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Trends and Counter- Trends in Digital Diplomacy¹

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Abstract

Digital diplomacy that is, the use of digital technologies in support of diplomatic objectives, is no longer an inchoate field of expertise trying to find its balance in a world challenged and disrupted by the advance of social media technologies. For many Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFA) around the world, the policy priority has moved on from creating the necessary infrastructure for conducting digital diplomacy to the more ambitious objective of “getting it right”. Digital diplomacy is likely to penetrate the deep core of the diplomatic DNA if technological acceleration will be seen by MFAs as an opportunity for ecosystem-based, pro-active, and network-oriented adaptation. If, on the other hand, digitization will fail to restrain emotional contagion, algorithmic determinism and strategic entropy, then MFAs will likely slow down their efforts of integration of digital technologies in their work.

The most fascinating aspect of technological disruption is its remarkable capacity for both destruction and creation. By marginalising or even eliminating ways in which people do their work in a specific field of activity, new technologies create pervasive conditions for active and enduring resistance against them. On the other hand, by laying the groundwork for new economic or social opportunities, they also stimulate new thinking and innovative practices that reinforce and sustain them in the long term. The ability of disruptive technologies to entrench themselves in the society much depends, therefore, on how the balance between the trends and counter-trends that they abruptly unleash is ultimately decided. This observation may prove particularly valuable for understanding the evolution of digital diplomacy and the extent to which the recent adoption of digital technologies by Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFA) will be able to substantially change the way in which diplomacy is practiced or whether it will have only a marginal effect on its mode of operation.

Two opposing mega-trends are particularly important to consider when examining the transformative potential of digital technologies on diplomatic relations. The first mega-trend actively encourages digital adoption and is driven by the dual process of

rapid acceleration of technological disruption, on the one hand, and the MFAs commitment to thrive in an increasingly competitive environment, on the other hand. While it took the telephone 75 years to reach 100 million users worldwide, the mobile phone and its most popular app, Facebook, needed only 16 years and 4 ½ years respectively to pass this milestone.² Technological acceleration thus puts significant pressure on MFAs to develop strong capacities for understanding the potential of digital technologies in their activity and for devising strategies for mainstreaming and tailoring them to short and long-term foreign policy objectives. Failure to do so risks exposing MFAs to the problem of not being able to maintain their ability to meaningfully influence policy outcomes in the international arena. Three areas are more likely to invite closer scrutiny by MFAs as the rate of technological disruption accelerates: the context, the process and the structure of the digital diplomatic transformation.

Context: from institutional-based to ecosystem approaches

From an institutional perspective, the MFA's organisational culture constitutes a critical interface for digital adaptation and can make a big difference as to whether diplomats would perceive digital technologies as a threat or as an opportunity in their work.³ However, as the success or failure of technological innovations is also dependent on the quality of the broader ecosystem that supports them, MFAs would also need to better understand the technological context in which they operate in order to figure out which digital trends to follow and which not. The 3G mobile technology made possible, for instance, the development and spread of social media networks. The 5G technology, which is due to arrive in just a few years, will likely usher in a whole new

² Dreischmeier/Close/Trichet, »The Digital Imperative«.

³ Bjola, »Adapting Diplomacy to the Digital Age: Managing the Organisational Culture of Ministries of Foreign Affairs«.

level of technological disruption, which could lead to the mass adoption of an entire range of tech tools of growing relevance for diplomacy, such as virtual and augmented reality in public diplomacy or artificial intelligence in consular services.

In fact, as Sandre points out the future is already here.⁴ For example, in May 2016, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation announced that it joined the Google Art Project — an online technology platform developed by Google to promote and protect culture — to open its art collection and virtually display 176 works of art.⁵ In July 2016, NATO's Euro Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) and Romania, with support from the Joint Health Agriculture and Food Group (JHAFG) and the Civil Protection Group (CPG), partnered to organize a disaster response exercise using virtual reality (VR) to simulate a large-scale emergency situation with multiple casualties and the evacuation of a large number of people.⁶ Augmented reality (AR) has been somewhat slower than VR to catch on with the public, but the technology is advancing fast⁷ and should be able to generate a steady flow of apps, including for diplomacy, relatively quickly.

Immersive AR systems could prove useful, for instance, for creating highly interactive public diplomacy campaigns or for tailoring consular services to individual needs, possibly in combination with iBeacon technology.⁸ Artificial intelligence is also making steady progress in consular affairs. At the lower end of the complexity scale, chat-bots now assist with visa applications, legal aid for refugees, and consular registrations.⁹ More sophisticated algorithms are being

developed by MFAs to either advance the spread of positive narratives or inhibit online disinformation and propaganda.¹⁰ In sum, the second wave of technological disruption is already under way, but its success will much depend on the reliability of the ecosystem in which embassies operate: superfast broadband availability, clear strategic vision, strong demand for digital services, cost effectiveness, and skilled personnel.

