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Technology, Peacebuilding and Transitional Justice: A Theoretical Framework for Digital Tools in Documentation, Dialogue and Reconciliation After Violent Conflict

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ABSTRACT

Societies emerging from violent conflict now face that past with tools that earlier transitions did not have. Smartphones record atrocities as they happen, civil-society groups build digital archives, courts weigh user-generated evidence, peace processes use online consultations and AI-assisted analysis, and reintegration programmes keep digital records of former fighters. This theoretical paper builds a framework for judging what these tools can and cannot do for transitional justice and peacebuilding. It draws on four bodies of work: transitional justice and international criminal justice, the emerging field of digital peacebuilding, the epistemology of synthetic media, and the critical data studies of humanitarianism. From these it separates three functions that the literature often treats as one. Documentation establishes what happened. Dialogue lets divided groups communicate. Reconciliation changes the relationships between them. The paper argues that digital tools greatly strengthen documentation, help dialogue only under specific conditions, and cannot by themselves produce reconciliation, which remains a slow, relational and largely offline process. It also identifies two new vulnerabilities: the erosion of evidentiary trust by synthetic media, and the exposure of victims through the data collected about them. The paper derives seven propositions and anchors them in the reintegration of former Boko Haram associates in North-East Nigeria. It closes with implications for transitional-justice institutions, peace-process designers, donors and researchers. It argues that the authority of digital evidence has become institutional, so that in an age of synthetic media trust attaches not to the image but to the institution that can vouch for it, which threatens to widen the gap between conflicts that attract verification capacity and those that do not. It further argues that the legitimacy of digital transitional justice depends on how it treats those it documents, so that victims' data must be governed with their participation and protected against exposure, or the record built in their name becomes another source of harm.

Keywords: transitional justice; digital peacebuilding; documentation; open-source evidence; deepfakes

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1. INTRODUCTION

Every transition from violent conflict must decide what to do with the past. It must determine what happened, who was responsible, how victims will be acknowledged and repaired, and how people who harmed each other will live together again. For most of the history of transitional justice these questions were pursued through institutions whose evidence was scarce and slow to gather: trials that depended on witnesses and captured documents, truth commissions that collected testimony years after the events, and community processes that relied on memory. That scarcity has ended. Violence is now filmed by the people who suffer it, by bystanders and often by the perpetrators themselves. Records travel across platforms within minutes. Civil-society organisations preserve, verify and catalogue them. Courts have begun to consider them, and peace processes have begun to use digital platforms and artificial intelligence (AI) to consult publics and analyse positions (D'Alessandra, 2024; Hirblinger et al., 2024; White, 2024).

The literature has responded in two registers. One is enthusiastic, treating digital evidence and digital participation as ways to make justice faster, more inclusive and harder to deny. The other is critical. It warns that the turn to data imports the biases of its sources, privileges what can be measured over what matters, and exposes vulnerable people to new risks (Hirblinger, 2024; Iazzolino & Dhungana, 2025). Both registers capture something real. Neither, however, distinguishes clearly between the different things that transitional justice and peacebuilding are trying to do. As a result, claims about what technology contributes are often too broad in both directions.

This paper offers a framework built on that distinction. It separates three functions. Documentation establishes an authoritative account of what happened. Dialogue enables divided groups to communicate about the past and the future. Reconciliation transforms the relationships between those groups. The central argument is that digital tools strengthen these functions very unequally. They have transformed documentation, though they have also created new vulnerabilities there. They can support dialogue, but only when deliberately designed for conflict-affected settings. They cannot in themselves produce reconciliation, which is relational, embodied and slow, and which depends on what people do together over time rather than on what they know.

