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DIGITAL STORYTELLING AS A STRATEGIC TOOL FOR COUNTERING MISINFORMATION, HATE SPEECH, AND CONFLICT ESCALATION ONLINE

Ramatu Abubakar Binyamin * and Frank Kwamla Nyamede

Department of International Peacebuilding, Hartford International University for Religion and Peace, Connecticut, USA.

* Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

Digital communication has transformed how societies produce, circulate, and interpret information, creating opportunities for participation while accelerating misinformation, hate speech, polarization, and conflict escalation. This study examines the potential of digital storytelling as a strategic communication intervention for countering harmful online narratives and strengthening conflict prevention. The study adopts an integrative analytical approach that synthesizes scholarship on digital storytelling, misinformation, narrative persuasion, strategic communication, and peacebuilding to examine the mechanisms through which storytelling may influence conflict-related attitudes and behaviours. The analysis traces how harmful narratives are produced, amplified, and interpreted through identity and emotion, and evaluates digital storytelling interventions across narrative credibility, corrective capacity, humanization, audience engagement, trusted-messenger influence, and conflict-sensitive dissemination. Particular attention is given to whether these mechanisms can reduce misinformation susceptibility and hostile stereotypes while strengthening empathy, dialogue, intergroup trust, counter-speech, information resilience, and social cohesion. The analysis also considers platform dynamics, community participation, digital literacy, algorithmic amplification, ethical risks, and unintended consequences that may condition intervention effectiveness. By linking these analytical dimensions across narrative, behavioural, community, and peacebuilding outcomes, the study assesses the conditions under which digital storytelling demonstrates potential to disrupt pathways from harmful online narratives to polarization and conflict escalation. The resulting integrated framework positions digital storytelling not as a substitute for fact-checking, moderation, or offline peacebuilding, but as a complementary strategy for strengthening information resilience and expanding credible, nonviolent alternatives within polarized digital environments.

Keywords: Digital Storytelling; Misinformation; Hate Speech; Conflict Escalation; Strategic Communication; Peacebuilding

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Digital Communication, Information Disorder, and Contemporary Conflict

Digital communication has fundamentally reshaped how information is produced, distributed, and interpreted across contemporary societies. Social media networks, mobile technologies, digital news ecosystems, and participatory platforms have enabled individuals and communities to communicate across geographic and institutional boundaries with unprecedented immediacy [1]. These developments have democratized public expression by allowing citizens, activists, journalists, and marginalized groups to create and circulate content without relying exclusively on traditional media institutions. Yet the same decentralization has weakened conventional gatekeeping mechanisms that historically filtered, verified, and contextualized information before publication [2]. This transformation has blurred distinctions between professional journalism, advocacy, personal testimony, entertainment, and politically motivated communication in information consumption.

Within this increasingly networked environment, misinformation, deliberate disinformation, hate speech, inflammatory narratives, and polarizing content can circulate rapidly among interconnected audiences. Digital platforms enable harmful claims to acquire visibility through repetition, sharing, recommendation systems, and engagement-driven amplification [3]. Speed and scale are particularly consequential because misleading narratives can reach substantial audiences before verification or corrective communication occurs. User-generated communication further complicates information integrity, as ordinary users may unintentionally reproduce inaccurate claims while coordinated actors strategically exploit platform affordances to manipulate perceptions [4]. Network effects can consequently transform isolated messages into widely shared narratives whose perceived credibility grows through familiarity and social endorsement [5].

These dynamics become especially consequential in conflict-affected and socially divided environments. Existing political grievances, ethnic and religious cleavages, historical memories, socioeconomic inequalities, insecurity, and institutional distrust can provide fertile conditions in which divisive digital narratives acquire heightened significance [4]. Information is interpreted through existing identities and experiences rather than encountered in a social vacuum. Consequently, inflammatory narratives may reinforce perceived threats, deepen suspicion, and intensify antagonistic understandings between communities [6]. Digital platforms therefore function as more than channels for discussing conflict: they increasingly constitute contested communicative spaces where conflict narratives are constructed, challenged, amplified, normalized, and potentially transformed [5].

1.2 Research Problem, Aim, and Contribution

Responses to harmful digital communication have emphasized fact-checking, content moderation, account restrictions, content removal, digital literacy initiatives, and the dissemination of corrective information [2]. These interventions remain essential for limiting false claims and reducing exposure to explicitly harmful material. Platform governance mechanisms can restrict circulation, while fact-checking and media literacy can strengthen users' capacity to evaluate questionable information [5]. Nevertheless, approaches centered primarily on factual correction or content suppression may address only part of the problem.

Harmful narratives frequently gain influence because they resonate with social identities, emotions, collective memories, perceived injustice, fear, and pre-existing divisions [7]. A technically accurate correction may therefore have limited persuasive effect when audiences interpret contested information through deeply embedded experiences of insecurity, exclusion, or group loyalty. Moreover, removing harmful content does not necessarily provide communities with alternative narratives through which grievances, identities, and relationships can be understood constructively [3]. Effective intervention consequently requires attention to both informational accuracy and the meanings audiences attach to information.

Digital storytelling offers a complementary strategic communication approach by combining credible information with lived experience, narrative structure, emotional resonance, humanization, and participatory audience engagement [1]. Rather than merely disputing falsehoods, strategically designed stories can contextualize verified information, challenge stereotypes, foreground shared experiences, and make peaceful alternatives more socially meaningful [6]. This article therefore examines how digital storytelling can counter misinformation and hate speech while disrupting communicative processes that increase vulnerability to conflict escalation [8]. Its principal contribution is an integrated analytical framework connecting strategic communication and narrative persuasion with misinformation research, conflict prevention, and digital peacebuilding [4].

