The Influence of Digital Diplomacy on Traditional Diplomatic Practices: Transforming Roles and Functions through Social Media

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Abstract: *In the 21st century, digital diplomacy, also known as e-diplomacy or cyber diplomacy, has significantly transformed traditional diplomatic practices by integrating social media and digital platforms into international relations. Unlike conventional diplomacy, which relies on closed-door negotiations and official statements, digital diplomacy fosters immediate, transparent, and direct communication between diplomats, governments, and global audiences. This paper explores how digital diplomacy is reshaping the roles and functions of diplomats, highlighting its advantages in enhancing engagement, crisis communication, and public diplomacy. It also examines the challenges posed by misinformation, cyber threats, and the rapid dissemination of unverified information.*

Keywords: Digital Diplomacy, Traditional Diplomacy, E-diplomacy, Cyber diplomacy, Social Media.

INTRODUCTION:

In the 21st century, diplomacy has transformed with the rise of digital platforms, leading to the emergence of digital diplomacy or e-diplomacy. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which relied on closed-door negotiations, digital diplomacy operates in a public, fast-paced environment through platforms like Twitter and Facebook. It allows diplomats to engage directly with global audiences, advocate national interests, and promote cultural exchange. This shift empowers smaller states and non-state actors but also brings challenges such as disinformation, cyber threats, and reduced deliberation. Diplomats must now balance traditional diplomatic values with new skills in strategic communication and digital engagement.

This paper investigates how digital diplomacy is reshaping traditional diplomatic roles and functions, looking into its advantages, challenges, and future implications for international relations. By analyzing case studies and theoretical frameworks, it aims to offer a thorough understanding of the changing relationship between diplomacy and social media. Digital diplomacy, also known as e-diplomacy or cyber diplomacy, has become an essential element of international relations in the 21st century. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which mainly relies on face-to-face negotiations and official statements, digital diplomacy utilizes social media and other digital platforms for immediate communication, information sharing, and public interaction. This paper explores two key aspects of digital diplomacy: its effect on transparency in international relations and the skills modern diplomats need to thrive in the digital age.

METHODOLOGY:

This paper uses the case study method and secondary research methods for reviewing the literature. The paper adopted a qualitative analysis of secondary sources, including Books, journal articles, government reports, and reliable online sources have been used to identify relevant documents.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Digital diplomacy, which involves using social media and digital platforms for diplomatic interactions, is increasingly changing the way traditional diplomacy operates. Many scholars and practitioners acknowledge its potential to create more inclusive, transparent, and immediate communication channels. However, the way it is implemented and its effects can differ greatly across various regions, influenced by factors such as technological infrastructure,

political priorities, and the readiness of institutions. Research indicates that digital diplomacy gives smaller nations and non-state actors a chance to raise their profiles on the global stage. Bjola and Holmes (2015)[1] point out that platforms like Twitter enable countries with fewer resources to connect with international audiences, circumventing the traditional barriers of international diplomacy. For example, Estonia has positioned itself as a frontrunner in digital diplomacy, utilizing its robust digital infrastructure to showcase its e-governance model and advance its national interests. On the other hand, the uptake of digital diplomacy in areas with limited technological access or restrictive political climates is inconsistent. Manor (2019)[2] observes that while Western democracies such as the United States and the United Kingdom have incorporated social media into their diplomatic approaches, authoritarian regimes often use these platforms mainly for propaganda or to engage domestic audiences. A case in point is China, which employs digital diplomacy to project soft power while tightly controlling online narratives.

Scholars highlight that cultural and political contexts play a significant role in how digital diplomacy transforms traditional practices. Asafo-Adjei (2024)[3], in her examination of African nations, points out that digital diplomacy often faces limitations due to infrastructural issues and a lack of digital literacy, leading to inconsistent advancements across the continent. In contrast, countries like South Korea leverage digital diplomacy to promote cultural exports such as K-pop, effectively merging traditional and contemporary methods to boost their global presence. These differences illustrate the intricate and changing dynamics between digital diplomacy and traditional practices. While the potential for change is clear, the global variations in execution emphasize the necessity for customized strategies that take into account local circumstances and technological resources.

