

Research Article

# Nonviolence Online: Reinterpreting Ahimsa as a Framework for Countering Digital Hate and Polarization

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## Abstract

Digital communication platforms have emerged as central spaces for political expression and civic engagement, yet they increasingly foster hate speech, polarization, and epistemic fragmentation through algorithmic amplification and attention-driven design. Existing scholarly responses have largely emphasized regulatory mechanisms, platform accountability, and technological interventions. However, comparatively less attention has been paid to the ethical foundations of individual agency and moral responsibility in digital publics — a normative gap that is significant, as the crisis of online polarization is not only structural but also ethical, rooted in everyday practices of speech, interaction, and recognition. To address this gap, the present article reinterprets Mahatma Gandhi’s concept of Ahimsa as an ethical–political framework for addressing digital hate, dehumanization, and polarization. Moving beyond a passive understanding of nonviolence, the study conceptualizes Ahimsa as an active practice of dialogic restraint, truth-seeking, and refusal of humiliation, and examines its relevance for contemporary digital citizenship within asymmetrical and algorithmically mediated environments. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative conceptual analysis combined with an integrative review of interdisciplinary literature, examining primary Gandhian texts alongside contemporary empirical research on counterspeech, symbolic violence, algorithmic polarization, and platform governance to enable a synthesis of classical political ethics with current digital communication scholarship. The analysis demonstrates that online hate speech, trolling, and misinformation operate as forms of symbolic violence that violate Gandhian principles of nonviolence in thought, speech, and action; reframed as digital nonviolence, Ahimsa emphasizes empathic counterspeech, ethical dissent, and dialogic responsibility as viable alternatives to censorship and retaliatory practices. The article concludes that while Gandhian ethics cannot alone address large-scale disinformation or structural power asymmetries, they provide a crucial normative foundation that must be integrated with platform governance reforms and regulatory accountability to strengthen democratic responsibility in digital spaces.

## Keywords

Ahimsa, Digital Hate, Algorithmic Polarization, Digital Citizenship

## 1. Introduction

The accelerating pace of digital polarization is a deep democracy crisis where algorithm systems are giving systematic

preference to outrage, visibility and emotional extremity through deliberation, contributing to the social fragmentation

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and erosion of epistemic faith [16, 22]. The digital platforms of today, which are motivated by the logics of attention-maximization, reward conflictual expression and moral absolutism, create conditions that encourage antagonism to circulate quicker than thought does. Whereas much of the existing research has focused on regulatory reforms, platform responsibility, and technological design as potential solutions, relatively little has yet been done on normative infrastructure that pre-empt individual ethical agency in digital publics. This omission is important in that the democratic decline in cyberspace is not only a structural issue but also an ethical issue and this is based on daily routines of talking, hearing and seeing.

The gap that has been fulfilled in this paper is to reclaim the concept of Ahimsa as Mahatma Gandhi understood the concept of Ahimsa to be an active process of ethical action or even a political technique of running the state rather than a passive approach to moral pacifism. Gandhi had a prophetic discussion on the modern technological civilization in *Hind swaraj*, where he had pointed that the system in which the human beings are treated as machines giving attention to speed, efficiency, and mechanization is in danger of eroding human dignity and moral responsibility [9]. His panic is acutely familiar with the alienated and hastened aggressiveness of the modern-day "attention economy" where immediacy ranks higher than reflection and moral caution.

Reframing Ahimsa as a guide to digital nonviolence, the presented study furthers the notion of Gandhian ethics as an anti-hate commodification counter-narrative. The paper uses primary texts by the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi and the current websites and concepts of digital ethics to show how Satyagraha (truth-force) and Samvad (dialogue) may serve as a practice of de-escalating an online conflict. It maintains that the combination of technocratic censorship and external regulation, rather than either as its sole means, is necessary to counter digital hate, and that this change in relationship between the self and the digital other is needed, which it sees as a change from adversarial tribalism to disciplined empathy and ethical responsibility.

The methodology chosen in this study would be a qualitative conceptual approach that interdisciplinary scholarship should be synthesized through an integrative review. Instead of the use of empirical surveys and experiments, it interprets primary Gandhian sources and current studies in the field of digital communication, governing platforms, and political actions on the internet. By using this approach, one can reconstruct Ahimsa as an ethical political ideal, as well as have the opportunity to apply it to the current issues of digital hate and polarization and amplification by an algorithm systematically. The critique attempts to reconcile classical ethics of the politics with the current digital realities with normative arguments and critical synthesis.

