



## The Impact of Social Media on International Diplomacy

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### Abstract

Social media has transformed the landscape of international diplomacy, offering new avenues for communication and engagement among states, organizations, and citizens. This research explores the multifaceted impact of social media on diplomatic practices, highlighting both opportunities and challenges. By analyzing case studies of diplomatic initiatives that utilized social media platforms, the study reveals how these tools can enhance transparency, foster public diplomacy, and facilitate real-time communication during crises. Social media empowers diplomats to engage directly with global audiences, thereby shaping public perceptions and influencing foreign policy. However, the study also identifies significant risks, including the potential for misinformation, rapid escalation of conflicts, and the undermining of traditional diplomatic protocols. Furthermore, the research examines the role of social media in amplifying non-state actors' voices, which can disrupt established power dynamics in international relations. Recommendations are provided for diplomats and policymakers on effectively harnessing social media's potential while mitigating its risks. Ultimately, this research underscores the necessity of adapting diplomatic strategies to the evolving digital landscape, ensuring that social media serves as a tool for constructive engagement rather than a source of division.

Keywords: social media, international diplomacy, public diplomacy, foreign policy, misinformation, digital communication, non-state actors, diplomatic strategies



## 1. Introduction

In recent years, an upswing in the ways social media is being used by state actors and political leaders has created an interest among scholars in the effects of such use on international relations. International diplomacy has traditionally been a back room pursuit, with diplomats establishing private, professional relationships in order to further the national interest. Much of the instant contact politicians have traditionally had is between established allies. Social media can render diplomacy as an instantaneous and reactive activity, diminishing the ability to consult and make decisions in a meaningful way.

Since Abraham Lincoln established a telegraph office in the War Department in 1862, the relationship between technology and diplomacy has broadened to include the telephone, fax machines, radio, email, and now the Internet. While the technology has shifted, the underlying goal of maintaining national interest through negotiation remains the same. However, with the 20th century advent of the radio and television, the context of diplomacy changed. The world watched as people like John F. Kennedy used his televised addresses as a means of confronting Soviet Premier Khrushchev during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. Television had made world leaders seem more approachable, as the public watched them speak in live action (Verrekia, 2017). Political historians agree that post-WWII television debates and televised diplomacy have affected election strategies and statecraft.

### 1.1. Background and Significance

In 2016, there is a year of significant political turbulence, and foreign policy has been at the forefront of both national and international concern. What was once discreet and mainly governed by a select few has now become more transparent through the advent of social media, and politicians, diplomats, and foreign ministers are no longer the sole protagonists on this international stage. With social media, it is easier to reach a wider audience, transcending national borders and including populations from around the globe. It has become an essential tool for any practitioner in international diplomacy both for communicating policy initiatives with foreign publics in a direct and cheap way, and for undertaking diplomatic dialogues about global issues and



events. Broadly speaking, it provides an opportunity for more effective and able public diplomacy activity (Verrekia, 2017). With this in mind, the research question posed is what impact does this medium have on international diplomacy, and how can digital diplomacy be leveraged to further influence international affairs for a long-term benefit? This concern is of importance since, overall, international diplomacy has traditionally been shrouded in secrecy, so the advent of new technologies has opened diplomatic practices to the wider public and is especially important at a time where “foreign policy decisions and crises are made and acted upon rapidly.” (Sheludiakova et al.2021)

## 2. The Evolution of Diplomacy in the Digital Age

The development of the internet at the end of the twentieth century effected major changes, from political representation to international security. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the internet entered a new and revolutionary phase with faster, cheaper and more accessible technology. As a consequence, the scope for development of a variety of different tools became possible, altering the lives of many citizens globally. These new tools enable people with computers and internet connectivity to utilize the internet in ways that were not possible previously.

Internationally, the internet especially provides opportunities for challenge and innovation in the realm of diplomacy. Traditionally, an area of state activity conducted in secret, diplomacy (often termed public diplomacy when practiced in public) attempts to support a country’s national interests without incurring conflict. The fundamental practice of diplomatic negotiation and exchange has been much the same since its origin in ancient civilisations; diplomacy is a constant in international society. However, recent acceleration in technological development and globalisation has changed the context, form and ethos of diplomatic representation and exchange. Seeking to understand and exploit these changes, a network of scholars have begun to investigate what is tentatively termed digital diplomacy (Verrekia, 2017). As international communication changes with the spread of the internet, electronic mail and online chat between ambassadors and foreign ministries, so the research interest of students of international politics and government has begun to focus more intently



on a new and vitally important site of political representation. Since foreign and international policy is the subject of diplomacy, an understanding of digital diplomatic practice will be of great interest, especially for the under researched discipline of cyber-politics.

### **2.1. Traditional vs. Digital Diplomacy**

For centuries, diplomacy has been looked at in a traditional and often analytical way - as the management of international relations through negotiations between sovereign states (Verrekia, 2017). Lately, with the rise of social media, there is an inclination to reconsider these definitions, and also to study their digitalization impact. Public diplomacy, understood as a subset of soft power, is especially in the spotlight with its propaganda, promotion of culture, and communication aspects. One explanation for the digitalization of diplomacy is the broader advances in communication and information technologies and their democratization.