Objectives:

· To analyse the impact of digital diplomacy on traditional diplomatic roles and functions.

· To examine the advantages and challenges associated with the use of social media in diplomacy.

·To assess the skills required for diplomats to effectively engage in digital diplomacy.

Transparency in Digital Diplomacy:

Digital platforms have increased transparency in diplomacy by enabling direct communication with global audiences via social media, bypassing traditional media. This fosters public trust and understanding but also poses risks such as superficial engagement, misinformation, and digital propaganda, challenging the effectiveness and credibility of diplomatic efforts in the digital age.

Increased Transparency: Direct Engagement and Public Trust

Digital platforms have opened up new avenues for governments to engage with international audiences. By circumventing traditional intermediaries like journalists and mainstream media, digital diplomacy enables direct communication that promotes greater transparency. Manor and Pamment (2019)[4] noted that countries such as Sweden and the United States have effectively utilized "Twitter diplomacy," leveraging the platform to inform global audiences about their policies, positions, and values. Sweden's

Foreign Ministry and U.S. officials during the Arab Spring used Twitter to share policy updates, engage with citizens, and support democratic movements. These actions showcased digital diplomacy's power to foster transparency, public trust, and participatory international engagement by breaking down traditional barriers between governments and global audiences.

Challenges to Transparency: The Superficial Nature of Digital Engagement

While digital diplomacy offers potential advantages, some scholars argue that the transparency it provides can be quite superficial. Duncombe (2017)[5] suggests that although governments may seem more open through their social media presence, the carefully crafted nature of digital content often conceals deeper political motives. Social media posts are usually tailored to fit specific narratives, showcase positive portrayals of governments, and target particular audiences. Consequently, the transparency associated with digital diplomacy may be more about performance than genuine openness.

For instance, a government's Twitter account might share frequent updates on policy initiatives, but these updates often leave out crucial details regarding behind-the-scenes negotiations or contentious decisions. This selective transparency can foster a misleading sense of openness, where audiences are only privy to the information that governments choose to share. Additionally, the character limits on platforms like Twitter can hinder in-depth discussions, reducing complex topics to oversimplified soundbites or slogans. As a result, audiences may end up with only a shallow understanding of the policies and positions being presented.

Risks: Misinformation Campaigns and Digital Propaganda

One of the major threats to transparency in digital diplomacy is the rise of misinformation campaigns and digital propaganda. Although digital platforms have made information more accessible, this have also opened the door for malicious actors to spread false or misleading narratives. Both state and non-state actors have increasingly turned to social media to sway public opinion and disrupt diplomatic initiatives. A notable example is the 2016 U.S. presidential election, where foreign entities exploited social media to disseminate misinformation, influence voters, and create division. These actions have shown how digital platforms can be weaponized to distort reality, making it challenging for governments to uphold credibility and transparency in their diplomatic endeavours. Digital platforms enable anonymous propaganda, with some governments using social media to promote state narratives and suppress dissent, undermining transparency and increasing global polarization.

Balancing Transparency and Credibility

To tackle these challenges, governments and diplomatic institutions need to find a balance between transparency and credibility. While it's crucial to keep open communication channels with global audiences, it's just as important to ensure that the information shared is accurate, substantive, and free from political manipulation. This calls for the adoption of best practices in digital diplomacy, such as fact-checking, encouraging dialogue, and promoting inclusivity. Bjola and Holmes (2015) argue that digital diplomacy should prioritize building long-term trust over simply projecting positive images. This means being open

about both successes and failures, engaging in meaningful two-way communication, and proactively addressing misinformation. For instance, some governments have set up dedicated units to monitor and counter misinformation online, which helps maintain the credibility and trustworthiness of their digital diplomacy efforts. Transparency is a key characteristic of digital diplomacy, allowing governments to connect directly with global audiences and build public trust. However, since this transparency often comes in the form of curated content, it can sometimes obscure underlying political motives, leading to a superficial sense of openness. Additionally, the rise of misinformation campaigns and digital propaganda presents significant threats to the credibility of digital diplomacy initiatives. To navigate these issues, governments must implement strategies that emphasize accuracy, inclusivity, and meaningful engagement, ensuring that digital platforms serve not only as tools for promoting transparency but also for fostering authentic dialogue and trust in international relations.