Process: from re-action to pro-action

Staying ahead of the technological curve will likely require a cognitive shift from following to anticipating and possibly pushing new trends. By reacting to the rise of social media, MFAs have managed, for instance, to leverage the power of these tools for maximising their role in public diplomacy, crisis communication and diaspora engagement. However, by anticipating new trends, they could better operate in an increasingly competitive digital environment and set the rules and standards of digital practice before others have the chance to do it. Pushing new trends could also prove highly beneficial, as the “first mover” advantage could help digital pioneers secure extra recognition and influence, thus boosting their ‘soft power’ credentials as diplomatic leaders and innovators.

‘Going pro-active’ could happen horizontally, when successful digital practices are extended from one diplomatic area to another (e.g., by transferring techniques of digital listening and engagement used in public diplomacy to crisis communication) or vertically, when the input/output value of digital technologies is maximised (e.g., by making better use of big data via predictive analysis and algorithms). For example, by mining open-source data from social media, satellite imagery and blogs, the Embers project sponsored by the Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity (IARPA) has generated, since 2012, highly accurate forecasts of influenza-like illness case counts, rare disease outbreaks, civil unrest, domestic politi-

⁴ Sandre, »Virtual reality for digital diplomacy«.

⁵ Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, »Collezione Farnesina«

⁶ NATO, »Romania hosts NATO exercise in a virtual world«.

⁷ Perdue, »Applications of Augmented Reality«.

⁸ Beecon »What is iBeacon?«

⁹ Visabot, »Immigration attorney 2.0.«; Cresci, »Chatbot that overturned 160,000 parking fines now helping refugees claim asylum«; Channel New Asia, »Most Singaporeans do not e-register before travelling«.

¹⁰ Cocking, »Using algorithms to achieve digital diplomacy«.

cal crises, and elections.¹¹ Big data analytics could thus become an indispensable tool for embassies for getting a comprehensive, in-depth and reliable understanding of the local conditions in which they operate in real-time, which in turn could help them better tailor and fine-tune their bilateral diplomatic approach.

Structure: from centralisation to “network of networks”

A dense digital environment with a high rate of technological innovation favours and rewards creativity and experimentation over hierarchy and procedures. This means that in order to adapt more effectively to technological challenges, MFAs would need to relax the constraints underpinning institutional centralisation and instead encourage forms and modes of digital interaction tailored to the specific profile of its constitutive diplomatic networks. As noted by the authors of the Future of Diplomacy Report, the nature of the national diplomatic environment is changing from one that privileges the role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to one which places it within a broader construct—that of the national diplomatic system (NDS), which covers the complex network of governmental and non-governmental institutions that inform and shape a country’s international policy objectives.¹² Building on this insight, one could argue that MFAs’ digital architecture could be best captured by the concept of digital diplomatic system (DDS), which refers to the “network of networks” of embassies, consulates, think tanks, private companies, international organisations and civil society groups that contribute and shape the digital diplomatic profile of the country.

DDS consists of three key layers. The first layer is demand driven and connects institutional actors, groups and stakeholders that directly benefit from digital diplomatic programs. They may include diaspora groups in

need of good digital consular services, embassies in critical spots facing public diplomacy challenges, and think tanks providing consultancy to MFAs on digital matters. The second layer is functional and task-oriented. Diplomatic missions to international organisations would benefit, for instance, from close collaborative efforts aimed at exploring and testing the potential of digital technologies in multilateral contexts. Similarly, embassies and consulates based in conflict-risk regions could share experiences and best practices regarding the use of digital technologies in crisis situations. The third layer is tech- and practice-oriented and seeks to advance digital innovation and dissemination of good practices of digital diplomacy. Digital pioneers working in embassies, academics researching digital diplomatic practices and private IT companies are the most likely nodes in this network. The three DDS layers have flexible configurations and they may occasionally intersect or clash, but they can offer MFAs a much-needed boost of creativity, forward-thinking and ambition to their digital diplomacy objectives and strategies, in a manner that does not require a fundamental rewriting of their institutional structure.

The second mega-trend works in the different direction by building resistance against the use of digital technologies. Unlike the case above, where MFAs are concerned about the risk of missing out on potential opportunities created by technological breakthroughs, this counter-driver raises questions about whether the costs of ‘going digital’ may not actually exceed its benefits. Paradoxically, the success of digitisation may plant the seeds for the rise of a powerful counter-trend to MFAs’ efforts to further integrate and institutionalise digital technologies in their work. Emotional contagion, algorithmic determinism and strategic entropy are three ways in which this counter-trend is more likely to manifest itself.

Post-truth: from fact-based reasoning to emotional commodification

Diplomatic engagement requires a minimum level of shared understanding and

¹¹ DAC, »Embers«.