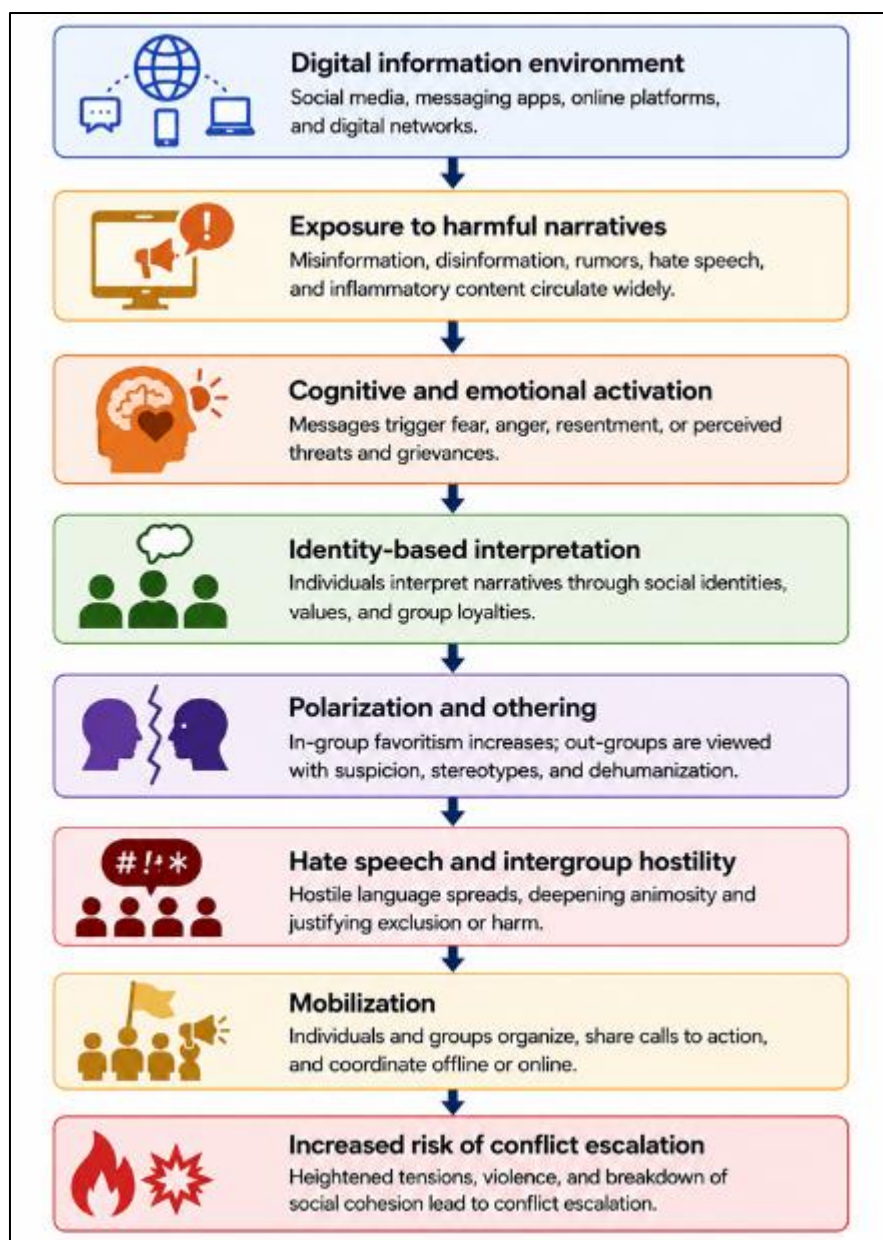


Figure 1: Pathway from Harmful Digital Narratives to Conflict Escalation

Having established why harmful digital narratives constitute both an information and peacebuilding challenge, the discussion now requires a clearer conceptual and theoretical account of how digital narratives acquire persuasive influence, shape collective interpretation, and affect conflict-related attitudes and behaviours.

2 CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Digital Storytelling and Strategic Communication

Digital storytelling refers to the purposeful construction and dissemination of narratives through digital technologies, combining text, photographs, video, audio, animation, personal testimony, and interactive media to communicate experiences and interpretations to defined audiences [9]. Unlike ordinary digital content creation, which may prioritize visibility, entertainment, or immediate information exchange, strategic digital storytelling deliberately connects narrative form with communication objectives. It organizes characters, events, experiences, and meanings into coherent accounts designed to influence how audiences understand particular social realities [6]. Authenticity and lived experience are especially significant because audiences may respond more strongly to recognizable human experiences than to abstract institutional messages. Cultural relevance, emotional resonance, audience orientation, and adaptation to platform characteristics further determine whether stories attract attention and generate meaningful engagement [12].

Within strategic communication, storytelling provides a mechanism for transforming fragmented information into interpretive structures through which audiences assign responsibility, identify threats, understand grievances, and evaluate potential responses [8]. Narrative choices concerning protagonists, victims, causes, consequences, and solutions can therefore shape perceptions without depending exclusively on direct persuasion. Digital formats extend this capacity by allowing narratives to circulate through participatory networks where audiences can interpret, reproduce, contest, and modify their meanings [15]. These characteristics have particular relevance for peacebuilding. Conflicts frequently involve competing narratives about historical injustice, identity, victimhood, legitimacy, security, territory, and belonging [10]. Strategic storytelling can create communicative space for alternative interpretations by making marginalized experiences visible, questioning antagonistic narratives, and presenting relationships between communities through perspectives emphasizing shared humanity, dialogue, coexistence, and nonviolent possibilities [13].