The paper is theoretical. It integrates recent scholarship on transitional justice and international criminal evidence (D'Alessandra, 2024; Kovras, 2023; McDermott et al., 2026; White, 2024), on digital peacebuilding (Hirblinger, 2024; Hirblinger et al., 2023, 2024; Wählisch & Kufus, 2025), on the epistemology of synthetic media (Habgood-Coote, 2023; Pierini, 2023), on humanitarian data (Iazzolino & Dhungana, 2025), and on reconciliation practice (Bigabo, 2025; Glucksam, 2025; Niyitunga, 2024). Its anchoring case is the effort to reintegrate former Boko Haram associates in North-East Nigeria (Atom, 2026; Ujene & Busari, 2026). The analysis moves from the state of the debate to the three functions themselves, then to the two new vulnerabilities the digital turn introduces, the erosion of evidentiary trust and the exposure of victims through their own data, before setting out a series of propositions, applying the framework to Nigeria, and drawing out its implications.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Technology in Transitional Justice and Peacebuilding: The State of the Debate

Technology has always shaped what transitional justice could know. Kovras (2023) shows that forensic science, from DNA identification to the exhumation of mass graves, did not simply serve existing transitional-justice goals. It changed them. It made the search for the missing and the identification of remains central to how societies dealt with the past, and it shifted authority towards the experts who could produce scientific truth. This insight matters for the digital moment. New technologies of justice do not only answer old questions more efficiently. They change which questions are asked, who is authorised to answer them, and what counts as an adequate answer.

The documentation revolution is the most visible change. D'Alessandra (2024) describes a decade in which civil-society organisations moved from supporting roles to becoming major producers of evidence for international criminal justice. They collect, preserve and analyse material on a scale and at a speed that official investigators rarely match. White (2024) examines the growing importance of

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user-generated, open-source evidence in international criminal investigations. She argues that its potential is limited less by the volume of material than by institutional arrangements for collecting, preserving and authenticating it, and she proposes a standing investigative mechanism to address the gap. McDermott et al. (2026) interviewed judges of the International Criminal Court and found that, despite the volume of user-generated material in circulation, few trials have relied on it heavily. The judges also expressed uncertainty about how courts will handle evidence in an age of AI. The revolution in supply has therefore not yet become a revolution in judicial use.

A parallel literature on digital peacebuilding has developed. Hirblinger et al. (2023) propose a framework for critical-reflexive engagement with digital technologies in peacebuilding. They argue that technologies are neither neutral instruments nor determinants of outcomes, and that practitioners and researchers must examine how digital tools reshape the practices and power relations of peacebuilding itself. A subsequent forum brought together scholars and practitioners to reflect on the role of digital technology in peace processes beyond the hype around data (Hirblinger et al., 2024). Its contributors emphasised uncertainty: peace processes are fluid and political, and the promise that more data will produce better agreements misreads what mediation involves. Hirblinger (2024) extends this into a research agenda for what he calls post-digital peacebuilding. In that condition the digital is no longer a separate domain but is woven into conflict and peace alike, and the data produced often do not add up to the picture they appear to offer.

AI has now entered this field directly. Wählisch and Kufus (2025) propose a context-sensitive taxonomy of AI-assisted digital deliberation tools for peace dialogues. They argue that tools must be selected and adapted to the specific conflict environment rather than applied as generic solutions. Rojas Corral et al. (2026) analyse the use of AI on judicial archives in a Chilean human-rights case, showing how computational methods can make large historical archives of transitional justice searchable and analysable. Critical scholarship on humanitarian data adds a necessary caution. Iazzolino and Dhungana (2025) examine the data work behind the datasets used by humanitarian actors in large-scale crises. They show that what is known about human suffering depends on how the data are created and curated, and that this curation embeds choices about whose suffering counts and how it is represented.

The reconciliation literature, by contrast, has engaged little with technology. That is partly because reconciliation is hard to digitise. Glucksam (2025), drawing on practitioners, shows that reconciliation is understood in many ways: as coexistence, as restored trust, as forgiveness, as structural change. Practitioners hold these conceptions in tension rather than settling on one. Bigabo (2025) studies reconciliation villages in post-genocide Rwanda, where former genocide prisoners and survivors live side by side, and finds that acceptance grows through shared action and daily coexistence. Niyitunga (2024) examines the factors that shape whether truth and reconciliation commissions in Africa contribute to peacebuilding and state-building, drawing on the South African experience. None of these accounts makes technology central, and the framework developed here suggests that this absence is not an oversight but reflects something real about what reconciliation is.

2.2 Three Functions: Documentation, Dialogue and Reconciliation

The framework begins from the observation that transitional justice and peacebuilding pursue several distinct functions. Each function rests on a different kind of good, and technology relates to each differently.