¹² Hocking/Melissen/Riordan/Sharp, »Futures for Diplomacy: Integrative Diplomacy for the 21st Century«, p. 53.

mutual openness in order to work. Such possibility arguably dissipates when emotions overwhelmingly frame and dominate the discourse by which opinions are formed online, and when facts are pushed into a secondary or marginal position. Emotional commodification (i.e., deliberate amplification of emotional content in the online discourse) has become a regular pattern of engagement on social media platforms as it helps digital influencers control the scope and direction of the online conversation. High-arousal emotions, whether positive or negative, has greater viral potential than that containing low-arousal emotions.¹³ At the same time, emotional valence (i.e., the degree of positivity or negativity of an emotion) can trigger, by over-exposure, desired reactions from the audience.¹⁴ Emotional commodification has negative implications for digital diplomacy for two reasons. First, it enables the formation of echo-chambers, whereby MFAs and embassies end up “preaching to the choir” of sympathetic online followers, failing thus to reach constituencies outside the self-reinforcing “digital bubble” of like-minded followers.¹⁵ Second, it favours a “post-truth” environment in which “fake news” and disinformation thrive, thus making more difficult for digital diplomats to articulate their message and engage with their audience or to defend themselves against defamatory claims.

As the connection between emotions and social media becomes stronger and more sophisticated, the question of how digital diplomats can adapt to an emotionally charged form of social communication can no longer be ignored. The concept of digital emotional intelligence (DEI) might offer a solution. First developed by Salovey and Sluyter, DEI covers four distinct dimensions, namely, the ability (1) to perceive or experience emotions accurately, (2) to use emotional information to facilitate thought and action, (3) to understand the meaning and significance of emotions, and (4) to manage

emotions in one's self and others.¹⁶ DEI cannot prevent the formation of echo-chambers or the dissemination of digital propaganda, but it can help social media users to better cope with them. For example, DEI can help digital users better discriminate between genuine vs. false emotional expressions, facilitate a better understanding of how emotions affect their thinking, enable them to recognise the sources and implications of their emotions, and regulate their level of detachment or engagement to an emotional trigger in a particular situation. Paying close attention to how genuinely and intensely people feel about a particular situation in their online communication can help avoid embarrassing moments with potentially disruptive implications for bilateral relations. In short, DEI could facilitate careful digital navigation through emotion-laden situations and steer the conversation back on a path informed by fact-based reasoning.

Automation: from relationship-building to robo-trolling

MFAs' interest in digital technologies primarily lies with their capacities to reach out to online influencers and develop multiple networks of engagement with and across a variety of constituencies. By ‘going digital’, the once secretive and exclusive domain of the elite has also gone public, requiring diplomats to regularly look outside their once closed doors, and perhaps more importantly, for the first time, allowing citizens to look in.¹⁷ Being able to reach out to millions of people, directly and in real-time thus represents a remarkable opportunity for MFAs to redefine themselves in the Digital Age, including by building strong relationships with foreign publics. This ability could nevertheless be severely tested and even compromised by the growing use of algorithms as instruments of conversation monitoring, agenda setting and message dissemination. Recent studies have shown that up to 15 percent of Twitter accounts are in fact bots

¹³ Davidson, »What are the Key Emotional Triggers for Online Video?«.

¹⁴ Ferrara/Yang, »Measuring Emotional Contagion in Social Media«.

¹⁵ Bjola, »Digital Diplomacy and the Bubble Effect: The NATO Scenario«.

¹⁶ Salovey/Sluyter, *Emotional development and emotional intelligence: educational implications*.

¹⁷ Bjola/Cassidy, »Gone Digital: Digital Diplomacy at the University of Oxford«, p.10.

rather than people, and this number is bound to increase in the future.¹⁸ One could safely argue that the moment that AI entities overtake humans in the population of digital users, the possibility of MFAs and embassies to develop meaningful relationships with online publics drastically decreases.

Furthermore, is not only the presence of algorithms that may hinder digital diplomatic interactions, but also the purpose for which they are used. Intriguingly, the “dark side” of digital technologies (e.g., disinformation, propaganda and infowar tactics) has proved to be the most fertile ground for the proliferation of bots. A recent report produced by the NATO’s Strategic Center of Excellence in Latvia has found, for instance, that the ‘Twitter conversation’ about NATO-related news is mainly bots talking to other bots, bots promoting third-party content and bots incrementally building more believable profiles.¹⁹ Some also fear that AI could soon make it easier for adversaries to divide and dishearten alliances, for example, by undermining trust among countries fighting on the same side and by discrediting their intelligence.²⁰ While these developments have a predominant intelligence and military profile, they nevertheless have important diplomatic repercussions, as their use is mainly tailored to tearing down political institutions and diplomatic relationships not building them up.