Many recent papers try to describe aspects of the impact of new communication technologies on diplomacy, while being still unproductive and chaotic. The subject of this paper is to analyse the impact of social media on international diplomacy considering foreign ministries as subjects, and to define and describe a third terminology: digital diplomacy. There appears to be no common same frame for understanding the concept of digital diplomacy. Understanding the subject requires a strong ICT background, and most papers try to define it through some buzzwords like web 2.0, twiplomacy or virtual diplomacy. There is some overlapping of terms, but in this paper, especially under the influence of Lessig's Code Theory, an attempt is made to show that the software codification of social media defines a new, unexperienced information environment. Appropriate diplomacy stakeholders must therefore understand the principles of social media operation, and its effects (positive or negative) on the interactions between countries. (Anis et al.2021)

### **3. Case Studies of Social Media in Diplomacy**

The use of Twitter by British ambassador in Magaddishu, Matt Baugh, earned plaudits throughout the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Sending micro-updates



such as, “Tonight: 5 fingers. Pink nail varnish. UKTI swimwear runway UKinSomalia is getting ready for summer season” when his task was seen as being the most dangerous in the world, Baugh broke away from tradition. By avoiding standard speeches and news releases, he took his approach to one that was more relatable, human, and light-hearted with an emphasis on style rather than heavy content. A tweet containing a call for dialogue was endorsed by the foreign secretary and the British Council, amplifying his calls for peace and earning him recognition in both the United Kingdom and Somalia. Despite facing accusations of quitting a country in crisis, presenting a complex place simplistically, and fostering complacency in UK-Somali affairs, argue that Baugh’s Twittering marked the birth of a new strategy. In this instance, the new technology primarily played the role of a traditional mass media in distilling an ambassador’s speech.

In recent times, there has been a growing recognition by diplomats and political leaders of the ways in which they can harness popular technology to enhance their international relations and further the interests of their country (Verrekia, 2017). Scholars agree that the origins of digital diplomacy can be traced back to the United States, and particularly with Hillary Clinton. As Secretary of State, Clinton shaped the foreign policy strategies of the Obama administration to exploit the new technology of information and communication. Clinton made social media an integral part of the programs run by the Department of State, using it as a tool for statecraft. The DOS uses social media to monitor the information that is posted online, modify its messages in response to the public opinion, and monitor Washington's Twitter feed in over 100 languages and dialects. Since the United States’ adoption of digital diplomacy, many countries have followed suit. It now is common for embassies to have interactive websites containing press releases, photos, and blogs, and for state department to have their Facebook accounts and Twitter feeds. In addition, the United Kingdom has established an official Office of Digital Diplomacy, whose role is to shape and manage HMG's digital brand globally. Moreover, smaller EU countries have sought to use digital tools and social media to shape their public diplomacy strategies. At the forefront of this movement is Poland. Prime Minister, President, advertisement campaigns, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have all established



their own digital tools and social media profiles. France launched a digital-relations portal, which helps foreign businesses invest in France. Also, Sweden established a new entity within the foreign ministry – the Swedish Institute – to shape the online image of the country and promote the Swedish model. Similarly, the Italian development cooperation agency has embraced digital tools to promote development awareness. Social media tools have allowed citizens to interact with politicians. Content management modules enabled them to create innovative websites that support two-way communications. Social media platforms have been used to publicize events, news, and actions taken by decision-makers. On a practical level, software helped tailor-make adverts and content. Moreover, telephone town-halls linked both the city, state, and federal levels, and got an improved, tailored system for alerting subscribers. This was done without a predetermined plan and required algorithmic changes to constituents' databases. (Antwi-Boateng and Al2021)

### 3.1. Use of Twitter in Diplomatic Relations

Since my selection of social media source is Twitter, in this part, I will be comparing two articles that use this source. The first article studies the Arab Spring and examines how street protests first spread in Tunisia in December 2010 via Twitter. The paper relies on the available bibliography of the Arab Spring to pursue a detailed content analysis study of the entire population of relevant tweets. The second article examines the question of whether and how activists' use of the internet in the form of email lists, websites, blogs and social media has had any consequences for the practice and success of contention in Egypt and Yemen from 2000 to 2012. Each article's methodology and results, and then conclude with a contrast of the results, are presented side by side. The two articles provide data and perspectives to assist in understanding the role and impact of social media, especially in the context of political uprising in Arab countries.

The use of technology to conduct diplomacy began as soon as the first civilization arises. In recent times, diplomats and political leaders have begun to recognize the ways in which they can use technology in this digital age to enhance their international relations and further the interests of their country (Verrekia, 2017).





