

Report from Panel Discussion on Intercultural Dialogue
Digital Storytelling – The Intersection of Culture, Peace, and Security

Gothenburg, October 17th, 2024



Swedish Dialogue Institute
for the Middle East and North Africa

Summary

On October 17th, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa hosted a panel discussion titled “Digital Storytelling – The Intersection of Culture, Peace, and Security” in Gothenburg, Sweden. This event was part of the “[Celebrating Our Diversity Forum](#)”, an annual gathering organized by the Swedish chapter of the Anna Lindh Foundation in collaboration with The National Museums of World Culture, Sweden. Now in its sixth edition, the forum, held from October 16th to 18th, focused on the theme “Living Together” and brought together intercultural dialogue practitioners dedicated to fostering inclusive, intercultural, and sustainable cities in the Euro-Med region.

The panel discussion explored the transformative role of digital storytelling in promoting intercultural dialogue and amplifying voices for peace. It explored how digital platforms such as social media, filmmaking, and podcasts can enhance cross-regional dialogue. The session aimed to engage intercultural dialogue practitioners and strengthen intercultural understanding in the digital age in the Euro-Med region.

The panel was moderated by the Dialogue Institute’s Deputy Director, Martina Berglund, and featured three distinguished practitioners, each with unique expertise and perspectives:

- **Omar Alshogre**, *Director of Detainee Affairs at the Syrian Emergency Task Force, known for his advocacy on behalf of Syrian political prisoners.*
- **Edgar Mannheimer**, *host of the Kalam Podcast, which delves into the history, culture, and politics of the Middle East, drawing on his experience as a journalist.*
- **Rasha Shaban**, *Projects Manager at the National Museums of World Culture in Sweden and the founder of the “Mind the Gap” initiative, which uses storytelling to foster inclusion and equality.*

Main takeaways from the panel

The panel concluded by emphasizing strategies to enhance digital storytelling's impact, such as focusing on universal themes like love, resilience, and community to foster broad resonance. They highlighted the importance of investing in arts and culture to evoke empathy and understanding across divides, promoting collaboration among storytellers and cultural practitioners from the EU-MENA region to amplify marginalized voices, and leveraging diverse platforms to reach varied audiences and navigate algorithmic constraints effectively.

Detailed highlights from the Panel

The session included **individual storytelling** by each panelist, complemented by thought-provoking questions. These questions provided a **discussion** that explored themes such as the role of digital storytelling in cross-regional dialogue, **key challenges in digital storytelling** and **strategies for creating inclusive and empathetic digital narratives**. This was followed by an interactive Q&A segment that provided attendees with the opportunity to engage deeply with the topics discussed.



Figure 1 Rasha Shaban speaking

Individual storytelling - Personal Stories

The panel began with each speaker sharing a transformative personal story that shaped their perspective.

Omar Alshogre recounted his journey of integration into Swedish society after enduring three years of imprisonment and torture in Saydnaya prison in Syria. He shared a powerful story about a Swedish family who befriended him during his early days in Sweden. While Omar was unable to speak the local languages, English and Swedish, at the time, the family used a digital application for interpretation to bridge the linguistic gap. This innovative solution allowed for meaningful conversations that highlighted Omar's resilience and the family's empathy. Their bond illustrated the importance of human connection, cross-cultural understanding, and the transformative role of digital tools in overcoming barriers and fostering integration.

Edgar Mannheimer reflected on his experience as an intern at an Egyptian newspaper during the country's first democratic election in 2012, a time marked by hope and tension following the Arab uprisings. He recounted a vivid memory of listening to the 2012 election results on the radio while riding in a taxi across Cairo. The driver, deeply engaged with the unfolding events, paused to pray in response to the outcome of the final results, creating a shared moment of reflection and connection that transcended their differing political views. This experience underscored how everyday interactions, even amidst political uncertainty, can foster understanding, human connection, and dialogue across divides.

Rasha Shaban shared her experience participating in Gothenburg's 400-year celebration, where her story was featured as part of an exhibition showcasing the city's diversity. As an Alexandrian who had lived in Sweden for nearly a decade, she described how storytelling became a powerful tool for navigating her dual identity. Her photo and story, displayed prominently in public spaces, symbolized her connection to both Alexandria and Gothenburg. She highlighted how storytelling initiatives, like her "[Mind the Gap](#)" program, have been instrumental in bridging societal divides, fostering inclusion, and creating meaningful dialogue between diverse communities in Sweden and the MENA region.

Thematic Discussions

After sharing personal stories by the panelists, they engaged in a discussion about the role of digital storytelling in cross-regional dialogue, the contributions of artists and cultural leaders to mutual understanding, the influence of podcasts and social media on public opinion. Key themes during the discussion included:

Digital Storytelling and Empathy: Rasha discussed how storytelling humanizes complex issues, making them relatable to wider audiences. Through her initiative, "Mind the Gap," she has used digital media to connect communities in Europe and the MENA region, demonstrating how personal narratives can foster mutual understanding.

Relatability and Hope: Omar emphasized the importance of making stories relatable to audiences while maintaining a sense of hope. He showcased the concept of "University of Whispers", a metaphor for communication among prisoners and lessons he learned during his time in prison from shared experiences in the harshest circumstances. It encapsulates the art of communicating and building a community with shared goals, which he now applies in his advocacy work.

Cultural Narratives as Bridges: Edgar highlighted the role of cultural elements, such as music and poetry, in making complex political and historical issues more accessible. He argued that cultural storytelling can cut across political polarization and create shared emotional experiences.



Figure 2 Edgar Mannheimer speaking

Key Challenges in Digital Storytelling

During the discussion, the panelists shared key challenges in digital storytelling and different strategies to mitigate them.

Algorithmic Barriers: The discussions underscored the challenges posed by social media algorithms, which often limit the reach of diverse perspectives and voices. Edgar highlighted the need for storytellers to navigate these constraints creatively.

Sustaining Engagement: The panelists acknowledged the difficulty of maintaining global attention on prolonged crises, such as the conflicts in Syria, Gaza and Ukraine. Omar stressed the importance of reframing stories to make them continuously relevant and relatable to current audiences.

Polarization in Media: The discussion touched on the growing isolation within media bubbles, where audiences tend to consume content that reinforces existing beliefs. This polarization makes it harder to engage with opposing perspectives.

Recommendations for cultural storytellers

The panel concluded by proposing several strategies to enhance the impact of digital storytelling:

Localizing Universal Themes: Focus on themes like love, resilience, and community to create stories that resonate universally.

Investing in Arts and Culture: Art, music, and film can evoke empathy and foster understanding across cultural and political divides.

Promoting Collaboration: Encourage partnerships between storytellers and cultural practitioners across the Euro-Med region to amplify marginalized voices and create more impactful narratives.

Leveraging Diverse Platforms: Use a mix of digital and in-person storytelling methods to reach different audiences and overcome the limitations of algorithms.



Figure 3 Group picture with the panelists, organizers, and several attendees