2.2 Misinformation, Hate Speech, and Online Conflict Escalation

Harmful online communication encompasses related but analytically distinct forms of information and expression. Misinformation consists of false or misleading information circulated irrespective of whether deception is intended, whereas disinformation involves the deliberate production or distribution of deceptive information to influence audiences [7]. Malinformation differs because it can involve authentic information strategically removed from context, manipulated, or disclosed in ways intended to cause harm. These distinctions matter because communicative intent, factual accuracy, and contextual manipulation require different intervention strategies [11].

Hate speech primarily involves expressions that attack, demean, stigmatize, or encourage hostility toward individuals or communities on the basis of identity characteristics. Inflammatory communication is broader and includes provocative language, imagery, rumors, and symbolic messages capable of intensifying anger, fear, or antagonism without necessarily satisfying narrower definitions of hate speech [14]. Conflict-inciting narratives operate at a wider interpretive level by connecting events and grievances to stories of collective threat, victimhood, betrayal, revenge, or existential insecurity. Such narratives can provide audiences with explanations that legitimize confrontation or portray peaceful compromise as dangerous [9].

These forms of communication can interact cumulatively. False claims may strengthen existing stereotypes, while repeated stereotypes can provide interpretive foundations for discriminatory or hateful expression [13]. Continuous exposure may normalize hostility and reduce sensitivity to increasingly aggressive rhetoric. Where narratives connect misinformation with group identity and perceived threats, online antagonism can become embedded within broader processes of polarization [6]. Under conditions of social tension, repeated hostile narratives may therefore contribute to environments in which exclusion, retaliatory attitudes, mobilization, and conflict escalation become increasingly conceivable [15].

Table 1: Conceptual Distinctions Among Harmful Forms of Online Communication

Concept	Defining Characteristics	Narrative Mechanism	Potential Conflict Effect	Storytelling Response
Misinformation	False or misleading information shared regardless of deceptive intent	Creates inaccurate interpretations of actors or events	Confusion, distrust, rumor propagation	Embed verified information within accessible corrective narratives
Disinformation	Deliberately created or circulated deceptive information	Strategically constructs misleading explanations	Manipulation, polarization, institutional distrust	Expose manipulation while providing credible alternative narratives
Malinformation	Genuine information used selectively, manipulatively, or harmfully	Removes authentic information from appropriate context	Reputational harm, grievance amplification, distrust	Restore context and explain broader circumstances
Hate speech	Identity-based degrading, hostile, or discriminatory expression	Constructs targeted groups as inferior, threatening, or illegitimate	Dehumanization and intergroup hostility	Humanize targeted communities through lived experiences and testimony

Inflammatory communication	Provocative language, imagery, rumors, or symbolic communication	Activates fear, anger, resentment, or outrage	Heightened tension and retaliatory attitudes	Use de-escalatory narratives emphasizing context, restraint, and empathy
Conflict-inciting narratives	Narratives linking grievances to collective threats, confrontation, or retaliation	Organizes events around victimhood, enemies, and existential danger	Mobilization and increased escalation risk	Promote alternative narratives of coexistence, agency, and nonviolent resolution

2.3 Theoretical Mechanisms of Digital Narrative Influence

The persuasive capacity of digital narratives can be understood through complementary theoretical perspectives. Narrative persuasion suggests that stories influence audiences partly through transportation, whereby individuals become cognitively and emotionally immersed in narrative worlds and temporarily experience events through the perspectives of characters [10]. Such engagement can make abstract political or social issues personally meaningful and potentially reduce resistance to unfamiliar viewpoints. Framing theory similarly explains how communication emphasizes selected dimensions of reality, thereby influencing how audiences define problems, assign responsibility, make moral judgments, and evaluate solutions [14].

Social identity theory extends this explanation by demonstrating how individuals categorize themselves and others through in-groups and out-groups. Harmful narratives can exploit these boundaries by portraying outsiders as threatening while reinforcing internal solidarity through shared grievance [8]. Emotional engagement strengthens these processes because fear and anger may intensify threat perceptions, whereas empathy and hope can support more constructive interpretations. Inoculation perspectives suggest that audiences can develop resistance to manipulation when exposed to weakened misleading arguments alongside appropriate refutations [12]. Intergroup contact perspectives further indicate how mediated encounters with experiences of other communities may challenge stereotypes when narratives encourage recognition and perspective-taking [7]. Together, these mechanisms explain why storytelling can both intensify division and strategically counter misinformation, humanize perceived opponents, weaken stereotypes, and make alternative interpretations cognitively and emotionally accessible [11].

These theoretical mechanisms explain why narratives can influence audiences. Section 3 therefore moves from theoretical explanation to the processes through which harmful narratives are produced, amplified, internalized, and potentially translated into conflict escalation.

3 FROM HARMFUL DIGITAL NARRATIVES TO CONFLICT ESCALATION

3.1 Production, Circulation, and Amplification of Harmful Narratives

Harmful narratives in digital environments rarely originate from a single identifiable source. They may emerge from ordinary users, political actors, influencers, partisan communities, coordinated networks, automated accounts, or information intermediaries that reinterpret and redistribute existing claims [13]. Political elites and influential communicators can introduce frames that are subsequently repeated, modified, and circulated through networked publics [17]. Ordinary users also contribute to this process by sharing, commenting upon, and adapting narratives within their social networks [20]. Coordinated actors may artificially increase visibility through synchronized posting, hashtags, links, or comments, while automated accounts can magnify apparent attention surrounding particular claims [15].

Platform structures can further facilitate amplification. Algorithmic recommendation and engagement-based ranking may increase exposure to material generating strong audience responses [21]. Virality allows emotionally resonant narratives to travel rapidly beyond their communities of origin, while network clustering can concentrate similar interpretations among interconnected users [14]. Such clustering may contribute to echo chambers in which competing perspectives receive comparatively limited attention [19]. Cross-platform circulation extends narrative reach as content migrates between social media, messaging applications, forums, blogs, and news outlets [18].