Robo-trolling (i.e., use of algorithms for content promotion and /or disruption) is now part of the digital landscape and absent new rules by which the anonymity of social media users can be removed, it is likely to remain so. Digital diplomats may not be therefore able to prevent AI from disrupting their relationship building activities, but they may contain some of its negative ramifications. “Three A’s” techniques of bot and botnet discovery and identification (activity,

anonymity, and amplification)²¹ should, for instance, be widely disseminated through the digital diplomatic system to increase awareness and resistance against possible sources of manipulation. At the same time, MFAs may deploy AI tools themselves, such as Google’s Perspective as a way of reducing the pressure on their limited resources for mapping and filtering abusive comments that disrupt their online conversation.²² In more serious situations, when the robo-trolling crosses the threshold of disinformation into aggressive propaganda and infowar, more sophisticated measure of digital containment would need to be considered with the goal of supporting media literacy and source criticism, encouraging institutional resilience, and promoting a clear and coherent strategic narrative capable of containing the threat from inconsistent counter-messaging.²³

Strategic entropy: from digital outputs to policy outcomes

It is also important to remind ourselves that digital diplomacy is not supposed to be an end in itself, but rather to inform and serve foreign policy objectives. The disruptive character of technological breakthroughs may lead, however, at least in the initial stage, to a decoupling of digital diplomacy from foreign policy. Quick adoption of digital tools without an overarching strategy of how they should be used in support of certain foreign policy objectives is likely to create problems of policy coordination and implementation. Digital enthusiasts working in embassies may seek to push ahead with experimentation and innovation, especially in public diplomacy, and with varying degrees of success. At the same time, MFA ‘mandarins’ facing budgetary and bureaucratic pressures to demonstrate ‘value for money’ may seek to slow down the process

¹⁸ Newberg, »As many as 48 million Twitter accounts aren't people, says study«.

¹⁹ Jensen/Harmata, »What to expect when you're expecting bots?«.

²⁰ Valášek, »How Artificial Intelligence Could Disrupt Alliances«.

²¹ Nimmo, »#BotSpot: Twelve Ways to Spot a Bot«.

²² Jigsaw, »Perspective«; Murgia, Madhumita, »Google launches robo-tool to flag hate speech online«.

²³ Bjola/Pamment, »Digital containment: Revisiting containment strategy in the digital age«.

of digital adoption and to align it to the pace of foreign policy making. The risk for MFAs entailed by the 'tug of war' between digital enthusiasts and sceptics is to find themselves either running underfunded digital campaigns with no clear direction or strategic compass, or uncritically embracing rigid 'diplometric' models, predominantly quantitative, for designing and assessing the success of digital activities. In both cases, the result is likely to be the same: a middle-ground approach that would neither promote innovative digital outputs as favoured by enthusiasts nor reliably inform foreign policy outcomes as advocated by sceptics.

One way in which this tension could be mitigated is by drawing on the output vs. outcome distinction in public policy analysis to separate means (what digital diplomacy does) from results (what digital diplomacy accomplishes).²⁴ Outputs reflect on-going consequences of digital activities, while outcomes cover broader influences of the digital outputs on policy objectives. As argued elsewhere, it makes sense to prioritise the impact of digital outputs at the expense of policy outcomes, when digital activities involve complex operations, large audiences, and lengthy periods of implementation, as it may often happen in digital public diplomacy.²⁵ In such cases, if quantitatively strong outputs (content, reach, engagement) are generated in a consistent fashion, then one would expect positive policy outcomes (e.g., perception changes in the target audience) to follow as well at some point. On the other hand, digital engagements are more conducive to informing outcome-based strategies, when they involve conventional operations, with small or medium-size audiences, requiring short periods of implementation. Consular crisis communication is particularly amenable to this approach as the goal of assisting nationals in times of terrorist attacks or natural disasters with timely and accurate information (output) about how to protect themselves from harm during crises (outcome) is a relatively straightforward

²⁴ Knoepfel/Larrue/Hill/Varone, *Public policy analysis*, p.11.

²⁵ Bjola, Corneliu, »Getting digital diplomacy right: what quantum theory can teach us about measuring impact«.

strategy in which digital outputs are informed by and assessed against tangible policy goals. In sum, managing strategic entropy is a matter of understanding how to prioritise and balance digital outputs vs. policy outcomes.

To conclude, the future of digital diplomacy lies with the ability of MFAs to exploit the opportunities generated by technological disruption, while guarding itself against the potential pitfalls its early success might create. If technological acceleration will be seen as an opportunity for ecosystem-based, pro-active, and network-oriented adaptation, then digital diplomacy is likely to penetrate the deep core of the diplomatic DNA. If, on the other hand, digitization will fail to restrain emotional contagion, algorithmic determinism and strategic entropy, then MFAs will likely slow down their efforts of integration of digital technologies in their work.

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