In its context, digital nonviolence can be defined as ethical practice of web-based interaction denying dehumanization, humiliation, and vengeful aggression and maintaining princi-

pled disagreement. Counterspeech refers to non-punitive replies of unwarranted expression, based on empathy, conversation and even ethical plea instead of prohibition or disgrace. Symbolic violence is perceived as violence that is committed using words and discourses that marginalize or delegitimize beings and groups without any physical force. Such explanations put Gandhian Ahimsa in the context of active model of responsible digital citizenship and not a passive philosophy of self-restraint.

## 2. Ahimsa as Ethical and Political Praxis: Gandhian Foundations

Ahimsa in the sense that Gandhi is practicing is not a withdrawal and quietish doctrine but a vice of challenging ethical and political activities that are rooted in Favor of truth, responsibility, and moral courage. Here, Ahimsa, according to Gandhi, which he identifies as the absence of violence, could not exist without Satya (Truth), the end which he equates as being nonviolence is the means, and once this is absent, the result would be mere expediency [9]. This connection causes Ahimsa to be a working process of conscience instead of a preventive approach. It involves readiness to suffer oneself, instead of making others suffer, and by fighting against injustice using what he termed as soul-force or love-force, instead of using force [9].

By taking Ahimsa as praxis, we can understand why it is separate and different to passivity, tolerance, or silence. Gandhi was clear that ahimsa is not nonviolence or absence of cowardice since Gandhi refused to oppose evil by violence [9]. Passivity is an unquestioning and retreating in the face of injustice; the other way is Gandhian nonviolence which demands to deal with injustices in terms of Satyagraha a combination of moral restraint and insistence. Tolerance, in its turn, can coexist with indifference, but it takes an active interest in the well-being and moral development of the oppressor as well as the victim of the oppression, Ahimsa. When silence facilitates humiliation or hatred, it is to Gandhi a commixture compliance in brutality and not chastisement.

Responsibility and self-scrutiny is also anticipated in this conception. Gandhi made it very clear on a number of occasions that Ahimsa does not just encompass the renunciation of physical violence but also the oppression of hatred, contempt, lies and humiliation in thought, speech and actions [9]. Non-violence can thereby emerge in all its complexity as a kind of ethic of relationality, it has to be able to tame emotions, speech and intention without dishonouring the personhood of the other in war. Ahimsa as it is here is a political approach as well as a moral ontology, i.e., the interdependence and value of every life, which offers practical means of struggle (non-cooperation, civil disobedience, etc.) that aims to change engagements and not to destroy the opponents [9]. Quite the contrary, a stern discipline, it makes ethical self-restraint dependent on confrontational, but non-hating, political action.

### 3. From Physical Violence to Digital Harm: Expanding the Scope of Ahimsa

Even though Ahimsa, discussed as the primary concept by Gandhi, covered corporeal violence in the colonial settings, its ethics building is persuasively applicable to the symbolic violence of digital space. Symbolic violence based on the Bourdieu concept, is based on the idea of language, discourse, and social norms to maintain the domination without the use of physical force [6, 7]. Online hate speech, trolling, and dehumanization are symbolic violence apparatuses that legitimize targeted groups, dehumanize, and establish unfavourable epistemological circumstances [23]. These discourses are not only offensive, but in a systematic way, they ostracize, silence, and psychologically traumatize their victims by refusing to recognize their validity and human status [19].

Misinformation is another type of digital violence to the extent to which it affects the truth-seeking abilities and develops affective polarization that may lead to physical violence [15]. When political actors use disinformation strategically, which causes fear and dehumanization of the opposing side, there is the emergence of stochastic terrorism indirect incitement whereby the violent language raises the likelihood of causing harm to the targeted groups [15]. These processes are further enhanced by the algorithmic amplification of outrage that can turn the digital platforms into the location where violence is normalized by repetition and virality [23].

The Gandhian Ahimsa with its broad understanding of the concept of violence, including as the expression of evil thoughts, hatred, and harsh words, has much in common with modern concepts of digital harm. In case the concept of Ahimsa is extended not merely to physical violence, but also to the brutalization's of the language and the aggressiveness of words and ideas, then dehumanization via the Internet, organized harassment and a distortion of the truth will be unquestionable acts of nonviolence [9]. This theoretical slip can be used to re-understand Ahimsa as a model of digital citizenship, the kind of citizenship that requires one to not only be responsible towards the things that they say but also towards the temporal, affective, and epistemic atmospheres that the digital actors produce in common.

