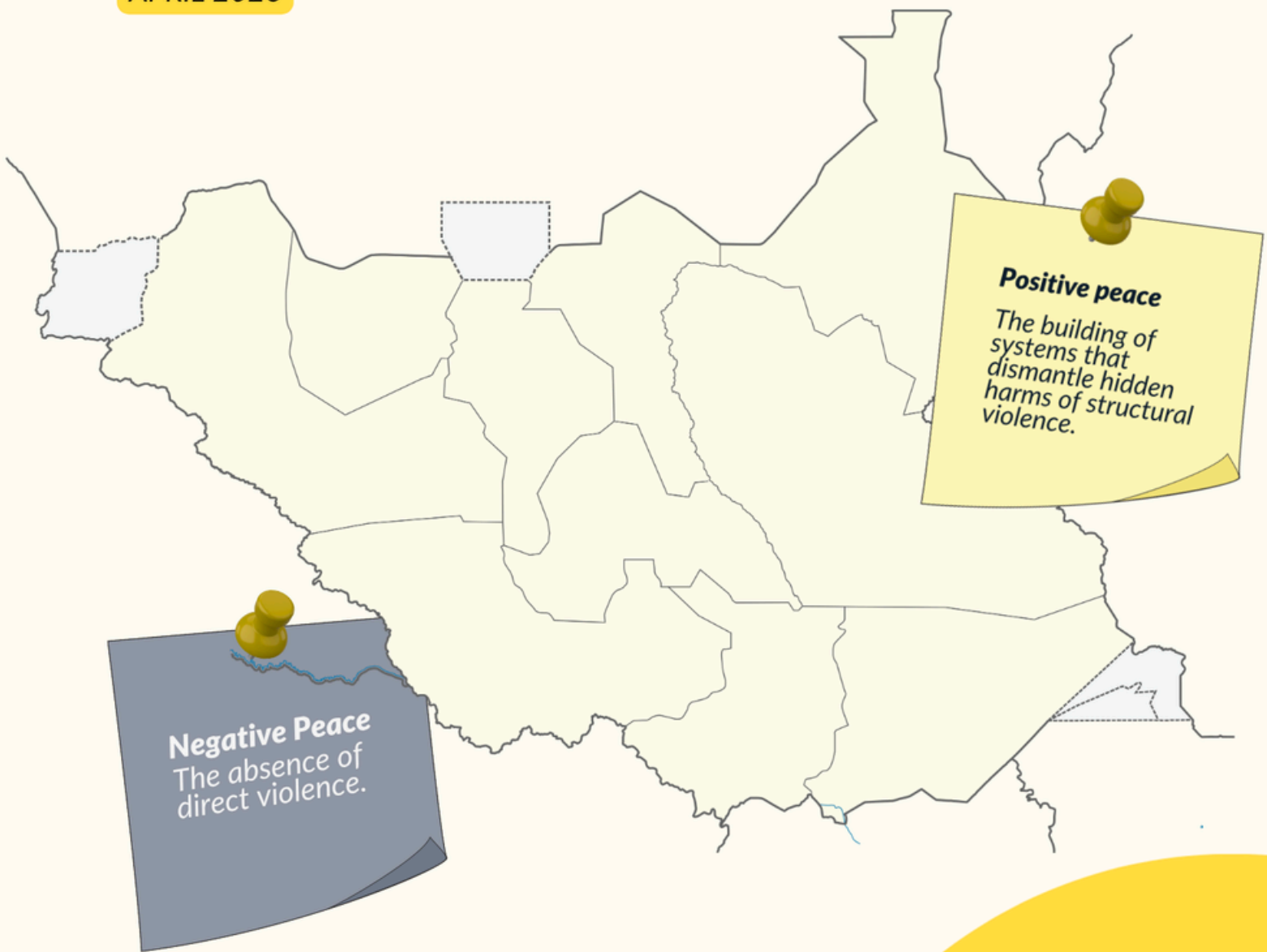


# Digital Rights and the Conditions for Positive Peace in South Sudan

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*"In October 2016, the UN warned of increasing violence in South Sudan following rumours circulating on social media over the ill health and death of President Salva Kiir. The rumours spread as far as Uganda before any authority could verify the facts."*

