



Digital Technologies and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS).

This paper was developed by the Cyber Peacebuilding Unit of Sustainable Cooperation for Peace & Security (SCPS), an Italian Civil Society Organisation promoting inclusive, evidence-based approaches to peace and conflict. SCPS conducts research and supports initiatives that strengthen resilience, participation, and cooperation in conflict-affected and digital environments.

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Integrating Cyber Peacebuilding into the YPS Agenda.

Eleven years after the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250 (2015), the YPS agenda has gained normative recognition and increasingly acknowledges youth as important actors in peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and social cohesion; yet the digital environment remains insufficiently integrated into YPS policy and practice.

For today's youth, civic engagement, political mobilisation, identity formation, and peace activism increasingly take place in online and hybrid spaces (Cho et al., 2020; Saud et al., 2023; Democracy International, 2025). Social media platforms, messaging applications, and algorithmically curated information ecosystems are not peripheral tools but central arenas where narratives are contested, and conflict dynamics are amplified or mitigated (Gurung & Agarwal, 2026; Qadi, 2025). Despite this shift, there remains a lack of assessment of how digital and hybrid spaces can sustain and support youth participation in peace and security activities (UNITAR, 2024).

At the same time, young people are disproportionately exposed to digital harms, including disinformation, hate speech, online harassment, surveillance, and digitally enabled polarisation (Kops et al., 2025; Obermaier & Schmuck, 2022; Äijälä, 2023, p. 8). These threats do not exist in isolation; they intersect with offline inequalities, weaken civic trust, and constrain meaningful youth participation. When left unaddressed, they undermine the very objectives of the YPS agenda, particularly its pillars of participation, prevention, and protection.

This thematic paper argues that cyber peacebuilding offers a timely and necessary framework for addressing the aforementioned challenges. Here, “digital” refers to online platforms and ecosystems which shape civic and social life, whereas “cyber” encapsulates the larger socio-technical domain of networks and infrastructures, such as cybersecurity risks or technology-enabled harms. Cyber peacebuilding reframes digital peace and security away from militarised or purely technical approaches. It aligns closely with the normative pillars of the YPS agenda and provides practical pathways for operationalising youth leadership in digital spaces. It aims to inform the Second Independent Progress Study by demonstrating why integrating cyber peacebuilding into YPS strategies is no longer optional but essential for sustaining peace in a digitally mediated world.

Cyber Peacebuilding: A Framework Aligned with YPS

Defining Cyber Peacebuilding

Cyber peacebuilding refers to the application of peacebuilding principles: prevention, inclusion, participation, and positive peace, to digital and cyber-enabled environments (Roff, 2016; Daniele, et al., 2025a). It is a human-centred approach that conceptualises digital harms such as

disinformation, online violence, surveillance, and exclusion not primarily as technical failures, but as manifestations of underlying social, political, and economic tensions.

Unlike militarised cyber defence or narrowly technical cybersecurity approaches, cyber peacebuilding focuses on addressing root causes and strengthening the conditions for sustainable peace in digital spaces. This includes fostering resilient information ecosystems, inclusive digital governance, trust-building between institutions and communities, and meaningful participation of affected stakeholders, particularly young people, whose civic and political lives are increasingly mediated by digital technologies (Schirch, 2020; Zimmermann & Pirker, 2025).

Normative Alignment with the YPS Pillars

Cyber peacebuilding aligns closely with all five pillars of the YPS agenda:

- **Participation** is advanced through youth inclusion in digital governance, platform accountability processes, and the design of information ecosystems.
- **Protection** is strengthened by recognising online harassment, disinformation, and surveillance as threats to civic space and personal security.
- **Prevention** is enhanced through early-warning mechanisms, media and information literacy, and resilience-building initiatives that address polarisation before it escalates into violence.
- **Partnerships** are fostered through collaboration between youth, civil society, educators, media actors, and technology companies.
- **Disengagement and reintegration** benefit from addressing online pathways to radicalisation and grievance formation.

This alignment demonstrates that cyber peacebuilding is not an add-on to YPS, but a framework that operationalises its core commitments in digital contexts.

Global Trends Shaping Youth, Peace, and Security in the Digital Age (2015–2025)

Digitalisation of Civic and Political Life

Digital technologies have become central infrastructures for civic and political participation, particularly for young people. This rapid change, pushed by the proliferation of digital tools and platforms, has shifted young people towards digital forms of political engagement (Siegel-Stechler et al., 2025). Social media platforms, messaging applications, and online campaigning tools now function as primary spaces through which youth mobilise, deliberate, and engage with political processes (UNDP, 2023; Zimmermann & Pirker, 2025). For many young people, especially in contexts marked by restricted civic space or weak institutions, digital platforms provide the most accessible avenue for participation, enabling new forms of transnational solidarity, peer-to-peer organising, and issue-based activism (UNDP, 2021, p.17).