### 4. Algorithmic Polarization and the Ethics of Amplification

Digital platforms run on the principle of the recommender system that incentivizes engagement measurements and systematically enhances emotionally provocative and ethically divisive content [2, 14]. It is not only this algorithmic architecture that mirrors existing divisions but also on the one hand builds them up further by using feedback loops, through which moral outrage creates perception, which subsequently rewards the expression of further outrage [2]. It has been shown that

users also develop to adapt their utterances to the outrage culture of their networks, which is enabled by the structure of the platform through social learning [2]. Most importantly, algorithmic bias creates distortive structures: as users receive prone ideologically agreeable content, the systems disrupt the informational commons of sharing information required to engage in the democratic discourse [11, 16].

The moral obligation behind such polarization is spread amongst various actors. Platforms have fiduciary responsibilities in the extent that their design decisions (including recommendation algorithm to interface affordances) influence the behaviour of users and the quality of their discourse [1, 11]. However, the concepts of responsibility cannot be fully outsourced to the corporation. Still, when algorithmically prompted, users are moral actors whose choices to promote divisive content are a source of toxic epistemic situations [2]. States, in their turn, have to solve the problem of how they can govern without empowering censorship and without disabling innovation, so the systems of regulation have to be based on encouraging transparency, auditability, and accountability other than on restrictions on the content [16].

This three-part responsibility model is hard on technological determinists to acknowledge that algorithms are mediators and not determinants. Although these computational systems generate conditions of polarization, the human agency (both only on the individual level and collectively) still can break these trends by addressing the problem of epistemic humility through intentional counter-practices, opposing partisan interaction, and algorithmic literacy [11]. Mitigation therefore needs to be effective and involve a concerted effort to all stakeholder groups, which should be based on empirical data on the interplay of design, behaviour, and regulation within digital ecosystems.

### 5. Reinterpreting Ahimsa for Digital Citizenship

To rethink Ahimsa on digital settings, it is necessary to think of it not as a passive tolerance but rather as a form of dialogic retainment, the active avoidance of the patterns of dehumanization through the critical attitude toward the opposing opinion. Digital citizenship based on Ahimsa involves the realization that online relationships although mediated are actually real relationships and dignity is something that cannot be invaded. This is translated into physical action: not amplifying hateful material, avoiding the temptation to mortify opponents and the development of what Gandhi described as truth-force or counter-speech that is an expression of attack on one's opponent without scorn [9].

The counter-speech is the paradigmatic use of the digital Ahimsa. The recent experimental data proves that the empathetic counter-speech that welcomes perspective-taking instead of shaming can help lessen the future speech that con-

veys hate and lessen the bystander assistance of toxic communications [10]. Most importantly, successful counter-speech implies the principles of Gandhism by criticizing the lie or the injury of the expression as opposed to the personalities of the speaker [4]. This difference between attacking ideas and attacking identity is a reflection of what Gandhi wanted to avoid doing which he insisted on doing: to engage the ethical activity with even the opponents of his ideology in a different way.

The concept of digital civility, in all its essence, should not be adopted as politeness, and instead, it is an approach to disagreement that is grounded in the scientific fidelity of knowledge and the dignity of the relationship [3]. Deliberation, empathy, and social awareness encourage uncivil discourse have been found to decrease uncivil discourse and do not hinder substantive dissent [4]. The interventions thereby make Ahimsa practical in that they lead to a state where the disagreement is not overwhelmed by symbolic violence or intentional humiliation as is the case of online behaviors which are empirically associated with both a higher level of aggression and a lower occurrence of prosocial interaction [17].

This redefining escapes prescriptive moralism because online spaces are sincere social spaces where democratic deliberation takes place, the actors in the online space are morally obligated to create the conditions that encourage truth-seeking and not a tribal warfare [3].

## 6. Applied Nonviolence: Ethical Responses to Online Hate

An empirical study of counter-speech intervention proves the Ahimsa-based therapies to be substantially different in contrast with censorship and retaliation. In one of the field tests conducted on Twitter, researchers discovered that messages where empathy was employed to address the counter-speech, that is, messages asking the perpetrators to imagine the dignity and experience of the targeted groups, minimized the expression of hate speech later without escalation to the defensive [12]. This is the operationalization of the Gandhian theories as it tries to eliminate the harmfulness of the statements, without eliminating the humanness of the speakers, thus establishing the conditions of the moral reflections, as opposed to punishment.

The experiments that have been conducted to evaluate different intervention models unveil the particularities of a non-violent approach to the digital interaction. Celadin compared seven nudges that were developed to encourage civil discourse and discovered that the interventions that encouraged empathy and deliberation were more effective than ones that involved social norm appeals [4]. Notably, these interventions never repressed some substantive difference but they deflected the expression off a dehumanizing rhetoric. This is unlike the concept of punitive content moderation that can encourage malicious elements to unmonitored networks and leave the attitudes behind to go unexamined [4].

