DIGITAL DIPLOMACY – OPPORTUNITY AND THREAT FOR PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

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Abstract. In a world where public opinion is more important than ever for decision-making and the ability to influence it can play a major role in the global balance of power, *DD* is the equivalent of a revolution in techniques able to influence foreign public opinion. The online environment offers a platform in which a whole constellation of non-state actors has something to say and are heard with or without the will of the rulers. It allows for audience fragmentation and selective exposure to specialized information. Digital Diplomacy represents both an opportunity and a threat for Public Diplomacy. The use of social media by politicians without prior training and experience in the field, manifested in posting messages or hasty responses to unverified information (sometimes provocative), can lead to political crises and the abrupt end of otherwise promising political careers. Being vulnerable to cybersecurity threats and misinformation techniques, the benefits of this soft power manifestation environment will only be fully accomplished when security threats will eventually fall within reasonable limits without affecting freedom of expression.

Keywords: *Public Diplomacy, International Relations, Digital Diplomacy*

In general, the whole trend by which officials of foreign ministries or governments have turned to *Facebook* or *Tweeter* social platforms to convey views to the internal or external public is called *Digital Diplomacy – DD*.[1] Sometimes it also appears under the name of *E-Diplomacy*.[2] The subject of *digital diplomacy* has been in the spotlight of political analysts for some time. Articles and books were written, workshops and conferences were organized to discuss novelty issues and challenges related to the way in which *DD* influences

IR and public diplomacy. COVID-19 pandemic turned a theoretical debate into a concrete reality that burned stages in the evolution of *DD*. In the case of *DD* just like in the case of traditional public diplomacy, in general only institutionalized forms of *DD* are taken into consideration. *De facto*, things are more complex when it comes to external image. In my view most of the messages contributing to the creation of the external image of a country are made by non-state actors, individuals, NGOs, private companies, hi-tech products, film, arts, cultural heritage, sports. Those are non-institutionalized forms of public diplomacy not under the state control; at most, benefiting from time to time from certain facilities (sponsorship for participation at events, prizes, translation subsidies, etc.). We do not have yet the needed terminology to delimit *public diplomacy* in the traditional sense, (the institutionalized one) with its various forms of manifestation (c*ultural diplomacy, advocacy, external public communication, country branding*, etc.) from *un-institutionalized* public diplomacy. The *un-institutionalized* public diplomacy involves any action or product externally associated with a particular country and all its citizens in contact with the external public.

In a world where public opinion is more important than ever for decision-making and the ability to influence it can play a major role in the global balance of power, *DD* is the equivalent of a revolution in techniques for influencing the foreign public opinion. It also depends on how we define *DD*. If we include in the definition the entire diplomatic activity that uses digital technologies to communicate with the public, the sphere of action of social media expands considerably beyond influence, image and persuasion. Although in the last decade digital communication proved to be the most useful way of communication between foreign ministries and their citizens caught in conflict areas, this is not necessarily *DD* but rather an efficient form of communication.

The Beginnings

It is difficult to mark when digital *diplomacy* started because the mere use of IT technology in international communication practices does not enshrine *DD*.

Online debates that have become familiar in the wake of the 2020 pandemic are not new in technology or practice. According to *DiploFoundation*, the first diplomatic meeting using teleconference took place in 1963, hosted by the International Telecommunication Union.[3] In 1992 can be mentioned two initiatives relevant to *DD*: *The Earth Summit* in Rio de Janeiro when civil society activists used e-mail and e-mail lists to coordinate views and lobbying activities, respectively the first PC unit specifically dedicated to IT applications in the field of diplomacy within the *Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies* in Malta.[4]

In 2001 the term digital diplomacy is acknowledged and explain by Wilson Dizard Jr in the book *Digital Diplomacy: U.S. Foreign Policy in the Information*

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[3] DiploFoundation. *Digital Diplomacy, E-diplomacy, Cyber Diplomacy,* 2021 Conference Summary, Blog: https://www.diplomacy.edu/e-diplomacy, accessed 8 August 2021.
[4] *Ibidem*.