Diplomatic Skills in the Digital Age

The digital revolution has significantly transformed the way diplomacy is practiced, compelling modern diplomats to acquire a fresh set of skills to adeptly manoeuvre through the intricacies of the digital world. As traditional diplomatic tools are enhanced and, in certain instances, supplanted by digital technologies, it has become crucial for diplomats to be proficient in technical, cultural, and strategic skills. This expertise is vital for engaging global audiences, managing crises, and sustaining effective international relations.

Technological Proficiency

A vital skill for diplomats in today's digital landscape is technological proficiency. The growing reliance on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram for diplomatic communication requires a solid understanding of how these platforms operate. Zaharna and Uysal (2016)[6] highlight that contemporary diplomats need to be skilled not only in crafting messages but also in grasping social media algorithms, analytics, and trends. This technical knowledge enables diplomats to enhance their outreach, pinpoint key audiences, and evaluate the effectiveness of their communications. For example, understanding how algorithms prioritize content can assist diplomats in amplifying their messages by customizing posts to fit platform-specific preferences. Additionally, utilizing analytics tools allows diplomats to analyze engagement metrics, monitor audience behavior, and adjust communication strategies in real-time. This technological expertise ensures that diplomatic messages effectively reach their target audiences, thereby boosting the overall effectiveness of digital diplomacy initiatives.

Crisis Management

In today's fast-paced digital landscape, diplomats need to have strong crisis management skills. The rapid spread of information on social media can escalate a minor issue into a major crisis in just hours, requiring quick and strategic responses. Melissen (2015)[7] emphasizes the necessity of managing online disinformation and public outrage in real time as a vital component of digital diplomacy. A clear example of this is how social media influences narratives during international crises. When disinformation campaigns target governments or organizations, diplomats must respond quickly to counter false narratives, clarify their positions, and

reassure stakeholders. This not only demands the ability to identify and address misleading content but also the skill to communicate transparently and credibly under pressure. Additionally, effective crisis management in the digital era includes building resilience against cyberattacks and misinformation campaigns that can jeopardize diplomatic efforts.

Cultural and Strategic Adaptability

In addition to technical and crisis management skills, cultural and strategic adaptability are essential for effective diplomacy in today's digital landscape. Social media platforms function within unique cultural and regional frameworks, meaning that messages that resonate in one area may not have the same effect in another. Therefore, diplomats need to be culturally aware and flexible, adjusting their strategies to align with local customs and values while ensuring their overall messaging remains consistent. Strategic thinking is also crucial, as the digital environment often demands a balance between immediate engagement and long-term diplomatic objectives. The most successful diplomats are those who can utilize digital tools not just to tackle urgent issues but also to cultivate relationships, advance national interests, and promote mutual understanding over time. The digital era has transformed the skill set necessary for effective diplomacy, highlighting the need for technological know-how, crisis management abilities, and cultural adaptability.

Analysis:

Case Study 1: The Arab Spring – Amplifying Citizen Voices vs. Selective Government Transparency

The Arab Spring (2010–2012) is a striking example of how digital diplomacy has transformed the concept of transparency in international relations. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were crucial in amplifying citizens' voices, allowing grassroots movements to share real-time updates, organize protests, and attract global attention to their calls for democracy and human rights. Adesina (2017)[8] points out that these platforms enabled ordinary people to bypass traditional media filters and connect directly with international audiences, resulting in an unprecedented level of openness and transparency. Activists from Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, for example, utilized social media to document state violence, raise awareness, and rally support for regime change. However, the Arab Spring also revealed the limitations of transparency in the digital era, especially concerning government use of social media. While citizen-led movements leveraged these platforms to advocate for transparency, governments often used them selectively to manipulate narratives, deflect criticism, and maintain control over public discourse. This "selective transparency" highlights the complex nature of digital diplomacy, where the same tools that promote openness can also be used to obscure or distort the truth.

