; Richmond and Pogodda 2016) that liberal peace has faced to date. This is despite the fact that such digital possibilities are elite-led, top-down, and speculative due to their connection to what has become known as ‘surveillance capitalism’ (Zuboff 2019b). Digital advances such as those related to expanding the inclusion of different actors and networks in peace processes, the facilitation of dialogue, back channels, and so social reconciliation, as well as countering various threats, the bridging of distance, failed infrastructure, and the provision of better knowledge or intelligence (Larrauri and Kahl 2013) have been small in scale, even if promising for civil society and their global networks in particular (Kaldor 2003).

Such potentially significant innovations, however, raise the old question of whether small-scale improvements in peacemaking address past political deficits often related to power relations and justice or sustainability issues, or merely represent attempts at pacification – a form of digital counter-insurgency on behalf of hegemony increasingly developing new technologies of power (Foucault 1995). They have proven far from being aligned with the massive disruptions that have occurred in broader international relations. In the past such disruptions, as in the Industrial Revolution, presaged new types of war, such as industrial or total war. These subsequently led to new approaches to peace, such as arose with the UN Charter, but these always lagged behind developments in war-making (Richmond 2022).

Debates and practices have moved forward since early discussions, however. In response to ethnic, secessionist, sectarian, hybrid, and other forms of civil war, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have shown limited potential in the contexts of humanitarian relief, development, early warning systems, the prevention and/or monitoring of pre- and post-electoral violence, and the use of big data for peacekeeping (Tellidis and Kappler 2016; McCarthy 2017; Merrin 2019). There is, however, wide diversity of digital technologies that might be claimed to be useful for the purposes of supporting existing practices of peacemaking, peacebuilding, statebuilding, stabilization, development, and humanitarianism. They might plausibly contribute to better, more positive forms of peace, accessible to a variety of developers and users, and their interest in deploying these tools means that each of these technologies navigates and interacts with the spaces (virtual and analogue alike), the dynamics, and the asymmetries of conflict.

Clearly, however, their impact is little understood, but the question remains as to whether peace may be substantively improved in critical terms. Do they lead

to better political outcomes that address justice and reconciliation issues as well as security and stability problems? As the literature on peacemaking has moved through various iterations, from the victor's peace and the balance of power, to liberal, hybrid, everyday, spatial, emancipatory, and many other iterations that bring peace and justice into a closer relationship with each, it has converged on issues of human security, justice, relative equality, recognition, and sustainability (UN General Assembly 2016; UN Security Council 2016; UN 2018). This provides a critical framework for trying to understand digital potential for peacemaking in the discussion that follows in the rest of this Element.

Digital Contributions

Digital technologies have been relevant in analysing conflict dynamics using social media, big data, text mining programmes, machine learning, digital maps and/or a combination of some or all of the above. Digital communication tools have expanded the inclusion and enhanced strategic communication with all conflict parties and affected population. Some of the aforementioned tools empower local, national, and international peace actors to respond in real time, while others offer an opportunity for enhanced analysis and comprehensive guidance. Digital technologies are increasingly being used to change the dynamics of negotiation after a fully fledged civil war, to handle negotiations in the context of electoral violence, and to design national dialogue processes after a popular uprising or local insurgency (Hirblinger 2020).

When this potential is regarded as small scale, immediate, and separate from political reform and wider ethico-political as well as scientific requirements, it appears more significant. In longer-term processes, new technologies such as digital and virtual platforms are also being used to bridge cultural and ethnic divides by invalidating and refuting exclusionary discourses and re-establishing the basis for cooperation, legitimacy, and shared political narratives. The significance of these new technologies has duly been noted by the UN, which is now increasingly seeking to benefit from their use both for the longer-term design and execution of its peace missions as well as for the satisfaction of the shorter-term needs of those affected by conflict and violent crises (Richmond 2020; Richmond and Tellidis 2020; UN 2021).

It is not the aim of this Element to offer a detailed examination and evaluation of each of these technologies, however. Rather than disaggregating the 'digital' in relation to peace, our objective is to highlight both the emancipatory and alienating potential inherent in the various theoretical and practical approaches that are emerging. The analysis is thus oriented towards a particular focus on the opportunities, challenges, and risks that the digital realm of IR and war and peace

therein poses for the international architecture of peacebuilding and statebuilding in the twenty-first century (Richmond 2021). It focuses on the most pressing areas and issues within this thematic and the broader area of digital IR, thus exploring and contributing to a new debate and mapping a new agenda. It has become clear that this task requires synthesized, cross-pollinated research on the much-heralded digital developments in IR and peacebuilding theory and practice, and responses to the changing dynamics of war and conflict in IR. In doing so, the study explores both the innovative aspects that digital technologies have brought to peacebuilding efforts, while also highlighting the tensions, dilemmas, and risks associated with such novel approaches (Hirblinger 2020).