Nonetheless, digital participation is not neutral. Platform architectures, algorithmic amplification, and monetisation models shape which voices are heard, which narratives gain traction, and how political identities are formed (BBC R&D, 2025). For young users, prolonged engagement in such environments can normalise adversarial discourse and heighten exposure to polarising content, with implications for social cohesion and peaceful political engagement. This is evident in a study by the Youth Endowment Fund, which surveyed nearly 11,000 children aged 13 to 17 and found that 82% had seen social media posts about harming specific groups (Youth Endowment Fund, 2025).

Digital Threats Affecting YPS

Alongside new opportunities, digital technologies have enabled a range of threats that directly intersect with peace and security dynamics. Disinformation and information manipulation campaigns have targeted electoral processes, youth movements, civil society organisations, and minority communities (UNDP, 2023). Young people are both key targets and key vectors of these campaigns, given their high levels of online engagement and centrality to political mobilisation. A Eurostat survey found that more than 76% of young people were exposed to disinformation and fake news, higher than in other age groups (Laaninen & Bol, 2025).

Online harassment, hate speech, and gendered digital violence disproportionately affect young people, particularly young women and activists, contributing to self-censorship, disengagement, and psychological harm (Salza & Samuel, 2025). These dynamics undermine trust in democratic institutions and weaken confidence in peaceful avenues for political participation. As highlighted in Daniele et al. (2025a), such harms should be understood not as isolated digital pathologies but as expressions of deeper social and political fractures that, if left unaddressed, can escalate conflict and instability.

Unequal Digital Access and Structural Vulnerabilities

Despite assumptions about universal youth digital fluency, access to digital technologies and the capacity to navigate online spaces safely and critically remain deeply unequal. Structural factors, including socioeconomic status, education, gender, geographic location, and conflict exposure, shape both opportunities for participation and vulnerability to harm (UNICEF, 2021; Salza & Samuel, 2025). Young people in conflict-affected or marginalised contexts often face compounded risks, including limited access to reliable information, heightened exposure to manipulation, and weak institutional protection.

As civic engagement increasingly shifts online, these inequalities risk reproducing and entrenching exclusion within peace and political processes. From a YPS perspective, digital inequality constitutes a structural challenge to peace and security. A concrete example can be found by observing Myanmar in the aftermath of the 2021 coup, where repeated internet shutdowns and restrictions curtailed young people's ability to organise, document abuses, and

access information (OHCHR, 2022). Addressing it is therefore not only a development or connectivity issue, but a prerequisite for inclusive participation, prevention, and sustainable peace.

The Evolution of the YPS Agenda and Its Digital Blind Spots

Progress Since UNSCR 2250

Since the adoption of UNSCR 2250, the YPS agenda has achieved significant normative progress. Youth are increasingly recognised as legitimate political actors and positive contributors to conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and recovery (UNSC, 2015; UNFPA, 2023). However, as noted in Tancredi (2026), much of this progress remains anchored in offline conceptions of peacebuilding, despite the rapid digitalisation of youth civic life. This gap also highlights young people’s innovation and creativity as peacebuilders: youth are not merely adapting to digital change, but actively developing new forms of civic engagement and conflict mitigation. Thus, demonstrating that youth-led innovation is increasingly central to sustaining peace in digitally mediated societies (UNDP, 2023; Tancredi, 2026).

Gaps in Addressing Digital Realities

Digital technologies remain insufficiently integrated into YPS policy and practice. While there are references to technology, social media, or digital literacy, they are rarely treated as core peace and security issues. Cybersecurity, platform governance, and information integrity are often addressed in parallel policy silos, with limited youth participation and minimal linkage to peacebuilding frameworks (Roff, 2016; Schirch, 2020).

As a result, young people are frequently positioned as users to be protected or educated, rather than as stakeholders with expertise and agency in shaping digital environments (Liang & Lim, 2024). Despite the fact that digital harms disproportionately affect youth participation and safety (Youth Endowment Fund, 2025).

Why the Digital Dimension Matters for YPS Implementation

The failure to integrate digital realities into the YPS agenda risks undermining its relevance for the youth. Here, digital realities imply unequal access to the internet and devices, exposure to disinformation/misinformation, and risks of online harassment, which all shape how young people engage in civic and political life.

