Chapter 62
The Benefits and Challenges of New Media for Intercultural Conflict

Amy Janan Johnson
University of Oklahoma, USA

Sun Kyong Lee
University of Oklahoma, USA

Ioana A. Cionea
University of Oklahoma, USA

Zachary B. Massey
University of Oklahoma, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines current research on intercultural interactions over new media with a particular emphasis on those studies involving conflict. Two main points are emphasized: 1) new media have several characteristics that differentiate them from traditional forms of media and shape intercultural conflict, providing benefits but also creating challenges not encountered before; and 2) traditional theoretical explanations of the relationship between media and conflict are inadequate for explaining the role that individual and group characteristics play in intercultural conflict in the digital age. Certain theories are discussed in relation to the second point. Overall, the chapter proposes questions that could advance research in this emerging area.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of new media has shortened the space between people of differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds, providing them with new and diverse ways of interacting with one another. For instance, users can now connect through visual image sharing sites (e.g., YouTube, Vimeo, Flickr), social network sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), discussion forums (e.g., Reddit, 4chan, Gaia online), and online

dating services (e.g., eHarmony, Match.com, Tinder). Furthermore, new media have been the catalytic force in the emergence of several intergroup conflicts or the success of social movements across the world (Zeitzoff, 2017), such as the Moldovan "Twitter revolution" of 2009, the Arab Spring movements of 2011 (Kharroub & Bas, 2015; Van Niekerk & Maharaj, 2013), and more recently, the use of YouTube by rebels in the Syrian civil war (Meis, 2017). Given the interactivity facilitated by new media platforms, contact via new media may be just as visceral, if not more so, than actual physical contact. Against this background, this chapter advances two main arguments: 1) new media's characteristics create a complex context, with new opportunities and challenges, that shapes intercultural conflict in novel ways; and 2) the relationship between new media and conflict needs updated theoretical explanations as traditional theories cannot explain how individual and group characteristics combine to drive intercultural conflict in the digital age.

BACKGROUND

Before delving into further discussion, however, it is useful to define some key terms. First, *intercultural communication* refers to communicative exchanges between members of different cultural groups. *Culture* is defined as an abstract, socially derived system of shared beliefs, values, and behaviors that a group of people who speak the same language and usually inhabit the same territory have devised (Kluckhohn & Kelly, 1945; Triandis, 1995). The authors use the term *culture* broadly, to include national cultures, ethnic groups, and any other cultural groups. *Intercultural contexts* are those situations that involve culturally different individuals or groups that come into contact, physically or digitally. Intercultural contexts also capture situations in which culture is a key consideration that shapes the interaction between individuals or groups. With respect to conflict, Hocker and Wilmot (1978) define *conflict* as, "an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals" (p. 9). Finally, Shuter (2012) speaks of information communication technologies when discussing *new media* and provides the following examples: social media, text messaging, Skype, blogs, virtual worlds, and multiplayer online games. Thus, the examination of intercultural conflict and new media involves discussions about the incompatibilities or struggles of culturally distinct groups or individuals that are undertaken through or facilitated by these new forms of communication technology.

Chen (2012) argues that there are five different characteristics of new media. *Digitality* refers to the conversion of media from analog to digital forms. *Convergency* means that various forms of information and media are reunited, blending their functions, and yielding new, powerful information technologies, such as the Internet and mobile phones. *Interactivity* captures the new ways in which users and information platforms interact, the freedom of producing, exchanging, and controlling information, and the convenience of such exchanges. *Hypertextuality* refers to the global network of information that can move instantaneously and freely among users. Finally, *virtuality* refers to the cyberspace new media have generated, giving users the opportunity to experience virtual realities (Chen, 2012). Besides these five characteristics, *anonymity* (i.e., the sender of the message is unknown) and *asynchronicity* (i.e., a time gap between message sent and message received) can be considered features of some new media, such as anonymous discussion forums; however, due to the wide adoption and usage of social media that require users to have authentic profiles and allow both synchronous and asynchronous interactions,

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