The Sentinel Project, Managing Misinformation to Build Peace in South Sudan

## From Negative to Positive Peace: Why the Distinction Matters

Johan Galtung's landmark 1969 paper, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," in the *Journal of Peace Research* transformed how we understand peace. His frame work draws a crucial line between two concepts: negative peace and positive peace. Negative peace being merely the absence of direct violence, when the guns fall silent and the fighting ends. Positive peace, however, is a much higher bar. It's the building of inclusive social systems, addressing conflicts at their roots, and dismantling the hidden harms of unjust systems, that Galtung calls structural violence. This distinction shapes how we pursue real, lasting progress.

In the case of South Sudan the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) achieved a version of negative peace which was a crucial halt to violence. What it has not achieved however and is far harder to build, is positive peace. An environment that requires functional institutions, ensuring equitable access to resources, genuine civic participation, and a shared information environment that citizens can trust. Which directly echoes Galtung's vision.

Galtung's concept of structural violence broadens our perspective. Referring to violence as not being limited to harm inflicted by a specific actor but often woven into the systems that shape daily life. Harm that kills not with weapons but through exclusion, misinformation, and systemic barriers that deny people opportunity and dignity. Reflected in instances when women and girls are excluded from the digital economy a form of structural violence in action. When disinformation circulates in an information vacuum triggering ethnic retaliatory violence in the real-world is another form of structural violence immediate and devastating consequences. South Sudan's digital landscape is not a neutral backdrop. It is a pivotal space where structural violence is both perpetuated and where can be dismantled and meaningful steps toward peace can take root.

## Digital Peace Building; A tool for Positive Peace in a Fragile Context

The academic literature around digital peacebuilding has grown more sophisticated in recent years, but it comes with important caveats. One of the most influential contributions is Hirblinger et al.'s 2023 framework in *International Studies Perspectives*, "Digital Peacebuilding: A Framework for Critical-Reflexive Engagement." A piece that stands out for rigorously mapping the contours of this emerging field. Crucially, they argue that much of the existing scholarship falls into "tech-solutionist" treating digital tools as quick fixes for conflict. Without adequately examining how technology is shaped by, and embedded within, the very social and political dynamics that drive conflict in the first place.

### LITERATURE -KEY FINDING

Schirch (2020) identified 25 distinct spheres where ICTs contribute to peacebuilding efforts, including citizen journalism, digital fact-checking, and early warning systems. The framework positions ICTs not as solutions but as enabling conditions – tools whose peacebuilding potential depends entirely on the political and social environment in which they operate.

Source: Digital Peacebuilding and PeaceTech, ResearchGate, 2024-

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385431110\\_Digital\\_Peacebuilding\\_and\\_PeaceTech](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385431110_Digital_Peacebuilding_and_PeaceTech)

Richmond and colleagues, in their work Peace in Digital International Relations (Cambridge University Press), explore how digital technologies can both empower and constrain. On one hand, these technologies have the potential to foster critical agency and broaden rights claims. On the other, they can be co-opted by the very power structures and conflict dynamics they are meant to challenge. South Sudan illustrates this double movement with uncomfortable precision. The social media platforms that once enabled civil society organising and diaspora advocacy became, in January 2025, the very platforms the government moved to block. This duality underscores the complex realities of digital engagement in fragile contexts.

Hirblinger's 2024 follow-up, "When the Digits Don't Add Up: Research Strategies for Post-Digital Peacebuilding," advances the conversation with a "post-digital" perspective, one that centers on the concrete, lived experiences of those affected by conflict. The real question, he suggests, is not "What can technology theoretically do for peace?", but "What are the actual, lived effects of the current digital environment on South Sudanese communities trying to build peace?"

## Disinformation as a Driver of Conflict: The South Sudan Evidence Base

The evidence linking disinformation to conflict in South Sudan is both substantial and sobering. Research from The Sentinel Project on [misinformation in South Sudan](#) identifies how hate speech, rumors, and disinformation act as complex drivers of conflict. In societies where institutional trust is low and politically charged ethnic identities, false information does more than simply mislead; it activates existing grievances, reinforces harmful stereotypes, and accelerates the path to conflict before dialogue can even begin.