Protecting youth offline while neglecting the digital environments where political identities, grievances, and mobilisation increasingly take shape results in fragmented and incomplete peacebuilding approaches. Moreover, reactive responses to digital harm, such as content takedowns or surveillance-heavy measures, including mandatory digital ID schemes, location

tracking, or content monitoring, have been shown to undermine trust and constrain freedom of expression and association. It deters individuals from engaging in protest, public debate, or dissenting discourse due to fear of reprisal or misuse of data (Murray et al., 2023).

Youth Engagement at the Cyber–Peace Nexus

Youth as Digital Peacebuilders

Youth are already acting as digital peacebuilders by directly countering online misinformation and promoting media literacy among their peers. A prominent example is the MediaWise Teen Fact-Checking Network (TFCN), a youth-led virtual newsroom composed of middle and high school students who produce fact-checks and media literacy content for social media. Through short videos and posts that debunk viral misinformation and explain how to verify claims, TFCN participants help equip peers with the skills to assess online information critically and resist manipulation. TFCN’s peer-to-peer model acknowledges that youth learning from youth can enhance resonance and relevance, strengthening community-level digital resilience against false narratives (Poynter Institute, n.d.).

Such youth-led initiatives represent informal and grassroots innovation in the cyber peacebuilding realm. Unlike top-down interventions, these efforts are rooted in the lived digital experiences of young people, who identify and respond to misinformation patterns in real time. By combining digital content creation with critical analysis, youth activists challenge the spread of polarising content, contributing to healthier information environments that support informed civic engagement.

Case-Based Illustrations

The consequences of digital harm for youth participation and trust are starkly illustrated in electoral contexts. During Romania’s 2024 elections, coordinated disinformation campaigns circulated on platforms such as Telegram and X depicted civil society organisations (CSOs) as corrupt agents of foreign influence (Daniele et al., 2025b). In this context, such narratives undermined the perceived legitimacy of CSOs as intermediaries of democratic participation, particularly those working with and for young people. By framing civic actors as threats to national sovereignty, these campaigns weakened public confidence in organised civic engagement and contributed to a climate of mistrust toward democratic processes. For youth, who increasingly rely on digital platforms as primary spaces for political information and mobilisation, this environment discouraged open participation in civic discourse and reinforced disengagement from formal and informal democratic channels (Gherguț-Babii et al., 2025)

Impact and Limitations of Existing Youth-Led Efforts

Youth-led digital peacebuilding efforts have shown measurable effects in limiting the spread of false information and encouraging corrective behaviour online. Research on community-based fact-checking indicates that exposing users to community notes reduced the circulation of misleading posts. In addition, the likelihood that users deleted their own misleading content more than doubled after exposure to these peer-generated corrections (Chuai et al., 2024). However, the study found that community notes often intervene too late in the diffusion process to affect the early and most viral stages of misinformation spread. This highlights a key limitation of youth and community-driven initiatives. While they can reduce harm and strengthen accountability, their impact is constrained by the speed at which false narratives propagate and by platform architectures that prioritise engagement over accuracy. Strengthening the timeliness and institutional support of community-based fact-checking is therefore essential for enhancing digital resilience and protecting civic trust in digitally mediated public spaces (Chuai et al., 2024).

Enablers and Barriers to Youth Participation in Digital Peacebuilding

Enabling Factors

Peer-based digital literacy, which entails the shared development of critical skills to assess online information, and civic education are central enablers of youth participation in digital peacebuilding. Evidence shows that programmes combining critical media literacy, civic education, and youth-led facilitation are more effective in strengthening young people's capacity to engage constructively in digital civic spaces than top-down approaches (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Zimmermann & Pirker, 2025). Supportive policy environments further enable youth engagement when institutions formally recognise youth expertise in digital matters. Research on youth participation highlights that meaningful inclusion in policy design processes, rather than consultation alone, increases legitimacy and ownership while improving policy relevance (UNESCO, 2026). Access to sustainable funding and digital infrastructure is equally critical. Long-term financial support enables youth-led organisations to maintain secure digital tools, develop technical expertise, and build partnerships, thereby shifting digital peacebuilding from short-term awareness activities to sustained prevention and resilience-building (UNFPA, 2023).

Structural and Institutional Barriers

Despite these enabling factors, youth participation in digital peacebuilding remains constrained by persistent structural barriers. Youth are largely excluded from cybersecurity and digital governance processes, which are frequently framed as technical or national security domains dominated by state institutions and private sector actors, leaving little space for youth expertise or participation (Roff, 2016; Schirch, 2020). At the same time, institutional responses to digital harm tend to lack coordination and to prioritise reactive measures, such as content takedowns

and platform moderation, rather than preventive approaches that address systemic drivers of digital harm. This combination of fragmented governance and reactive policy responses limits strategic coherence, resulting in parallel approaches that fail to adequately address risks showcased by YPS policy and programming in digital environments (UN, 2018).