Age.[5] *B*asically he presents what the information technology means for foreign politics and public diplomacy. At the time social media as such was still in its infancy. The first foreign ministry with a special unit dedicated to digital diplomacy was the *US State Department* which in the specific conditions after September 11, 2001 and the intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan created in 2002 a *Taskforce Office of e-Diplomacy*.[6]

President Obama was the first US president who extensively used social media to communicate with internal and external public opinion.[7] He used *Tweeter* platform to communicate with millions of supporters, but also Facebook.[8] Facebook was used for the first live transmission from the White House.[9] At the same time, the concept *Smart power* associated with digital communication and with the capacity to project a certain ideology in the social media gained notoriety. The power and effects of *Smart power* were visible during the *Arab Spring in 2011* where it played a decisive role in a political crisis that affected a large geographical area. In 2011, the United States created the first *virtual embassy* in Tehran in order to maintain contact with Iranian civil society.[10] Maldives, Sweden, Estonia, Philippines, Columbia also created virtual embassies in the form of a website containing information about the country, its culture and information of interest to an external audience.[11] The difference between an information page and a virtual embassy involves the possibility to interact with *cyberdiplomats*.[12] Other examples would be the *US Office of eDiplomacy* or the *British Office of Digital Diplomacy*.[13]

Like any new form of public communication, *DD* embodies both continuity in the practice of international communication and a change of old communication paradigms. The spread of *DD* is *bad news* for authoritarian or dictatorial regimes which in particular have an ancestral fear of everything they cannot control in terms of information.

In theory *DD* invigorates the public scene and significantly reduces the costs of participation, theoretically offering anyone the opportunity to participate in the public debate regardless of location. It allows for audience fragmentation and selective exposure to specialized information.[14] *DD* both advantages and

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[5] Wilson Dizard Jr., *Digital Diplomacy: U.S. Foreign Policy in the Information Age,* Praeger 2001.

[6] S. Adesina Olubukola, James Summers (Reviewing Editors), "Foreign policy in an era of digital diplomacy", *Cogent Social Sciences*, 3:1, 2017.

[7] Andreas Sandre, "The White House prepares for the first-ever digital presidential transition", in *Digital Diplomacy,* posted on 16 November 2016, available online: https://medium.com/digital-diplomacy/the-white-house-prepares-for-the-first-ever-digital-presidential-transition-e04a444019d1, accessed 17 August 2021.

[8] *Ibidem*.

[9] *Ibidem*.

[10] Jovan Kurbalija, *E-Diplomacy and Diplomatic Law in the Internet Era*, 2013, p. 401, available online: https://www.diplomacy.edu/sites/default/files/PeacetimeRegime-JK%20Chapter.pdf, accessed 8 August 2021.

[11] *Ibidem*.

[12] *Ibidem*.

[13] Nicholas J. Cull, "The Long Road to Digitalized Diplomacy: A Short History of the Internet in U.S. Public Diplomacy", *Revista Mexicana de Política Exterior, 2018,* p. 7, available at: https://revistadigital.sre.gob.mx/images/stories/numeros/n113/culli.pdf, accessed 16 august 2021.

[14] Craig Hayden, "Social Media at State: Power, Practice, and Conceptual Limits for US Public Diplomacy", *Global Media Journal*, Fall 2012, p. 3, available https://www.academia.edu/2529447/_Social_Media_at_State_Power_Practice_and_Conceptual_Limits_for_US_Public_Diplomacy_, accessed 31 August 2021.

disadvantages the institutions of traditional institutionalized public diplomacy. It is not a matter of choice for the states. Public opinion is influenced by online information anyway. The online environment offers a platform in which a whole constellation of non-state actors has something to say and are heard with or without the will of the rulers. By 2021, most foreign ministries and most heads of state and government, have *Facebook* or *Tweeter* pages (among the few countries without official FB pages can be nominated Eritrea, Laos, Mauritania, Nicaragua, North Korea, Swaziland and Turkmenistan).[15]

These social platforms are tools through which the connection with the public is made directly, social media accounts being followed by many users several times a day. Theoretically, online platforms facilitate dialogue instead of monologue and help officials to better understand the expectations of the public regarding particular decisions. It is expected that facilitating dialogue will lead to a more intimate connection with the public and implicitly an acceptance of political decisions. Politicians' posts on personal pages enjoy greater visibility and reaction than posts on institutions' pages. In theory, one can enter into dialogue with an individual person, more difficultly with an institution.