Repetition also has psychological consequences. Familiar statements can become easier to process and consequently appear more credible despite weak supporting evidence [16]. Social endorsement can reinforce this effect when information comes through friends, community figures, or trusted networks [22]. Narrative credibility therefore develops through interactions among repetition, familiarity, visibility, social trust, and perceived endorsement [13].

3.2 Identity, Emotion, and Narrative Polarization

The influence of harmful narratives extends beyond technological dissemination because narratives provide frameworks through which audiences interpret identities, grievances, threats, and political events [20]. Messages portraying communities as endangered, betrayed, humiliated, or unfairly treated can activate fear, anger, resentment, and perceptions of injustice [15]. Fear may increase sensitivity to perceived threats, whereas anger can encourage blame and punitive responses toward those represented as responsible [18]. Humiliation can similarly strengthen narratives centred on restoring dignity, status, or collective recognition [21].

These emotions become particularly consequential when connected to salient social identities. Individuals may interpret political or social developments not merely as personal concerns but as threats against communities with which they identify [17]. Historical grievances can provide interpretive resources through which contemporary disputes become connected to memories of exclusion, discrimination, violence, or collective victimhood [14]. Narratives can therefore transform isolated events into evidence of broader perceived group persecution [22].

Polarization intensifies when these interpretations establish rigid boundaries between groups. Stereotyping reduces diverse populations to simplified characteristics [16], while scapegoating assigns responsibility for complex political, economic, or security problems to identifiable out-groups [19]. Dehumanization can further weaken recognition of shared humanity and legitimate membership [13]. Othering and moral exclusion may consequently portray opponents as dangerous, contaminating, disloyal, or undeserving of protection [20]. Through these processes, complicated disputes are compressed into emotionally powerful constructions of “us” versus “them” [15], reinforcing antagonistic identities and reducing opportunities for alternative interpretations [18].

3.3 From Online Hostility to Offline Conflict Escalation

Sustained digital hostility can influence offline conflict dynamics by changing how communities interpret events, threats, and opposing groups [21]. Repeated antagonistic discourse may gradually normalize hostile expressions that would otherwise attract stronger social resistance [14]. Rumor propagation can intensify uncertainty during periods of political or communal tension, particularly when reliable information is limited [17]. As threatening interpretations circulate repeatedly, communities may develop heightened collective threat perceptions and greater receptiveness to retaliatory narratives [22].

Digital communication can also facilitate mobilization by connecting individuals who share grievances and enabling rapid circulation of messages concerning demonstrations, political action, or collective responses [16]. Narratives portraying hostility as defensive, necessary, or morally justified may contribute to its legitimization [19]. However, these processes should not be interpreted technologically deterministically. Exposure to antagonistic narratives does not automatically generate violent behaviour [13]. Their consequences depend substantially on political instability, weak institutions, insecurity, historical grievances, social fragmentation, leadership behaviour, and pre-existing intergroup tensions [20].

Digital communication is therefore better conceptualized as an amplifying and enabling environment rather than an independent cause of violent conflict [15]. Online spaces can increase narrative visibility, repetition, emotional intensity, and opportunities for coordination [18], while offline developments simultaneously reshape digital discourse [21]. If harmful narratives acquire influence through factual claims, identity construction, emotional activation, and social meaning, interventions centred exclusively on correcting inaccurate information address only part of the escalation process [17]. Effective responses must also engage the identities, emotions, memories, and interpretive frameworks through which narratives become socially meaningful [14]. This limitation establishes the analytical basis for examining digital storytelling as a more comprehensive narrative intervention [22].

4 DIGITAL STORYTELLING AS A STRATEGIC COUNTER-NARRATIVE INTERVENTION

4.1 Countering Misinformation Through Credible Narrative Correction

Digital storytelling can counter misinformation by embedding verified information within coherent narratives that explain not only what is inaccurate but why an alternative interpretation is more credible [23]. Isolated factual corrections may challenge individual claims without replacing the broader explanatory framework through which audiences understand an issue [27]. Narrative-based correction addresses this limitation by combining evidence, context, sequence, and recognizable experiences into accounts that audiences can follow and evaluate [21]. Contextualization is particularly important because misleading claims often gain influence by separating events from their historical, political, or social circumstances [29].

Prebunking can complement corrective storytelling by preparing audiences to recognize misleading techniques before encountering them [25]. Explanatory stories can similarly demonstrate how claims emerge, identify omitted information, and clarify relationships between evidence and conclusions [22]. Trusted messengers strengthen these interventions where audiences evaluate information partly through perceptions of source competence, integrity, and social proximity [28]. Testimonial narratives can make verified information more concrete by connecting evidence with lived experiences and identifiable consequences [24].

Nevertheless, persuasive storytelling should not substitute emotional appeal for evidential integrity. Effective narrative correction requires factual accuracy, transparent sourcing, consistency, and acknowledgement of uncertainty where appropriate [30]. By combining these principles with understandable explanations, storytelling can offer audiences a credible interpretive framework capable of replacing misleading accounts rather than merely contradicting them [26].

4.2 Countering Hate Speech Through Humanization and Empathy

Digital storytelling can challenge hate speech by contesting the stereotypes, categorical judgments, and dehumanizing representations through which hostility toward social groups becomes normalized [22]. Hate-oriented narratives frequently reduce diverse communities to threatening abstractions, making individual differences and ordinary experiences less visible [26]. Personal testimony provides an alternative by presenting individuals as recognizable people with families, aspirations, vulnerabilities, responsibilities, and complex identities [29]. Lived-experience narratives can therefore disrupt simplified representations by allowing audiences to encounter perspectives ordinarily excluded from antagonistic discourse [24].