DRF's own research, published as "[Unmasking Disinformation and Misinformation in South Sudan](#)", found that 98.1% of survey respondents believed disinformation and misinformation increase violence in their communities. That near-unanimity reflects a lived understanding, grounded in experience, of exactly what Galtung describes when he theorises about structural violence: harm that is slow, cumulative, embedded in systems of information and communication that most people cannot see or name, but can feel.

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*Disinformation in a conflict-affected society does not merely mislead, it weaponises existing social fractures and converts ambiguity into threat, at speeds that no institution, however well-resourced, can fully match.*

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The [CDAC Network's 2025 report on Sudan's information war](#) makes a claim that deserves to be applied directly to South Sudan: that information must be treated as strategic humanitarian infrastructure, not an afterthought. When fewer than 20% of South Sudanese are able to access [independent or reliable news](#), the information environment becomes much more than a media issue, it stands as a decisive factor for peace and security.

## The January 2025 Social Media Shutdown: A Case Study in Negative Peace Logic

In January 2025, the South Sudanese government ordered Internet Service Providers to block access to Facebook and TikTok for a period of up to 90 days. This move drew swift condemnation from the [Digital Rights Alliance Africa](#), which argued that it violated South Sudan's constitutional rights to freedom of expression (Article 24) and access to information (Article 32). The action also contravened the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa (2019).

This episode offers a revealing look into the government's underlying theory of peace. By imposing a shutdown, authorities chose a negative peace response to what is fundamentally a positive peace challenge.

The action removed a perceived trigger (social media) without addressing the root causes: an information vacuum, limited credible state communication, and the absence of a rapid-response civil society media ecosystem. In effect, peace was treated as the absence of unrest, rather than the presence of constructive conditions, a fundamental inversion of Johan Galtung's warning against such approaches.

### FIELD EVIDENCE – INTERNET SOCIETY SOUTH SUDAN

The Internet Society South Sudan Chapter mobilised within hours of the shutdown order, issuing a public statement and appearing on national radio. Their advocacy contributed to an earlier lifting of the ban than initially decreed. This is precisely the kind of organised civil society capacity—rapid, rights-grounded, publicly visible; that positive peacebuilding scholarship identifies as essential to democratic resilience in fragile states.

Source: Internet Society Blog, March 2025—<https://www.internetsociety.org/blog/2025/03/how-the-south-sudan-chapter-mobilized-to-keep-the-internet-on/>

## Fact-Checking as Positive Peacebuilding: The 211 Check Model

Disinformation, as conceptualized by Galtung, operates as a form of structural violence embedded within the information environment and causing harm without a single, identifiable perpetrator. In this context, fact-checking emerges not simply as a response to isolated incidents, but as a form of structural peace work. It seeks to intervene at the systemic level, reshaping the very architecture of the information environment.

211 Check, South Sudan's only independent fact-checking and verification platform, operates on this premise. By combining open-source investigation, social media monitoring, and community engagement, 211 Check adopts methodologies identified in digital peacebuilding literature as most effective in high-disinformation environments. Similarly, the Sentinel Project's Hagiga Wahid ("One Truth") project demonstrated that ICT systems that actively engage citizens in verifying rumours can meaningfully contribute to atmospheres of peace, bridging divides across communities and borders.

## Gender, Structural Exclusion and the Digital Divide as Peacebuilding Failure

Research on women's use of ICTs in peacebuilding in Cameroon—a context sharing notable structural similarities with South Sudan found that even low-tech tools, such as WhatsApp groups, played a crucial role in coordinating women peacebuilders. The study proposed an intersectional feminist digital peacebuilding framework, highlighting that while digital spaces offer significant potential for advancing gender equality. This promise is consistently undermined by limited accessibility and technology-facilitated violence against women.

As Hillert (2024), writing on human rights and peacebuilding in the *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, emphasises the need for bidirectional awareness between human rights and peacebuilding actors. In the context of digital inclusion, this means that lasting peace cannot be achieved if half the population remains structurally excluded from the information systems that underpin and sustain it.