Documentation

Documentation is the establishment of an authoritative account of what happened: who did what to whom, when, where and under whose command. It serves prosecution, truth-telling, reparation and memory. Its good is epistemic. A documented past is one that can no longer plausibly be denied. Digital technology has transformed documentation in three ways. It has multiplied the sources of evidence, since violence is now recorded by many actors rather than reconstructed afterwards from a few (White, 2024). It has transformed the capacity to verify, since geolocation, chronolocation, metadata analysis and cross-referencing allow open-source investigators to establish where and when material was produced (D'Alessandra, 2024). And it has transformed the analysis of large archives, since computational tools allow investigators and historians to search material

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that would previously have taken years to read (Rojas Corral et al., 2026).

Documentation is also the function most exposed to the biases of its sources. Broache et al. (2025) show that conflict-event data systematically undercount civilian victims of state forces, because the reporting sources on which datasets rely are more likely to record violence by non-state actors. The same logic applies to digital documentation. What is recorded depends on who has phones, connectivity and the safety to record. Violence in remote areas, against people without devices, or by actors able to control communications will be underrepresented. Digital abundance can therefore coexist with systematic silence, and the silence may fall exactly where accountability matters most.

Dialogue

Dialogue is communication between groups divided by violence, about the past, about grievances and about the terms of a shared future. Its good is communicative. It allows each side to hear the other, to have its own experience acknowledged, and to take part in shaping what comes next. Digital tools offer real advantages here. They can include people who cannot travel to a negotiation venue, such as displaced people, diasporas, women and young people often excluded from formal processes. They can gather views at a scale no series of meetings could match. And with AI they can summarise and cluster large volumes of input so that mediators can see the range of positions (Wählisch & Kufus, 2025).

These advantages are conditional. Online platforms reproduce offline inequalities of access, literacy and safety. They can be captured by organised groups or flooded by manipulation. They can also expose participants to surveillance by parties who may later retaliate. The digital information environment is itself a site of conflict, where armed groups recruit and propagandise (Osisanwo, 2025). Dialogue tools therefore operate in the same space as the forces they are meant to counter. AI summarisation adds a further risk. It can flatten minority positions, smooth over the intensity of grievances, and present a false consensus to mediators who must work with the real one. Hirblinger et al. (2024) caution that peace processes are fundamentally political and uncertain. A tool that makes the range of views legible is valuable, but it does not resolve the political question of which views will shape the agreement.

Reconciliation

Reconciliation is the transformation of relationships between groups that harmed each other, from enmity towards coexistence, trust or, in the fullest accounts, mutual recognition. Its good is relational. It lives in how people treat each other, whether they trade, intermarry, share schools and markets, and whether they can imagine a common future. The reconciliation literature emphasises that this transformation is slow, contested and grounded in practice (Glucksam, 2025). In the Rwandan reconciliation villages, acceptance grew through working, living and acting together over years (Bigabo, 2025). In Nigeria's North-East, reintegration depends on rebuilding social bonds between returnees and the communities that suffered the violence (Ujene & Busari, 2026).

The framework holds that digital tools cannot produce this transformation, because reconciliation is not chiefly a matter of information or communication. Documentation can establish facts that make denial impossible, and that is necessary. Dialogue can create channels through which grievances are heard, and that helps. But relationships change through repeated interaction, through shared material stakes, and through experiences of trust honoured over time. A platform can support these things, for example by connecting reconciliation initiatives or recording their progress. It cannot replace them, and treating digital engagement as a substitute for embodied reconciliation risks mistaking activity for transformation.

2.3 The Evidentiary Turn and Its Vulnerabilities

The transformation of documentation has created a new vulnerability: the erosion of trust in evidence itself. The concern arises from synthetic media, the ability of generative AI to produce realistic images, video and audio of events that never happened. Two distinct threats follow. The first is fabrication: false material may be introduced into the record to implicate the innocent or to manufacture atrocities. The second, often called the liar's dividend, is denial: genuine material may be dismissed as fake. Perpetrators may claim that authentic evidence is synthetic, and in an environment where fakes are known to exist, that claim gains a plausibility it would not otherwise have.