Perspective-taking is especially relevant because stories can invite audiences to interpret circumstances from another person's position without requiring immediate agreement with that person's political or social views [27]. Narratives highlighting shared identities and common experiences may further weaken rigid distinctions between in-groups and out-groups [21]. Similarly, accounts of intergroup encounters and cooperation can demonstrate that relationships across social boundaries are not inherently antagonistic [30].

Humanization can consequently encourage empathy and reduce perceived social distance by replacing generalized images of supposedly threatening populations with specific experiences [25]. Such processes may disrupt stereotypes and increase openness to dialogue, although effects remain dependent on audience predispositions and context [28]. Digital storytelling is therefore most valuable when it creates opportunities for recognition and perspective-taking while avoiding sentimentalization or the simplification of conflict experiences [23].

4.3 Digital Storytelling for Conflict De-escalation and Peacebuilding

The strategic value of digital storytelling extends beyond reactive responses to misinformation and hate speech. It can also support proactive construction of narratives that make peaceful alternatives more visible within polarized communication environments [24]. Narratives emphasizing coexistence can demonstrate how communities maintain relationships despite political, ethnic, religious, or social differences [28]. Stories centred on dialogue and reconciliation can additionally illustrate processes through which disagreements are addressed without representing compromise as weakness or defeat [22].

Peace-oriented storytelling may highlight nonviolent problem-solving by documenting how individuals and communities manage disputes through negotiation, mediation, collective action, or locally legitimate institutions [26]. Narratives emphasizing shared interests can redirect attention from exclusively adversarial identities toward common concerns such as security, livelihoods, education, community welfare, or social stability [30]. Stories of community resilience can likewise demonstrate the capacity of conflict-affected populations to resist divisive pressures and sustain cooperative relationships [23].

Successful intergroup cooperation is particularly significant because harmful narratives frequently portray hostility as inevitable [27]. Making examples of cooperation visible can challenge this assumption and expand the perceived range of legitimate responses to disagreement [25]. Storytelling therefore contributes to peacebuilding not simply by opposing harmful messages but by constructing alternative narratives through which coexistence becomes imaginable and socially meaningful [29]. Within polarized environments, repeated exposure to credible accounts of dialogue and cooperation may strengthen the visibility and legitimacy of nonviolent alternatives [21], supporting narrative conditions more compatible with de-escalation and social cohesion.

4.4 Community Participation, Trusted Messengers, and Local Ownership

The effectiveness of counter-narratives depends not only on what stories communicate but also on who creates and communicates them [28]. Community members possess contextual knowledge that can make narratives responsive to local experiences, symbols, grievances, and communication practices [23]. Youth and women can contribute

perspectives frequently marginalized within formal conflict discourse, while conflict-affected populations can communicate experiences that external institutions may struggle to represent authentically [26]. Journalists and educators can contribute verification and explanatory capacity, whereas peacebuilders, civil society organizations, and community influencers may connect storytelling with established networks of engagement [30].

Religious and traditional leaders can be particularly influential where their social authority provides messages with cultural legitimacy [24]. Yet messenger credibility should not be assumed solely from formal status. Audiences may evaluate authenticity through familiarity, perceived independence, language, previous conduct, and demonstrated understanding of community concerns [27]. Local-language storytelling can strengthen accessibility while allowing meanings, expressions, and cultural references to remain contextually recognizable [21].

Participatory storytelling is therefore preferable to externally imposed messaging that treats communities primarily as recipients [29]. Involving participants in identifying problems, selecting themes, developing stories, and determining dissemination strategies can strengthen local ownership [25]. Such participation also reduces the risk that counter-narratives will be perceived as institutional propaganda [22]. Digital storytelling becomes more credible when communities recognize their experiences and voices within the intervention [28]. These principles provide the foundation for operationalizing storytelling through context analysis, audience segmentation, participatory development, trusted messengers, appropriate dissemination, audience engagement, and assessment of narrative and attitudinal change [30]. Section 5 therefore turns from strategic potential to the practical requirements for implementing effective digital storytelling interventions.