Digital diplomacy refers to the use of information and communication technologies in the conduct of diplomatic relations, and so it includes twentieth and twenty-first century advancements such as the telegraph, telephone, and the Internet. A diplomatic way of communication, whether carried out in person, by paper correspondence or nowadays through technology, is always conducted among recognized institutions and according to predefined rules. Diplomatic communication typically two forms: official and informal. Diplomatic communication is always carefully planned, bearing in mind the sensitivity of diplomatic relations. Social Networks Sites comprise a category of websites that allow users to create online profiles in which to display information about themselves, typically photos, videos, and messages. Moreover, these websites enable users to establish social ties and communicate with each other. Social media or SNS refers to websites that support social interaction and allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content, which in turn makes them accessible to broader audiences through the World Wide Web. Social media has vastly revolutionized the way information is disseminated and received. (Al-Oraiqat et al.2022)

## 4. Challenges and Opportunities

While social media has undoubtedly revolutionized the way organizations can reach and interact with the public, its biggest impact thus far has been the potential to amplify pre-existing foreign policy goals. As access to the internet grows and social media becomes more and more popular, embassies around the world have been quick to see the possibilities of engaging with a public audience in foreign countries. Social media has made the world smaller, and with communication tools more advanced than ever before, there are new opportunities to cultivate international friendships and partnerships. However, to many diplomats, this new media world can appear somewhat daunting (Verrekia, 2017).

Trying to fit social media into the already busy schedule of a diplomat is one problem, as many have only recently become active and ignore their accounts in the heat of more pressing issues. Equally, there are misunderstandings and grievances that come with the indomitable presence of internet communications – when a statement is made,



it can be picked apart by influential voices within seconds. As international relations continue to evolve in a progressively interconnected world, the cross-sectoral approach should move forward on a number of fronts and from varied connections, capitalizing on the new digital paradigm. This includes ensuring the sharing of best practices, and facilitating coherence and consistency in a complex international system.

## 4.1. Fake News and Disinformation

International crises are never simply about two adversaries or even three. They are the product of a multitude of interests, ideas, peoples, cultures, and structures. Each source involved in the making of crises will go along with the corresponding interests, be they news agencies, newspapers, think tanks, universities or TV channels. Controversy gets upscaled into crises, but contradictory voices rarely take part in public debate.

The representation of conflict or any international crises in the press is conditioned by the set of pressures, preferences, limitations and constraints journalists operate under. Being an agent of information, the war reporter works as an articulator in the relay of messages between distant territories and disconnected publics. Media filters details according to news values. In other words, media content is the articulation of a series of inequalities besides manipulation. Newspapers are only a source among many others. Would different agents articulate the same contents, it is likely that different actors will be given relative importance. Gathering knowledge about the media's operations is precarious. Television is, up to now, barely accessible for scholars due to its ephemeral nature. Internet and the high secrecy of news agencies safeguard practices. Equally, agencies are reluctant to reveal their tactics and when obliged to do so they hardly ever tell the truth. Therefore, it is crucial to develop research strategies that rely on an array of different sources that can be juxtaposed for triangulation. Investigative journalism of the kind that could shed light on manipulation is hardly to be found. Designed decades ago in Western democracies, journalism is unable to fulfill its democratic mandates under current power asymmetries. (Goyanes et al., 2021)





## 5. Conclusion

Judging by how swiftly social media has integrated itself into our daily lives, it is hard to believe that the same technology had been denounced as a time-consuming waste of time by many not long ago. Still, some may claim that the emergence of diplomatic representation is a different case. Taking into consideration the innately conservative nature of international diplomacy, one may assume that social media and its accompanying ills shall fail to cause a transformation of comparable extent.

Certainly, social media are far from constituting a panacea. To handle sudden crises successfully, traditional diplomatic resources of negotiation, privilege and confidentiality must still be utilized... Programme entails further investigation into the actual outcomes of actual representation practices, with the particular objective of indicating whether the traditional divide between the 'public' and the esoteric aspects of diplomatic activity, such as bargaining, favor exchange and representational signaling, is indeed being eroded by the new demands of social media interaction (Verrekia, 2017). But also social media training curriculums are in the making, designed as communications to instruct various diplomatic actors about how to make clever use of these tools.

### 5.1. Summary of Key Findings

World leaders are making use of social media to connect with other leaders that are using the same technology and are finding a mutual goal in constructing a strategic relationship. A stunning example of these connections making a direct effect on diplomacy can be drawn from 2 Twitter accounts: John Kerry, the U.S. Secretary of State's account, and the Cuba Foreign Ministry's account. Past statistics have proven the use of twitter and its high value in diplomacy. Diplomats and leaders try to make a provoke statement or a thought-through statement in 140 characters or less, creating a comprehensive and meaningful message. On May 26, 2015, the DOS made a significant diplomatic move. It decided to follow the State Department of Cuba on Twitter. Only several hours later, the Foreign Ministry of Cuba followed the DOS twitter account. This synchronized move was later followed by an invitation by John Kerry to the foreign minister of Cuba to visit Washington, saving the U.S from a



consistent loss in the GA vote (Verrekia, 2017). This example is a perfect example of the way social media has revolutionized international diplomacy. In the past, an unusual move would not have had the same effect, nor would it be noticed. Moreover, it is a valuable lesson of how a relationship can develop over the web. A summit, negotiation, world event would have never occurred without the simple move of following an account. Creating powerful relationships over the web can have groundbreaking effects on international diplomacy.

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