Philosophical work on synthetic media helps clarify the stakes. Habgood-Coote (2023) challenges the claim that deepfakes will bring an epistemic apocalypse in which recordings lose all evidential

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value. He argues that the trust placed in recordings always depended on social practices of verification and testimony, and that the problem is better understood as a challenge to those practices than as a collapse of visual evidence as such. Pierini (2023) makes a related argument from the theory of depiction. He holds that the significance of deepfakes lies partly in their shifting of recordings from evidence towards communication, so that a video becomes less a trace of an event and more a claim about it.

These arguments have a direct implication for transitional justice. If the evidential value of digital material rests on practices of verification rather than on the material itself, then the institutions that perform verification become central. White's (2024) proposal for a standing investigative mechanism, D'Alessandra's (2024) account of professionalised civil-society documentation, and the ICC judges' concern about evidence in the age of AI (McDermott et al., 2026) all point in the same direction. Trust in documentation is shifting from the artefact to the chain of custody, from the image to the institution that can vouch for when, where and by whom it was produced. Documentation remains digital, but its authority becomes institutional.

This shift has distributional consequences. Well-resourced investigators can maintain chains of custody, apply verification methods and present material in forms courts will accept. Victims and local organisations in poorer conflict settings often cannot. The evidentiary turn may therefore privilege conflicts that attract international investigative capacity over those that do not. It may also give perpetrators in neglected conflicts more room to deny. Combined with the statist bias in event data (Broache et al., 2025), the risk is that the accountability gap widens precisely in the settings where documentation is hardest and the liar's dividend easiest to collect.

2.4 Victims, Data and Harm

The second vulnerability concerns those whose experiences are documented. Digital documentation records not only events but people: the faces of victims and witnesses, their locations, their testimony and sometimes their identities. This material can be used to pursue accountability. It can also be used against them. Survivors filmed in the aftermath of violence may be identified by those who harmed them. Witnesses whose testimony is digitised may be exposed if archives are breached, subpoenaed or seized by a later government. Footage of violence circulated on social media may retraumatise victims and their families, who did not consent to its circulation and cannot control its afterlife.

Iazzolino and Dhungana's (2025) analysis of humanitarian data work provides a framework for these concerns. Data about suffering are never simply collected. They are produced through decisions about categories, inclusion and representation, and those decisions reflect the priorities of the organisations that make them rather than those of the people represented. Transitional-justice documentation shares this structure. The categories into which victims are sorted, the experiences that count as violations, and the forms in which testimony is preserved all shape whose experience enters the record and how. Victims who are documented without meaningful participation in these decisions become objects of the record rather than subjects of justice.

The framework therefore treats victim data governance as a core element of digital transitional justice, not an afterthought. Three principles follow from the literature. The first is purpose limitation: data collected for accountability should not be repurposed for other ends, such as security screening or surveillance, without consent. The second is survivor participation: victims should have a say in how their experiences are categorised, preserved and shared. The third is protection against exposure: archives should be designed on the assumption that they may later fall into hostile hands. These principles are demanding, and they can conflict with the needs of prosecution, which favours comprehensive collection and long retention. The tension is real and cannot be resolved by technology. It must be governed.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Proposition 1. Digital technology strengthens documentation more than any other function of transitional justice, by multiplying sources, enabling verification and allowing large archives to be analysed. However, the evidentiary value of digital documentation depends on institutional capacity to preserve and authenticate it, not on its volume (D'Alessandra, 2024; McDermott et al., 2026; White, 2024).

Proposition 2. Digital documentation reproduces the biases of its sources. Violence against people

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without devices, in remote areas or by actors who control communications will be systematically underrepresented, so digital abundance may coexist with silence where accountability matters most (Broache et al., 2025).

Proposition 3. Synthetic media shifts the authority of digital evidence from the artefact to the institution that vouches for it. The liar's dividend will be largest in conflicts that lack strong verification institutions, so the evidentiary turn may widen accountability gaps between well-resourced and neglected conflicts (Habgood-Coote, 2023; Pierini, 2023).

Proposition 4. Digital dialogue tools broaden inclusion only when they are designed for the specific conflict environment, protect participants from surveillance and resist manipulation. Generic platforms will reproduce offline exclusions and may expose participants to retaliation (Hirblinger et al., 2024; Wählisch & Kufus, 2025).