The other example of applied Ahimsa is Restorative justice structures. Instead of deleting posts and blocking individuals, restorative methods focus on healing damages to the relationship by using an invent mediator to discuss the issue with the affected parties [21]. These interventions recognize that offenders are typically able to feel remorse and reform, and victims are better helped in such processes that address their demand other than the retributive punishment [13, 21]. This reflects the stance taken by Gandhi to distinguish the individual on the other hand to the action, the evil word as a chance to change and not as a sin.

Nonviolence applied is also portrayed in the counter-speech programs in education. It was significant that interventions that encouraged digital intergroup contact conducted on the basis of which adolescents communicated with outgroup avatars with the help of whom they received experience of victimization posed a feeling of higher intention to counter hate speech by means of the implementation of empathy [5]. According to these findings, Ahimsa-informed responses do not perform well by put to silence the opposition but they instil the affective and cognitive ability required to disagree ethically.

## 7. Limitations and Critiques of Gandhian Ethics in Digital Spaces

While Ahimsa manages to offer a more compelling normative framework of digital interaction, its implementation faces serious constraints of structure. To begin with, the issue of scalability exists: the individual-scale counter-speech interventions, although proven to be empirically effective at the reduction of the number of particular instances of hate [12], are unsuitable to address the insider disinformation spread on an industrial scale, utilizing automation, coordinated inauthentic behaviour, and algorithmic amplification [8]. Organised disinformation is based on networked infrastructure that is specifically designed to flood the counter-narratives on an organic level, making any personal ethical response inadequate without intervention at a system level.

Second, an unequal distribution of power is a fact that questions the mutual assumptions of Ahimsa. Nonviolence by Gandhi assumed the existence of opponents who could be subjected to moral suasion through the use of liberal democratic values and the global scrutiny. The modern digital environments, though, involve participants who intentionally leverage anonymity, are not accountable to jurisdiction, or cognizant of the possibility to engage in dialogues [20]. According to the critics, nonviolence faces the crippling concessions in case of any opponent who is deficient of moral conscience or who poses totalitarian traits which are impervious to appeals of morality [18].

Third, the various effects of disinformation reveal how personalistic ethical systems fail to be sufficient to mitigate structural injuries. They are the most vulnerable groups of people

subjected to coordinated harassment and identity-based disinformation, which means that the need to be mindful of Ahimsa when facing aggressors puts an unrealistic psychological and safety demand on the former [8]. The given asymmetry discloses that Ahimsa needs to be strengthened by the strong regulatory instruments of platform responsibility, algorithmic disclosure, and structural disparities [20].

Therefore, although Ahimsa provides the much-needed concepts of digital citizenship, the adequate reduction of harm on the internet provides a necessity of including these concepts in legal practice, platform governance transformations, and controlled regulation of the state that cannot be employed by individual ethics only.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper has presented the case that through Ahimsa, which is better understood as the active ethical practice other than the passive withdrawal, Gandhi provided a normative ideal of addressing the problem of digital hate and digital polarization. Focusing on redefining online hostility as symbolic violence, the analysis shows that dehumanization, algorithm amplification, and coordinated disinformation are all forms of violation of nonviolence demands in epistemics and relationships. Redefining Ahimsa as digital citizenship presupposes dialogic restraint, empathic counter-speech, and the rejection of the humiliating practices, which are empirically demonstrated and can minimise hate speech without compromising on the democratic contestation.

More importantly, Ahimsa is a normative guide and not a technical one. It is powerless to solve the algorithmic design failures, cannot unilaterally oppose industrial-scale disinformation and has serious engine constraints with actors outside the moral suasion. The effectiveness of the framework relies on the incorporation with effective platform governance, regulatory responsibility and structural remedies to power imbalances that personal ethics can never prevent. Gandhian nonviolence is just a complement and not a replacement of systemic reform.

The way forward in future research must take three directions. To begin with, ethical scholarship in digital areas has to build conceptual frameworks that bridge classical politics and computational realities that studies the role of virtue ethics, care ethics, and deliberative theory to inform algorithmic governance. Second, the research of platform governance must examine institutional designs that implement the principles of nonviolence, even considering clergy systems based on transparency, systems based on restorative justice, and systems based on participatory moderation, without allowing censorship. Third, the studies in the research on political education should evaluate the pedagogical interventions that foster digital Ahimsa: critical media literacy, empathetic and epistemic humility as civic skills. Finally, any effort to counter cyber hate efforts as a necessary condition cannot be achieved by giving up the Gandhian ethics but instead putting them in the

context of multidimensional ecosystems in which the virtue of individuals, the acts of collectively and the justice of structure will not be conflicting but mutually reinforcing.

## Author Contributions

**Daksh:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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