In social media the audience becomes communicator, content creator and multiplier of information. The response to a *Tweet* or opinion expressed by a reader can be more sophisticated and influential than the initial post. However, this *metamorphosis* of the original message does not necessarily evolve in the direction desired by the initial author.

Not a few debates are related to the realism of direct communication between individuals and institutions. A dialogue implies a symmetrical communication between participants. Public Institutions have a problem with regard to efficiency, credibility and speed of reaction in social media. Any posting on social media involving a public institution had to be approved in advance by an entire decision-making chain. Although a normal procedure, it affects the efficiency, quality and credibility of posts, making it impossible to respond in a timely manner to thousands of messages posted daily by third parties. Diplomatic and administrative language involves formulation of dry, standard, non-personalized answers that often leave the impression of a conversation with a robot. Under these conditions, *influencers* are more effective. The *influencers*, those who transmit a certain point of view apparently in their personal name do it with charm, verve and implicitly results.

In social media, the content must be renewed continuously with information of interest to the public and exposed in a familiar language different from the *dry/sober* language of the *official communiqués*. The transition from information paradigms to communication paradigms is not easy for government institutions. In the second case it can get out of control, it can be misunderstood and easily infiltrated by hybrid threats. The collaboration of *influencers*, co-production and

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[15] Burson Cohn and Wolfe, BCW *World Leaders on Facebook 2019,* p. 1, https://twiplomacy.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/World-Leaders-on-Facebook-Study-2019.pdf, accessed 27 August 2021.

the real openness encountered in the private environment is difficult to be achieved by public institutions, in particular those active in the sensitive field of external relations.[16]

It can be noted that most FB accounts of various diplomatic missions are passive, not even intending to engage in a dialogue. After all, institutionalized public diplomacy is not a *must have* for a country.[17] Ireland does not have an institutionalized cultural diplomacy or specialized representations such as the *British Council* and yet any city in the world that respects itself has an *Irish Pub* and most supermarkets sells *Guinness beer* or *Irish Whiskey*. Also, from time to time social media giants like FB like to remind the institutional users who is the owner of the platform by changing some algorithms and functions which needs constant adaptation from institutional users, by definition government institutions being reluctant to change.

Communication on social platforms may allow a more efficient evaluation of attitudes and opinions of the external public. As the number of users increases the relevance of these assessments increases too. Just like in the case of online product marketing, the evaluation may be done using online computer algorithms.[18] Just like in the case of commercial products those algorithms, if sophisticated enough, can cope with the *social listening activity*, the investigation and analysis of debates, discussions, posts about a certain country, location, political or cultural event in the global social media.[19]

Some countries have specialized departments within the Ministries of Foreign Affairs that deal with it. The most frequently monitored sites are *FB, Tweeter, Instagram, Reddit*, but also specialized blogs or forums.[20] Monitoring these platforms allows taking *the pulse* of public opinion and scheduling timely public diplomacy interventions. Theoretically, trends and changes of opinion on a particular country in general or specific issues can be identified.[21] The analysis of millions of posts and the identification according to their content of certain trends depending on the relevance, tone, language or words used, is impossible without the use of sophisticated analysis tools whose algorithms are set specifically for different languages, analyse the frequency of words, expressions in function that identifies a certain tone, friendly, unfriendly, neutral, etc. It allows to obtain relevant results in connection with a so-called *general feeling*, but does not allow to obtain results with absolute accuracy that would be impossible to obtain anyway even if the intervention of PC algorithms would be replaced by the work of thousands of

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[16] Kathleen McNutt, "Public Engagement in the Web 2.0 Era", p. 50; Paul Henman, "Governmentalities of Gov 2.0", *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 16, no. 9, 2013, pp. 1397-1418.