Youth Perceptions of Institutional Actors

When institutions, both national and international, fall short in delivering inclusive and transparent digital governance, young people's perception of the legitimacy of these actors is negatively affected (Portillo et al., 2024). Moreover, experiences of tokenistic participation, where youth voices are consulted but not reflected in outcomes, reduce willingness to engage and undermine confidence in formal political processes (UN Youth Envoy, 2020). For these reasons, young people increasingly turn away from formal institutional channels and engage in alternative, non-institutionalised forms of political participation, including transnational social movements and digitally mediated activism that operate beyond national borders (Marien, Hooghe, & Quintelier, 2010). Addressing these perceptions requires institutionalising youth participation with real decision-making power, in line with the participation pillar of the YPS agenda.

Education and Digital Civic Resilience

Accelerating YPS implementation requires integrating critical digital literacy into youth peacebuilding strategies. Evidence shows that education combining media literacy with civic learning strengthens young people's capacity to engage constructively in democratic processes and resist manipulation (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Youth-led organisations play a key role in contextualising education to local risks, translating abstract digital threats into relevant civic challenges and supporting informed participation in digitally mediated public spaces (Zimmermann & Pirker, 2025).

Partnerships and Multi-Stakeholder Models

Cyber peacebuilding highlights the need for multi-stakeholder collaboration involving youth, media, educators, technologists, and local actors. Research shows that cross-sector partnerships strengthen trust in public communication by combining technical expertise with social legitimacy (Schirch, 2020; Wara, 2025). As mentioned in this paper, youth-driven digital fact-checking networks and peer-to-peer monitoring initiatives operate as informal early-warning mechanisms by identifying emerging disinformation trends before they escalate. When institutionalised, these mechanisms will enable youth to contribute with up-to-date local knowledge while benefiting from institutional and technical support, enhancing the legitimacy of their actions and their resilience within the peacebuilding ecosystem.

Youth-Inclusive Digital Governance

Institutionalising youth participation in digital policy, cybersecurity strategies, and platform accountability frameworks is essential for aligning YPS policies with contemporary security realities. Excluding youth from digital governance undermines both policy legitimacy and effectiveness, given their central exposure to online harms. Moreover, regulatory instruments such as the EU Digital Services Act and related transparency and risk-mitigation obligations offer entry points for youth inclusion in content moderation and platform accountability processes. However, meaningful participation requires formal mechanisms that go beyond consultation to ensure youth have shared decision-making power in digital policy outcomes (Daniele et al., 2025a).

Sustainable Financing and Capacity Building

Sustained progress depends on long-term investment in youth-led cyber peace initiatives, such as multi-year funding for youth-run digital literacy programmes, community-based fact-checking networks, youth-designed early-warning and monitoring tools, and sustained youth representation in digital governance and platform accountability processes. Short-term project funding limits continuity, innovation, and institutional engagement, reducing the preventive potential of youth action (UNFPA, 2023). Dedicated financing for youth-led research, digital tools, and organisational capacity strengthens resilience and enables participation in regional and global tech governance forums. Supporting youth representation in these spaces enhances accountability and ensures that digital peacebuilding strategies reflect the experiences of those most affected by digital harm.

Conclusion: Reclaiming Digital Space as a Site of Youth Peacebuilding

This paper has demonstrated that digital spaces are no longer peripheral to YPS efforts but constitute central arenas where participation, trust, identity formation, and conflict dynamics increasingly unfold. Between 2015 and 2025, the rapid digitalisation of civic and political life has fundamentally reshaped how young people engage with peace and security, while also exposing them to new and intersecting risks. When these digital realities are insufficiently addressed, the core objectives of the YPS agenda are directly undermined.

By positioning cyber peacebuilding as an integrative framework, this paper has argued that digital harms should be understood not merely as technical challenges but as manifestations of deeper social and political tensions that require inclusive, preventive, and human-centred responses. Cyber peacebuilding aligns closely with the normative foundations of the YPS agenda and provides concrete pathways for operationalising youth leadership in digital environments, from education and partnerships to governance and financing. Importantly, the analysis shows that young people are already acting as digital peacebuilders, yet their efforts remain constrained by fragmented governance, reactive policy responses, and limited institutional recognition.

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