Proposition 5. AI-assisted analysis of dialogue input makes the range of views legible to mediators, but it risks flattening minority positions and presenting false consensus. Its value depends on human interpretation that restores the intensity and distribution of grievances (Hirblinger, 2024; Wählisch & Kufus, 2025).

Proposition 6. Reconciliation cannot be produced by digital tools, because it is a relational transformation achieved through repeated interaction and shared stakes over time. Digital engagement that substitutes for embodied reconciliation will produce activity without transformation (Bigabo, 2025; Glucksam, 2025; Ujene & Busari, 2026).

Proposition 7. The legitimacy of digital transitional justice depends on victim data governance. Documentation that exposes, retraumatises or repurposes victims' data without their participation will undermine the trust on which both justice and reconciliation depend (Iazzolino & Dhungana, 2025).

The propositions are stated as conditional claims for comparative research and as design principles for institutions that use digital tools in transitions from violent conflict.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Nigeria's North-East as an Anchoring Case

The conflict in North-East Nigeria offers an instructive setting for the framework. It is not a completed transition. Violence continues, and the conflict involves multiple armed groups, including Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province, which have competed for territory and for the loyalty of local populations (Stoddard, 2023). It sits within a wider landscape of insecurity that includes banditry and armed violence in the North-West (Ojewale, 2025). Yet transitional processes are already under way within the conflict: the surrender, rehabilitation and reintegration of former fighters and associates, and the return of displaced people to communities that experienced the violence.

The reintegration programme known as Operation Safe Corridor has been the most prominent of these processes. Ujene and Busari (2026) analyse rehabilitation and reintegration through the lens of transitional justice. They frame the central task as reconstituting the social bonds between returnees and the communities they rejoin. This is exactly the relational function the framework identifies as beyond the reach of technology. Atom (2026) studies the security actors who work within the programme and documents cognitive dissonance, moral injury-related distress and psychological strain among those asked to rehabilitate people associated with violence they may have fought against. Both studies show that reintegration is a human and social process whose success depends on acceptance, trust and the management of moral conflict.

The framework clarifies where digital tools can and cannot help in this setting. Documentation is a genuine need. The violence in the North-East has produced large numbers of victims whose experiences are poorly recorded. Accountability, reparation and the identification of the missing all depend on better documentation. Digital tools could strengthen it substantially: mobile testimony collection, geolocated records of attacks, digitised registers of the displaced and the missing. But the biases identified in Proposition 2 apply strongly. Many of the worst-affected communities are rural, poorly connected and inaccessible. Violence by every party, including state forces, is subject to the reporting biases Broache et al. (2025) identify. A digital documentation effort that relied on what is easiest to record would reproduce the silences the conflict has already produced.

Victim data governance is acute in this setting. Reintegration programmes generate records of former fighters and associates. Humanitarian agencies hold records of displaced people. Security

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agencies hold records of suspects and detainees. If these data are poorly governed, the consequences can be grave: returnees may be exposed to reprisals, victims may be identified to the groups that targeted them, and records collected for humanitarian purposes may be repurposed for security screening without consent. Proposition 7 implies that the legitimacy of reintegration depends partly on governing these data in ways that communities and returnees can trust.

Dialogue is where the framework suggests caution. Communities and returnees need channels to communicate, and digital tools could support consultation with displaced and dispersed populations. Early-warning and peace-education initiatives already seek to connect monitoring with community response (Okonkwo & Akanji, 2025; Okonkwo & Okoi, 2026). But the region's information environment is contested. Armed groups use communication strategically for recruitment and intimidation (Osisanwo, 2025), and early-warning systems face persistent gaps in data and response (Palihapitiya et al., 2025). Digital dialogue tools that exposed participants or were captured by organised interests could do more harm than good. Their design would have to begin with participant protection rather than reach.

Reconciliation is where the framework is clearest. The reconstitution of social bonds that Ujene and Busari (2026) identify as the core of reintegration cannot be delivered by a platform. It depends on the kinds of shared practice that Bigabo (2025) documents in Rwanda: working together, living side by side, and accumulating experiences of trust. Technology may support such practice, for example by connecting local initiatives, recording their progress or channelling resources to them. But the work itself is local, relational and slow. A digital strategy that promised to accelerate it would misread the process it claimed to serve.