[17] Heewoon Cha, Sunha Yeo and Bittnari Kim, "Social Media's Dialogic Communication of Foreign Embassies in Korea and Public Diplomacy: Based on Dialogic Communication Theory", *Advanced Science and Technology Letters,* vol. 63, 2014, pp. 175-178.

[18] *Ibidem.*

[19] Barbara Rosen Jacobson, Katharina E Höne and Jovan Kurbalija, "Data Diplomacy Updating diplomacy to the big data era"*, DiploFoundation*, February 2018, pp. 8-19, available online: https://www.diplomacy.edu /sites/default/files/Data_Diplomacy_Report_2018.pdf, accessed 27 august 2021.

[20] Lida Khalili Gheidari, "Social Media and Iran Post election's crisis", in *Cyberspaces and Global Affairs*, edited by Sean S. Costigan, Jake Perry, Ashgate Publishing 2012, pp. 216 -218.

[21] Barbara Rosen Jacobson, Katharina E Höne and Jovan Kurbalija, *art. cit.*

eyes. Whether or not the computerized algorithms are sophisticated enough to replace a well-trained team of experts is a matter of debate, but for sure they can help. Most of these analyses involve at a certain level of investigation and human intervention to carry out the final syntheses and to make the eventual recommendations. The frequency of topics of interest regarding a country, for example, may help choosing the topic and scheduling cultural diplomacy events.[22]

There have also been attempts in Romania to coordinate social media interventions with the help of the public in the form of online campaigns in order to promote a positive image online or to change/mitigate certain prejudices circulating online. See in this sense the campaign *Romanians are Wise* from 2011 organized by *McCann Erickson* for *Kandia Dulce* (a traditional well-established Romanian chocolate producer). The degree of real long-term success of these initiatives is debatable but they certainly make a difference, at least in terms of financial efficiency, compared with the former endless chain of exorbitant congresses, workshops, conferences, festivals etc.

It is also interesting to note the way Germany used in 2014 digital platforms to identify initiatives and ideas useful both for evaluating its own foreign policy actions and for proposals to improve the modalities of action in various external files.[23] A number of countries such as Denmark have created diplomatic missions directly in the environment of the giants of the digital world in California – Silicon Valley.[24] A career diplomat, former ambassador to Indonesia, has been sent to Silicon Valley as a *Tech ambassador* to streamline closer ties between these entities and Denmark to encourage mutual investment.[25] In Sweden *The Stockholm Initiative for Digital Diplomacy* started in 2014 consisted in an 24 hour *diplohak marathon*, a platform that brought together 20 diplomats with IT and digital communication technicians, social activists, journalists, business people and members of academia in order to discuss the technical solutions necessary for communication in the field and the various ways of approaching the new digital public diplomacy.[26]

DD – the Issue of Discretion and Diplomatic Tact

Diplomacy by its nature involves tempering the action of politicians and avoiding risks; the digital and social media, with its freedom of expression, allows and invites hasty actions and impulsive responses unfiltered by advisers.

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[22] *Ibidem*, pp. 27-28.
[23] Danielle Cave, "Does Australia Do Digital Diplomacy?", in *The Interpreter,* Lowy Institute, 2015, available at: https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/does-australia-do-digital-diplomacy, accessed 19 August 2021.
[24] W. Alexander Sanchez, "The Rise Of The Tech Ambassador. Courier diplomats", in *Diplomatic Courier: A Global Affairs Media Network* 23 March, 2018, available at: https://www.diplomaticourier.com /posts/the-rise-of-the-tech-ambassador, accessed 19 August 2021.
[25] *Ibidem*.
[26] Margot Wallström, *Plugging Government into Peace*, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, published 23 March 2015, available: https://www.government.se/opinion-pieces/2015/03/plugging-government-into-peace/, accessed 19 August 2021.