This enables an evaluation of the extent to which technological innovations can ‘revolutionize’ the international and domestic politics of peacekeeping, mediation, conflict transformation, liberal peacebuilding, and statebuilding paradigms. Might digital technologies restore some of the legitimacy that was lost due to the clashes of ideology, geopolitical and economic interests, and/or a decline of political will to initiate and sustain positive conflict transformation? The empirical sections of the Element critically evaluate various cases of new technologies as used by the UN in conflict-affected settings, as well as other significant international actors (states, but also donor organizations), non-governmental organizations (NGO), civil society organizations and citizens’ initiatives to highlight and evaluate the political implications of such new possibilities for peacemaking (Owen 2015). That is, it is necessary to understand how peace is to be made in an emerging and evolving digital system of international relations, and what its qualities might be, in particular, for the impact upon bottom-up and hybrid dynamics of peace formation (Richmond 2016).

Key themes examined in relation to these goals relate to the changing nature of war and violence in an increasingly relational, networked, and digital IR, where states remain dominant actors but are also subject to increasing economic, political, social, and technological pressures. Similarly, the systems of international peacemaking and the development of civil society networks face huge intellectual and practice challenges. Consequently, we examine questions relating to:

- the dysfunctionality of the liberal peace and whether digital, more participatory forms of peace efforts can alter, or possibly hybridize its problematic character;
- the conceptualization of peace architecture and its critical evaluation; the relationship between intervention and peacebuilding, in their analogue and digital forms;

- the potential of digital technologies to overcome the flaws of analogue peacebuilding, especially how increased direct participation (emanating from the very nature of new technologies) could promote more a locally legitimate basis for peace, including the ramifications this has for the legitimacy of the international architecture of peace (IPA); and
- the risks that the ‘digitalization’ of peace efforts might be co-opted and controlled by hegemonic powers (much like analogue forms of peace efforts have been).

Ambivalent Dynamics

The amalgamation of peacebuilding efforts with new digital technologies represents an important but ambivalent turn in global and local efforts for ending wars and building peace. The adaptation of new digital technologies for peacebuilding has partly taken place as a response to emerging problems in the IPA in order to overcome blockages (Pogodda et al. 2022). In this context, digital technologies may provide new emancipatory scope to bypass peace-capturing dynamics. Peacebuilding actors are exploring digital political and international dynamics and tools partially in response to the inadequacies of peacekeeping, mediation, peacebuilding, and statebuilding in recent times. There has been an expectation that this might ensure that programmes and interventions are designed in such a way as to maximise their effectiveness and legitimacy in conflict-affected societies. Yet, digital contributions have little scope for shaping political agendas or the direction that digital technologies take (a form of digital governmentality, in other words) (Badouard et al. 2016; Richmond 2020), which risks sidelining emancipatory forms of peacebuilding and peace in response to unmet political claims as a concept.

There is no doubt that digital technologies might enhance peacebuilding efforts if they are taken to resolve around concepts like negative peace, resilience, and everyday dynamics solely, but it is important to also account for the structural risks that new digital technologies for peace can have for many conflict-affected societies, partly because they are connected to military, intelligence, state and elite level, media, and other political and economic power structures. While they offer the augmentation of civil society, multilateral structures, and global rights frameworks, evidence also indicates how easily these are disrupted.

Thus, new digital technologies should be treated as a somewhat ambiguous supplement to, rather than a replacement of existing practices in the states-system and global political economy (Richmond and Visoka 2021a, 2021b). This is because they offer the temptation – through the capacity for remote

operation, their connection with existing power structures, and residual bias in data patterns and algorithms – of governing risk and war from afar without endangering vital interests in the older, extant geopolitical systems (themselves driven by geopolitics, *realpolitik*, and extraction). The challenge of digital peacebuilding is how to utilize new technologies for social and political emancipation without falling into the traps and distractions that such externally controlled platforms can impose on peacemaking and peacebuilding endeavours.

For the most part, digital technologies, social media platforms, and other ICTs used for peacemaking are useful to, and engaged with, by interlocutors in conflict-affected societies. Yet, that does not mean that social, political, and economic life has entirely embraced the digital domain. Thus, it is important to think through how to tailor the use of digital technologies to the local context and absorption capacities, bearing in mind that global elites and powerful actors tend to do such tailoring with all of the issues this raises. In many conflict-affected settings, analogue politics and networks related to the residual rationalities of state and empire, and territorial sovereignty, tend to dominate the design of institutions, social life, and economic affairs: a legacy of early eras and rationalities. So, it is crucial to explore what it means to pursue peace through digital approaches in an environment that is still analogue in countries shattered by violent conflict (i.e. peacemaking and politics are thus rooted in different rationalities of politics). How suitable are digital peace technologies for resolving contemporary conflicts?