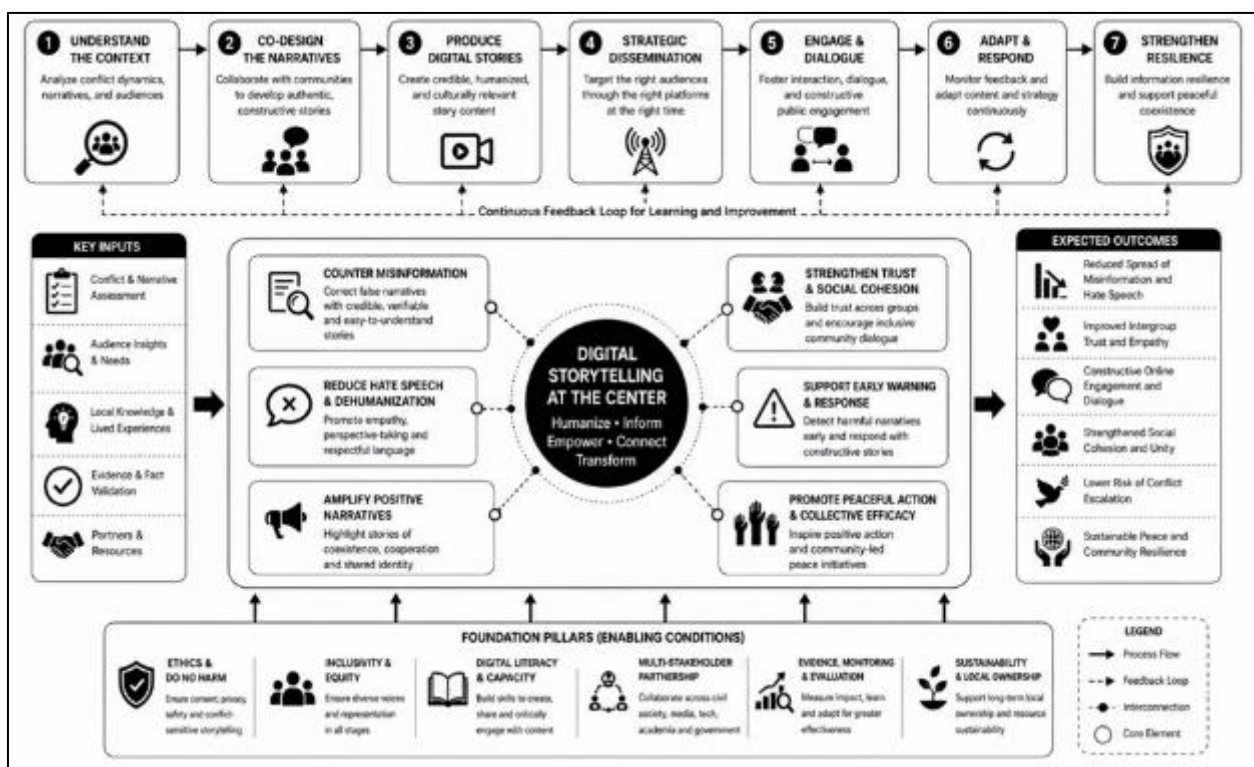


Figure 2: Integrated Strategic Digital Storytelling Framework for Conflict Prevention

5 DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING EFFECTIVE DIGITAL STORYTELLING INTERVENTIONS

5.1 Audience Analysis, Narrative Design, and Platform Selection

Effective digital storytelling interventions should begin with systematic audience analysis because narratives are interpreted through existing beliefs, identities, experiences, and social environments [31]. A message considered persuasive by one community may appear irrelevant or threatening to another. Audience assessment should therefore examine existing attitudes, grievances, group identities, language, cultural norms, and relationships with other communities [27]. Understanding media consumption patterns is equally important because digital literacy and access influence where and how audiences encounter information [33]. Mapping trusted information sources can identify whether community members rely primarily on journalists, religious leaders, peers, influencers, civil society actors, or other intermediaries [29].

Platform preferences should consequently inform narrative design rather than being determined after content production [32]. Short-form videos can communicate concise personal experiences, while podcasts provide greater space for dialogue and explanation [28]. Testimonials may foreground lived experiences, whereas visual narratives can communicate across literacy differences [30]. Interactive stories and social media content can additionally encourage participation and discussion rather than passive consumption [27]. Format selection should reflect communication habits, technological access, and the sensitivity of the conflict environment [31]. Effective intervention therefore depends upon deliberate alignment between the **audience, message, messenger, medium, and conflict context**, ensuring that narrative strategies remain accessible, credible, culturally meaningful, and responsive to the circumstances in which audiences interpret them [33].

5.2 Credibility, Emotional Resonance, and Narrative Authenticity

Effective storytelling requires careful balance between factual evidence and emotional engagement. Accuracy is fundamental, but factual correctness alone does not guarantee that audiences will consider a narrative meaningful or persuasive [30]. Stories can make evidence more understandable by connecting abstract information with recognizable experiences, consequences, and human concerns [28]. Emotional resonance can sustain attention and encourage audiences to consider perspectives that conventional informational messaging may struggle to communicate [32].

However, emotional intensity should support rather than replace factual integrity. Excessive appeals to fear, sympathy, anger, or guilt can undermine credibility and risk reproducing manipulative techniques associated with harmful narratives [27]. Storyteller authenticity is therefore critical. Audiences may respond differently depending on whether narrators appear genuinely connected to the experiences they describe [31]. Cultural sensitivity, appropriate language, recognizable circumstances, and respect for local meanings can strengthen this authenticity [29].

Transparency concerning sources, intentions, and evidential limitations further protects narrative credibility [33]. Emotional framing should remain proportionate to the subject and avoid exaggerating experiences for persuasive effect [28]. Effective storytelling consequently integrates credible evidence with authentic human experience, allowing emotion to facilitate attention, empathy, and understanding without displacing accuracy [30].

5.3 Dissemination, Engagement, and Adaptive Response

Table 2: Strategic Components and Evaluation Indicators for Digital Storytelling Interventions

Strategic Component	Objective	Implementation Approach	Output Indicator	Short-Term Outcome	Peacebuilding Outcome
Audience Analysis	Understand target audiences	Segmentation and context analysis	Audience profiles	Greater message relevance	Reduced narrative vulnerability
Narrative Design	Develop credible stories	Co-creation and verification	Stories produced	Increased credibility	Narrative resilience
Humanization	Challenge stereotypes	Testimony and perspective-taking	Human-centered content	Increased empathy	Reduced intergroup hostility
Trusted Messengers	Strengthen authenticity	Engage credible local actors	Messengers engaged	Increased audience trust	Greater dialogue legitimacy
Dissemination	Reach intended audiences	Platform-specific distribution	Reach and engagement	Greater participation	Constructive engagement
Ethical Safeguards	Prevent unintended harm	Consent, privacy, risk assessment	Safeguards implemented	Reduced participant risk	Conflict-sensitive practice
Evaluation	Measure substantive effects	Attitudinal and behavioural assessment	Outcome measures	Positive attitude change	Social cohesion and resilience

Digital storytelling should be treated as an interactive communication process rather than a one-directional transmission of predetermined messages [29]. Dissemination strategies should consider timing, platform characteristics, audience activity, and changing conflict conditions because identical narratives may produce different responses depending on when and where they appear [32]. Cross-platform dissemination can extend reach by adapting

core narratives to different communication environments without sacrificing consistency [27]. Strategic repetition may reinforce recognition, although excessive exposure can produce fatigue or resistance [31].