### **DRF ; BILDD PROGRAMME**

The Banat Initiative for Leadership and Digital Development (BiLDD) directly addresses this gap, providing young women with structured training in digital literacy, cybersecurity, entrepreneurship and life skills. The programme is designed on the principle; supported by the peacebuilding literature that digital inclusion for women is not charity but load-bearing infrastructure for sustainable reconstruction.

## The Cybercrimes Bill 2026: Legislation as Positive or Negative Peace Tool

South Sudan's Cybercrimes and Computer Misuse Bill 2026 presents the starkest current test of the country's digital governance, raising the question of whether it will promote positive or negative peace. Since 2021, DRF's SafetyComm programme has documented over 850 cyber incidents, yet the lack of any legal framework for redress constitutes a form of structural violence in itself. This situation is particularly concerning in light of the regional track record, which offers serious grounds for caution.

This pattern is not unique to South Sudan; across the region, cybercrime legislation often begins with genuine intentions to prevent harm but ends up containing provisions so broadly worded that journalists, activists, and government critics become the primary targets. For example, the Atlantic Council's analysis of Sudan's information environment, highlights how the 2020 amendment to Sudan's Cybercrimes Law, passed in secret, was ultimately used to criminalise dissent rather than protect citizens. Comparable dynamics have been observed in Uganda, Tanzania, and Ethiopia.

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*Poorly drafted cybercrime law is not a safety net. It is a trap door and the people who fall through it are always the same: journalists, activists, the marginalised, the inconvenient.*

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The test for South Sudan's bill is whether it will be grounded in the human rights frameworks that give it legitimacy. The African Charter on Human and People's Rights, the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa, and the ICCPR or whether it will replicate the regional pattern of using digital governance as a tool of negative peace.

### **Toward a Digital Rights Framework for Positive Peace: What the Evidence Suggests**

Drawing together the peacebuilding literature, the regional evidence base, and the specific context of South Sudan, several key analytical conclusions can be drawn.

First, digital rights should not be viewed as a separate domain from peacebuilding; rather, they constitute one of its foundational structural conditions. According to Galtung's positive peace framework, true peace is unattainable when significant portions of the population are systematically excluded from knowledge systems, participatory mechanisms, and sources of individual security. Issues such as the digital exclusion of women, the decline of independent media, unchecked disinformation, and the susceptibility of civil society actors to digital threats all represent forms of structural violence, not merely communications challenges.

Second, while the digital peacebuilding literature's critique of tech-solutionism is valid and must be heeded, it should not become an excuse for inaction. Evidence from the research on post-conflict Colombia demonstrates that digital tools can meaningfully shape civil society outcomes. Relating to social capital, reintegration, and justice when they are deployed with contextual awareness rather than indiscriminate optimism about technology.

Third, the information environment should be regarded as strategic infrastructure central to peacebuilding, not simply a communications add-on to humanitarian response. Community-level systems that empower citizens to monitor, verify, and counter rumors can play a significant role in fostering trust between ethnic groups. Such initiatives embody the "positive content" that Galtung's positive peace requires.

## **Conclusion: The Information Environment as a Peace Variable**

South Sudan faces an immense and long-term reconstruction challenge. However, peacebuilding literature makes it clear that achieving positive peace involves more than simply ending violence. It requires the establishment of inclusive social systems, the eradication of all forms of structural violence, and the development of trustworthy institutions capable of constructively resolving conflict.

An information environment plagued by unchecked disinformation, the exclusion of women and girls, unprotected civil society actors, and legal frameworks that prioritize surveillance over service constitutes structural violence. Such conditions threaten to undermine every other aspect of the positive peace project in South Sudan just as profoundly as sustained armed conflict would.

Digital rights, when properly understood, are not separate from human rights or peacebuilding, they are their digital expression. In a context where mobile phones serve as the main infrastructure for civic engagement, economic activity, and social connection, safeguarding these rights is not a matter of idealism. Rather, it is the most pragmatic and essential form of peacebuilding available.

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