How research is helping to reduce prejudice between people online

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When individuals from different groups interact positively and cooperate online, society changes for the better. Credit:

The internet often gets a bad rap, and for good reason. Social media use

can contribute to poorer mental health in teens. It can also be used to manipulate users' emotions, and to disseminate misinformation and click bait to sway public opinion.

The internet is also home to countless online communities that have been founded on hatred towards social diversity. These online hate groups often incite violence between political, ethnic and religious groups in the real world.

Despite this, research demonstrates that, when used appropriately, the internet can be a powerful source for social good. When individuals from different groups interact positively and cooperatively online, society may change for the better.

The internet brings people together

The number of people connecting online is increasing every day. Data collected this year by the Pew Research Center shows 69% of adults living in the United States use at least one social media site, up from 21% in 2008. In Australia, almost 80% of the population has a social media account, and many people access these sites multiple times per day.

Most individuals use the internet to stay in touch with people they already know. But many are also using it to meet new people – 57% of teens report making new friends online. One of the benefits of the internet is that it breaks down the barriers that often prevent people meeting offline.

A powerful example of this is the Facebook peace initiative, "A World of Friends". This ongoing project has documented vast numbers of online friendships between people living on opposite sides of conflict zones. At the time of writing this article, Facebook says that more than

200,000 new Israel-Palestine friendships had formed in the past 24 hours.

Online interactions could resolve group conflict

Conflict between groups is evident in many parts of the world: examples include the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in the Middle East, the strained relations between North and South Korea, and the history of hostility between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.

Closer to home, last Friday's [terrorist incident in Melbourne](#) has created a backlash against the Muslim community.

One solution for reducing such conflict is through intergroup contact. First proposed by American psychologist Gordon Allport in 1954, the "Contact Hypothesis" suggests that having a positive interaction – or contact – with a person from an opposing group can improve our attitudes towards that group. It does so by challenging many of the negative stereotypes and feelings that we may have towards that group.

If this interaction is supported by institutions, and facilitates cooperation and an equal status between the individuals involved, then it is even more effective.

Online social networks can connect people from all over the world, even in the most unexpected places.

There is an impressive body of research that supports the power of contact for improving relations between groups experiencing conflict. However, in reality, interacting with others who are different from ourselves, who we may fear, or who are physically distant from us, can be challenging.

In situations such as these, the internet provides a practical avenue for contact, helping people bridge the gap from the safety and comfort of their own homes. Already, social media sites, online chat rooms, multi-player video games, and support forums connect people from diverse backgrounds.

Current research has found encouraging results

But what does research say about the benefits of online contact for social cohesion? For almost a decade, we have been exploring whether [online interactions can improve relations between diverse groups](#).

To test this question in the research lab, we developed an online program – called E-contact – to simulate a structured chat room interaction between two individuals from different groups. First, a moderator helps the individuals get to know each other by exchanging interests, after which the individuals are guided through a cooperative task. Each individual contributes equally during the interaction, and together they achieve a shared goal. This shifts people from an "us versus them" to a "we" thinking style, to promote a more inclusive mindset.

So far, our E-contact research has connected [Catholics and Protestants](#) in Northern Ireland, [Muslim and Catholic](#) students from segregated schools in Australia, [homosexuals and heterosexuals](#), and [individuals with and without schizophrenia](#).

In each of these cases, our results have been consistent: online interactions between diverse groups reduce prejudice and promote social cohesion.

The future of research into online interactions

In the digital age, interacting with other groups online is a powerful tool for improving social cohesion. However, motivating individuals to do so voluntarily and outside of the research lab can be difficult.

Many people surf the internet with a heightened sense of "stranger danger", and rightly so. Future research must look at ways to encourage

positive and safe online exchanges between diverse groups.

In addition to finding ways to promote social cohesion, researchers should explore emerging technologies, such as virtual and augmented reality, which may provide a unique and engaging opportunity for people to interact online.

As conflict between groups continues all over the world, the need for effective solutions to combat it only grows. The internet, although commonly part of the problem, may also be part of the solution.

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