In the last two decades some international political crises were triggered by social media posts made by leading politicians. The use of social media in public diplomacy implies the existence of risk avoidance solutions and rapid response in situations of crisis due to lack of discretion and diplomatic tact.

Using social media is within the reach of anyone with minimal ability to use PC, tablet or smartphone devices. Effective communication on social platforms involves technical knowledge, language, local culture, audience segmentation, algorithms for the operation of a particular platform, and last but not least personal talent and charisma. Creating one's own patent and style on social media in order to gain followers in an information-saturated environment is not easy. An effective social media presence involves a constant effort to be present with the latest information in the area of interest and relevance of the desired audience segment.

By definition, professional diplomats are retained and reluctant to comment. When they speak, even off duty, by the nature of their profession they are obligated to use a neutral aseptic language of diplomacy which is unattractive to the public. In the diplomatic language the pamphlet or sarcasm enjoyed by the public is avoided by professional diplomats. Using language that is attractive to the public and at the same time balanced and aseptic, consonant with the rigors of diplomacy, are challenges that few can cope with. Separating formal from informal communication is not a solution. The job of diplomat or politician does not end at the office but involves a certain conduct 24/7. Opinions expressed on social media by a high-ranking official, even if made in personal name and off duty, will have image repercussions on the entire institution or the country. Spontaneity and the possible absence of message filtering open the way for misinterpreting messages. The consequences of a misinterpreted statement that, like a snowball, end up circulating even more distorted on social networks can be serious. Reducing these risks involves using tact and filtering or dropping some of the most attractive attributes of the online environment.

Another way to avoid risks would involve more rigorous selection programs for diplomatic staff, coupled with training programs that ensure, as much as possible, that those who are interfaces for public institutions know what can be posted and what not in terms of the subject, language, expressions, tone, etc. For example, the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office does not allow comments on photos posted on Instagram.[27] All this affects the essence of social media communication which involves dialogue and free expression of opinions as an alternative to monologue. The various disclaimers claiming that the opinions posted on the Facebook pages do not represent the official opinion do not offer much protection when it comes to effect or the creation of a current of opinion. The possibility to delete comments that do not comply with certain rules of conduct introduced by FB a few years ago is a useful tool. Equally useful is the

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[27] Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). *Social media use, official web page*: https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/foreign-commonwealth-office/about/social-media-use, accessed 19 August 2021.

rule that prohibits public officials who manage institutional social media accounts from commenting on internal policy on social media.[28] On the Tweeter network, FCDO regulations do not allow British officials to answer individual and direct questions, which again affects the essence of social media communication.[29] In this case they are trying to find a balance between the rigours of official communication involved in a governmental institution and the approach involved by social media communication, without finding the perfect solution. Apart from this there should be added an entire constellation of technical risks and security breaches such as the risk of taking over the control of a social media account used by a government institution. Back-up strategies and a 24/7 IT security technical teams is needed.

DD is also a form of manifestation of the digital economy and is vulnerable to attacks that affect the global flow of information. The global economy itself depends on e-commerce, e-transaction, e-banking, e-reservation which in turn depend on the quality and maintenance of IT infrastructure, servers and submarine cables that largely follow the routes of telegraphic cables from more than a century ago.[30] Terrestrial geopolitics is equally relevant to the *geopolitics of digital information flows*, with the Suez Canal, the Strait of Malacca, or Hormuz Island being nodal points for transcontinental submarine cables.[31]

The culture of anonymity in social media that facilitates freedom of expression can be a threat.[32] The biggest danger is the use of communication platforms, social media as tools of misinformation that can destabilize fragile democracies. At the disposal of experienced political forces, the digital environment can become a weapon more effective than the last generations of lethal weapons. In developing countries misinformation campaigns spread rumours, erode the authority of governments, promote anarchy. Hacking and posting content online by hackers and the 2010 *WikiLeaks s*candal in which hundreds of thousands of confidential *US Foreign Office* telegrams were published online demonstrated the vulnerability of a system used to work in secrecy. Procedures, security systems and cybersecurity firms have emerged as a result; however, cyberspace remains vulnerable.