4.2 Implications

For transitional-justice institutions, the framework implies that investment in digital documentation must be matched by investment in verification and preservation. The authority of digital evidence now rests on the institutions that can vouch for it. Courts, commissions and investigative mechanisms therefore need the capacity to maintain chains of custody, authenticate material and resist claims that genuine evidence is fabricated (McDermott et al., 2026; White, 2024). They also need deliberate strategies to counter the biases of digital documentation, by seeking out violence that is least likely to be recorded and by treating digital silence as a question rather than an absence (Broache et al., 2025).

For peace-process designers and mediators, digital dialogue tools should be chosen for the specific conflict environment and designed around participant protection (Wählisch & Kufus, 2025). AI-assisted analysis should support human interpretation rather than replace it, and mediators should actively look for the minority positions and intense grievances that summarisation may obscure (Hirblinger et al., 2024).

For victims and the organisations that represent them, the framework supports a claim to participation in the governance of documentation. Victims should not be only the subjects of digital records. They should have a voice in how their experiences are categorised, preserved, shared and protected (Iazzolino & Dhungana, 2025).

For donors and international partners, the framework cautions against treating digital tools as substitutes for the slow, relational work of reconciliation. Funding that favours measurable digital outputs, such as numbers of testimonies recorded or participants reached online, risks drawing resources away from the embodied processes through which relationships actually change (Glucksam, 2025; Hirblinger, 2024). In Nigeria, support for reintegration should strengthen community-level reconciliation, the psychological support needs of those who work within the programme (Atom, 2026), and the governance of the data such programmes generate.

For researchers, the propositions identify several questions that remain open. How do the biases of digital documentation vary across conflicts? Does the liar's dividend affect accountability outcomes in practice? Under what conditions do digital dialogue tools broaden inclusion rather than reproduce exclusion? And how do victims experience the documentation of their suffering? Answering these questions requires comparative work across conflicts that differ in connectivity, international attention and institutional capacity, and it requires methods that bring victims' perspectives to the centre (Hirblinger, 2024).

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Societies emerging from violent conflict now confront their past with tools that earlier transitions

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did not have, and both the enthusiasm and the anxiety those tools provoke are warranted. This paper has argued that their contribution can be judged only by separating the functions they are asked to serve. Documentation, which establishes what happened, has been transformed by digital technology, though it now faces new threats from synthetic media and from the biases of its own sources. Dialogue, which lets divided groups communicate, can be supported by digital tools, but only when they are designed for the conflict environment and protect those who use them. Reconciliation, which transforms relationships, cannot be produced by technology at all, because it is made through what people do together over time.

Two cross-cutting conclusions follow. The first is that the authority of digital evidence has become institutional: in an age of synthetic media, trust attaches not to the image but to the institution that can vouch for it. This makes verification capacity a central question of justice and threatens to widen the gap between conflicts that attract such capacity and those that do not. The second is that the legitimacy of digital transitional justice depends on how it treats those it documents. Victims' data must be governed with their participation and protected against exposure, or the record built in their name will become another source of harm.

In North-East Nigeria, where reintegration of former fighters proceeds alongside continuing violence, these conclusions point to a clear division of labour. Digital tools should be used to strengthen documentation, with deliberate attention to the communities least likely to be recorded and with strong protection for the data collected. They should be used cautiously for dialogue, with participant safety as the first design principle. And they should support, rather than claim to replace, the slow work through which returnees and the communities they rejoin learn to live together again. Technology can help societies know their past more fully. Coming to terms with that past remains a human undertaking.

6. CONTRIBUTION TO EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

The paper contributes a separation of the functions digital tools are asked to serve in transitions from violent conflict, documentation, dialogue and reconciliation, and shows that technology strengthens documentation greatly, helps dialogue only under specific conditions, and cannot by itself produce reconciliation, which remains a slow, relational and largely offline process.

It further identifies two new vulnerabilities, the erosion of evidentiary trust by synthetic media and the exposure of victims through the data collected about them, giving transitional-justice institutions, peace-process designers and donors a basis for using digital tools where they add value while governing the data they generate in the interest of those they document.

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