Audience interaction is equally important. Comments, responses, sharing patterns, discussion forums, and community conversations can reveal how audiences interpret narrative content [33]. Community moderation can maintain constructive engagement while limiting harassment, inflammatory exchanges, or renewed circulation of harmful material [28]. Feedback mechanisms, including surveys, facilitated discussions, interviews, and digital engagement data, can provide further evidence regarding narrative reception [30].

Such information should support adaptive response rather than serve solely as retrospective evaluation [27]. Storytellers can revise language, formats, messengers, dissemination schedules, or narrative emphasis when audience reactions reveal misunderstanding or resistance [32]. This iterative approach connects implementation with continuous learning and contextual sensitivity [29]. Once storytelling is understood as a deliberately designed and adaptive intervention, attention must therefore shift toward evidence of meaningful outcomes beyond digital visibility and toward the ethical or unintended consequences associated with its implementation [33].

6 EVALUATING EFFECTIVENESS, RISKS, AND ETHICAL CHALLENGES

6.1 Measuring Narrative, Behavioural, and Peacebuilding Outcomes

Evaluating digital storytelling requires a clear distinction between **digital visibility and substantive effectiveness**. Platform-level indicators such as reach, views, completion rates, comments, shares, and engagement provide useful information about content circulation and audience attention [32]. High engagement, however, does not necessarily indicate persuasion or constructive influence because users may interact with content to criticize, ridicule, or contest it [36]. Similarly, extensive reach cannot independently demonstrate reduced belief in misinformation or diminished conflict risk [39]. Digital metrics should therefore be treated as indicators of exposure rather than evidence of intervention success.

More substantive evaluation should examine whether storytelling changes misinformation beliefs, source trust, empathy, prejudice, and perceived social distance [34]. Measures of willingness to engage in dialogue can indicate whether narratives encourage constructive interaction across social boundaries [38]. Behavioural outcomes are equally important, including counter-speech practices and willingness to redistribute harmful content [33]. Where feasible, evaluation should compare attitudes and behaviours before and after exposure and examine whether observed changes persist beyond immediate intervention periods [40].

Evaluation must ultimately extend beyond individual audiences. Community-level indicators can assess intergroup trust, constructive dialogue, reduced hostility, and social cohesion [35]. Narrative resilience is particularly relevant because successful interventions should strengthen communities' capacity to recognize and resist inflammatory narratives [37]. At the peacebuilding level, effectiveness concerns whether these changes contribute to environments less susceptible to antagonistic mobilization and escalation [32]. A multilevel approach therefore connects content quality, audience responses, behavioural change, community relationships, and broader conflict-related outcomes without assuming that digital engagement automatically produces social impact [39].

6.2 Ethical Risks and Unintended Consequences

Digital storytelling interventions can generate significant ethical risks, particularly when implemented within polarized or conflict-affected communities [35]. Informed consent should extend beyond permission to record a story and include clear understanding of potential audiences, digital permanence, redistribution, and foreseeable consequences [38]. Privacy protections are similarly essential because seemingly minor contextual details may expose storytellers or vulnerable populations to identification [33]. Storyteller security should therefore be considered before publication, particularly where testimony concerns powerful political or social actors [40].

Representation creates additional challenges. Narratives involving vulnerable populations can reproduce stereotypes when experiences are selectively presented to generate sympathy or emotional impact [36]. Recounting violence, displacement, discrimination, or loss may also create risks of retraumatization [34]. Emotional engagement should consequently remain proportionate and should never become manipulation disguised as peacebuilding communication [39]. Political actors may appropriate stories for purposes different from those intended by storytellers, while inappropriate audience targeting can expose participants to hostile groups [32].

Counter-narratives may themselves produce unintended informational effects. Repeating misinformation during correction can increase its familiarity or provide additional visibility to claims that might otherwise remain marginal [37]. Storytellers may face harassment, backlash, or coordinated attacks, while interventions can provoke

countermobilization [35]. Poorly designed narratives may even reinforce binary identities by repeating stereotypes they seek to challenge [38]. Conflict sensitivity and “do no harm” principles must therefore guide story selection, production, dissemination, moderation, and evaluation [40]. These constraints demonstrate that storytelling requires integration within a broader digital peacebuilding ecosystem rather than treatment as an isolated communication solution [33].