Last but not least, there are ways of screening communication, information and privacy that would have embarrassed any secret services 2-3 decades ago, materializing a world anticipated by George Orwell in his *1984* novel. For a democratic society this attempt to the privacy of its citizens as well as the tool offered by social media to manipulate the individuals and groups in the long term may prove a greater security threat than the confidentiality of governmental confidential documents.

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[28] *Ibidem.*

[29] *Ibidem*

[30] DiploFoundation, *Digital Diplomacy, E-diplomacy, Cyber Diplomacy,* Blog: https://www.diplomacy.edu/e-diplomacy, accessed 19 August 2021.

[31] *Ibidem.*

[32] *Ibidem.*

Conclusions

The assessment of the impact or effectiveness of new media must consider the context. I encountered plastic-naive opinions but with academic pretensions claiming that Niccolo Machiavelli would have carried out his political project if he had had a Tweeter account. I consider that the speed of circulation and the spread of the ideas of the Florentine writer was high enough for the environment in which he lived. Then he wrote in a world *hungry* for information and *silent* enough for his voice to be heard. I also speculate that if he had lived in the digital age his Tweets would probably have been lost in the general *background noise* of an information flooded world, full of *revelations* and conspiracy theories.

I note that, for what would be called *e-Diplomacy efficiency,* most studies are European and American-centrist. A large part of social media users does not use FB or Tweeter. The most relevant cases are those of China where the two platforms are blocked anyway and where users use their own adapted platforms such as WeChat, QQ, Tick-tock. It is also the case of Russia and a large part of the former Soviet space, where the Yandex search engine or social networks like VK are preferred instead of FB, Google or Tweeter.[33]

Digital diplomacy has become the most important and influential form of public diplomacy, especially for small states that cannot afford an extensive diplomatic presence but have a well-developed ICT infrastructure. It amplified the phenomenon of dissolving the barriers represented by borders. Simultaneous translation programs facilitate access to information and opinions expressed on social media in foreign languages.

The use of social media by politicians without prior training and experience in the field manifested in posting messages or hasty responses to unverified information (sometimes provocative) can lead to political crises and the abrupt end of otherwise promising political careers.

By moderating communication on social media, insults, provocations, etc. can be eliminated but the forms of hate speech are subtle and excessive asepticism will limit the right of free expression, will create new categories of *taboo subjects* and in the end a new form of censorship.

Also, here a simple good idea implemented with limited budget can have better results than a bad idea implemented with a lot of money. Publishing content about your own country and culture on the Wikipedia encyclopaedia benefits from more access and visibility than an album, a festival, a luxury encyclopaedia.

We probably need to introduce in the sphere of *DD* the digitization of consular services that offer visas, travel information, alerts, online forms, etc. The quality and accessibility of these services are often directly proportional to the degree of technological advancement of the country, and offer a first positive or negative impression about the country and its administration.

Initially viewed with suspicion, official communication in the digital and social media environment has triggered a frenzy generated by the fear of not

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[33] Alexander Yakovenko, "Russian digital diplomacy - clicking trough", *Science &Tech,* 7 September 2012, http://rbth.com/articles/2012/09/06/russian_digital_diplomacy_clicking_through_18005.html.

being left behind. By no means does it mean the end of diplomacy and radio communication, as the advent of radio did not mean the disappearance of concerts and the print media and the advent of television did not mean the disappearance of radio – although at the time of the advent of each new technology there were voices anticipating the end of classical to do things in a certain field.

Being vulnerable to cybersecurity threats and misinformation techniques, the benefits of this soft power manifestation environment will only be fully accomplished when security threats will eventually fall within reasonable limits without affecting freedom of expression. It's a difficult pairing to put into practice. There is no question of replacing direct communication. The most likely evolution would be towards a hybrid system in which the share of digital platforms will depend on the context, and the opportunity to use them.

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