There is clearly a risk that a significant number of advanced digital technologies are not aligned with the social and political realities of conflict-affected societies, given how they have emerged. Political time and space are not clearly harmonized with digital peace. Societies affected by violent conflict have deeply rooted tension concerning a broad range of issues, mostly of an analogue nature. While digital technologies might well overcome certain blockages to peacemaking set by counter-peace forces (Pogodda et al. 2022), it is important to highlight that for peace to receive social legitimacy it needs to relate to the needs of affected communities and must enable them to have the possibility to shape the contours of such a peace process.

Contrary to this assumption, which is common to much peacemaking literature, digital peace approaches may tend to distance politics from local claims and needs, while giving an impression of agency and cooperation, risking thus the production of new forms of alienation and exclusion. In this regard, when not fit for specific contexts, digital technologies connected to peace operations may indirectly support a regressive push away from effort to localize and optimize peacemaking to the local needs and political agencies.

Thus, unbalanced and externally induced efforts to push for digital peace might be prone to failure due to an asynchronous relationship with the existing analogue approaches to peace.

In other words, conflict prevention, transformation, and resolution require a lot more than extended reach, reactive speed or surveillance, reduced risk, covert presence, predictive politics, and artificial intelligence. There is no substitute for political will when it comes to engaging substantively and materially with political and justice claims in conflict-affected societies. According to long-standing and broad scientific evidence, which should not be ignored on the grounds of the emergence of experimental, mitigating approaches (a neoliberal argument about resilience in other words) (Chandler 2014), peacemaking depends on using political rather than technical solutions to address the root causes of war and violence. Such roots are often shaped by elite or external political and geopolitical interests – and can only be dealt with by developing strategies for representation, restitution, reconciliation, justice, and the production of sustainable and emancipatory, alternative political orders.

Structure of the Element

Our critical examination (Koopman 2013, 48) analyses the relationship between conflict and peace problems and policy solutions under digital conditions, given these differ significantly from previous historical contexts across a wide range of dynamics (Visoka 2019). The first section examines the transition from analogue to digital IR and focuses on exploring the dynamics that have determined such a transition and the implications for peace, security, and order. Section 2 looks at peace in analogue international relations, which were characterized by territorially sovereign states, and twentieth-century politics and technology, moderated by the national interest and limited international cooperation, which protected long-standing hierarchies. Section 3 looks at the intersection between peace and new digital technologies in world politics, in which IR, peace, security, and order are no longer centred on the territorial state, but on an amorphous, complex, and unstable set of networks, with constantly changing personal, fluid goals, all dependent upon the next technological enhancement, which shifts their capacities again.

The second part of this study focuses on the promise and limitations of a potential digital turn in peace and conflict studies, namely for efforts to build sustainable peace in conflict-affected societies. Section 4 looks at the promise of technology in complementing existing efforts for peacebuilding. A potential ‘revolution in peacebuilding affairs’ (Richmond 2014; Pogodda 2020) in the digital sphere seeks to compensate for the current lack of direct and

indirect access for the UN, various internationals, donors, leading states, and international non-governmental organizations (INGO), in the world's conflict, emergency, revolutionary, and development areas. In Section 5, we turn to explore the dilemmas and limits of digital peacebuilding. We argue that digital peacebuilding is still embryonic, lacks emancipatory goals connected to subaltern political claims, and without legal and ethical regulation it risks becoming a form of digital governmentality harnessed by political hegemony and geopolitics. The Element concludes with a summary of the pros and cons of the digitalization of peace in IR and its impact on the existing transitional international order. Section 6 provides an overview of the directions and backsliding that a digital turn in peacebuilding practices is likely to take.

2 Peace in Analogue International Relations

Introduction

The 'analogue' framework for various conceptualizations has become an important reference point describing the old, industrial (and pre-industrial) non-digital, and offline technologies and methods of communication and technology across a range of disciplines. It has often been used to highlight its potential and limitations, which is significant for the evolution and potential of political community, the nature of the state, the workings of the international system, and political economy. Ultimately, it made global governance more plausible in the twentieth century, created the potential for more multilateral, economic, civil, and social networks with more political capacity than ever, as well as increased the political awareness of global populations. It has implications for norms and standards in international relations, very relevant to how the concept of peace has been understood and has developed, as well as for self-determination, human rights, development, and democracy. This section examines what this framework means for how we understand peace in international relations.

Conceptualizing the Analogue

The analogue concept is polymorphous. Its meaning has changed over time and mostly in comparison to the conceptualization of the concept of the digital, which is supposed to offer a marked change in the way technology frames the political potential of the current era. In its most recent iterations, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines analogue as 'a person or thing seen as comparable to another'. It tends to describe things and tools which have a continuous, direct association with the world (Wilden 1980, 156). The concept of the analogue tends to represent a broad spectrum of domains that are human-scaled, relatable, temporal-spatial, formal, and relatively fixed.