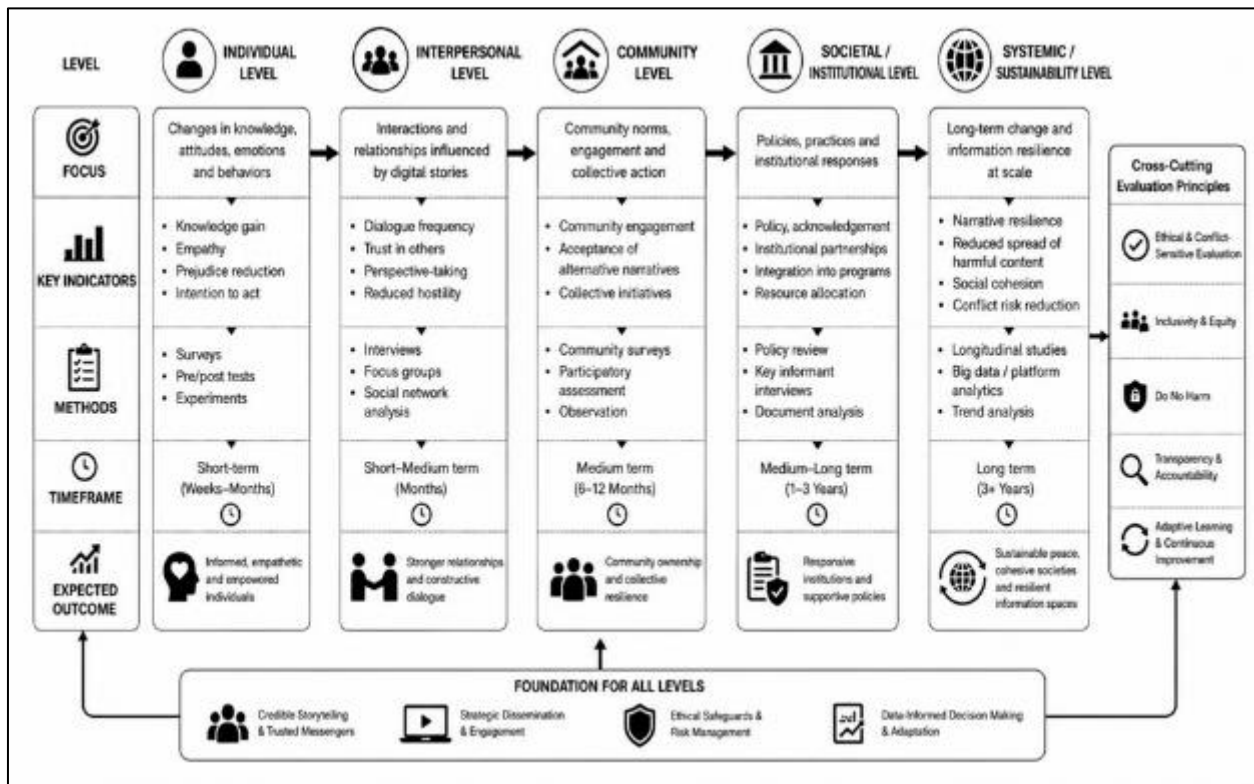


Figure 3: Multilevel Evaluation Model for Digital Storytelling Effectiveness

7 DISCUSSION: STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR DIGITAL PEACEBUILDING

7.1 Integrating Narrative Strategy into Digital Peacebuilding

Harmful online communication operates through more than factual distortion. Its influence also develops through emotions, identities, social relationships, historical narratives, and interpretations of collective threat [36]. Effective responses should consequently combine information correction with narrative transformation, addressing both misleading claims and the interpretive frameworks that give those claims social meaning [39]. Digital storytelling can complement fact-checking and content moderation while strengthening digital literacy, counter-speech, and early-warning mechanisms [34]. It can also connect online interventions with community dialogue and offline peacebuilding initiatives [37]. Its strategic contribution can therefore be conceptualized as credible storytelling → narrative contestation → humanization → constructive engagement → information resilience → reduced vulnerability to conflict escalation [40]. Storytelling should thus function as one mutually reinforcing component within a multidimensional approach to digital peacebuilding [32].

7.2 Policy and Practice Implications

Policymakers, technology platforms, civil society organizations, journalists, educators, and peacebuilding institutions should invest in locally grounded storytelling capacity rather than standardized counter-messaging [35]. Community participation and trusted messengers can strengthen legitimacy, while ethical standards and conflict-sensitive communication can reduce unintended harm [38]. Digital literacy should complement narrative interventions by strengthening critical audience engagement [33]. Systematic evaluation is also necessary to establish outcomes beyond visibility [40]. Cooperation among technology, communication, community, and peacebuilding actors is therefore essential for avoiding fragmented interventions [37]. Strategically constructed narratives matter because they can engage the social, cognitive, and emotional processes through which harmful information acquires conflict-escalating influence [39].

8 CONCLUSION

Digital communication environments have expanded the speed, scale, and visibility through which misinformation, hate speech, and antagonistic narratives can circulate within societies. Yet their conflict-related influence cannot be understood through information accuracy alone. Harmful narratives acquire significance through their interaction with identity, emotion, historical grievances, perceived threats, and relationships between groups. Digital storytelling offers a broader response by combining credible information with narratives capable of promoting empathy, humanization, dialogue, coexistence, and alternative interpretations of contested issues. Its contribution to conflict prevention nevertheless depends on careful audience analysis, community participation, credible messengers, cultural sensitivity, ethical safeguards, and meaningful evaluation beyond digital engagement metrics. Storytelling should therefore complement rather than replace fact-checking, moderation, digital literacy, counter-speech, early warning, and offline peacebuilding. When strategically designed and locally grounded, digital storytelling can strengthen information resilience, expand the visibility of peaceful alternatives, and reduce vulnerability to narratives that intensify polarization and conflict escalation.

8.1 Future Research Directions

Digital storytelling represents a strategically important complement to conventional responses to misinformation and hate speech because it addresses factual understanding alongside emotion, identity, empathy, relationships, and social meaning. Rather than treating harmful communication exclusively as an information deficit, storytelling provides opportunities to contest misleading interpretations while constructing credible alternatives that support humanization and dialogue. Its effectiveness, however, depends upon credibility, authenticity, local ownership, audience sensitivity, trusted messengers, ethical implementation, and systematic evaluation. Future research should prioritize longitudinal evaluations capable of determining whether narrative effects persist beyond immediate exposure. Experimental testing can strengthen evidence concerning causal mechanisms, while cross-platform comparisons should examine how different digital environments influence reception and engagement. Culturally comparative research and improved audience segmentation are needed to establish contextual variation. Further investigation should address algorithmic amplification, narrative durability, and interaction between competing narratives. Most importantly, stronger measures are required to determine whether changes generated by online storytelling translate into sustained offline peacebuilding outcomes and relationships.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript

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