Case Study 2: China's Limited Adoption of Twitter Diplomacy vs. Western Openness

There is a notable difference in how China and Western countries adopt digital diplomacy. Seib (2016)[9] discusses how Western democracies, including the United States and Sweden, have utilized platforms like Twitter for open and transparent communication. For instance, former U.S. President Barack Obama and Sweden's Ministry of Foreign Affairs have leveraged Twitter to share real-time updates, clarify their policy positions, and build trust with

global audiences. This practice of "Twitter diplomacy" aligns with the values of openness and inclusivity, enhancing the perception of transparency in diplomatic interactions. In contrast, China's approach to digital diplomacy is much more cautious. Although Chinese officials have created accounts on platforms like Twitter and Facebook, these efforts are mainly aimed at international audiences rather than encouraging open dialogue within the country. China's limited use of Twitter diplomacy reflects its focus on controlling narratives and maintaining message discipline. Chinese diplomats frequently use social media to promote state-sponsored narratives, advance geopolitical interests, and counter Western criticisms, rather than fostering true transparency. This strategic approach underscores the different ways digital diplomacy is employed to encourage openness, influenced by political, cultural, and ideological factors.

What Skills Do Modern Diplomats Require?

Technology Adaptation

The rapid evolution of digital platforms and the growing threat of cybersecurity issues have made it essential for modern diplomats to adapt technologically. Bjola and Holmes (2015)[10] point out that diplomats need to be skilled in using social media, but they also need to understand the technologies behind these platforms. This includes knowledge of algorithms, data analytics, and digital marketing strategies, which are vital for improving outreach and customizing messages for specific audiences. Additionally, cybersecurity has become a major concern, as diplomatic communications face increasing risks from hacking, disinformation campaigns, and other cyber threats. For instance, during the 2020 U.S. presidential election, foreign entities exploited digital platforms to disseminate false information, underscoring the importance of diplomats establishing strong cybersecurity measures to protect their digital diplomacy initiatives.

Soft Skills: Engaging Diverse Cultural Audiences

While being technologically proficient is essential, soft skills are still fundamental to effective diplomacy. Sandre (2015) [11]emphasizes the significance of cultural adaptability, empathy, and communication skills when engaging with diverse audiences. Digital diplomacy functions within a global framework where cultural norms, values, and communication styles can differ greatly. Diplomats need to be aware of these variations and adjust their messages to ensure they resonate with their target audiences. For example, campaigns that thrive in one cultural setting might not succeed in another due to variations in language, symbolism, or humor. There is need of enhancement in technical skills with the capacity to build relationships, encourage mutual understanding, and navigate the intricacies of intercultural communication.

Balancing Technology and Human Interaction

Modern diplomacy involves more than just mastering technology; it requires the integration of these tools into comprehensive diplomatic strategies. Diplomats need to find a balance between utilizing digital platforms and preserving the interpersonal skills that have always been vital to traditional diplomacy. This means building trust through face-to-face interactions, creating networks of allies, and resolving conflicts in ways that digital tools alone cannot achieve. By merging technological proficiency with strong interpersonal and cultural skills, diplomats can effectively address the challenges of the digital age while adhering to

the core principles of successful diplomacy. Digital diplomacy has certainly enhanced transparency in certain areas, allowing governments to connect directly with global audiences and build public trust. Proficiency in technology and cybersecurity has become essential, while soft skills like cultural adaptability and effective communication are still crucial for engaging diverse audiences. By honing these skills, diplomats can successfully navigate the intricacies of digital diplomacy, balancing openness with narrative control to foster mutual understanding and further national interests.

Balancing Traditional and Digital Practices:

The advent of digital diplomacy has brought both opportunities and challenges to the practice of international relations. Digital tools offer unparalleled accessibility, speed, and direct engagement with global audiences, transforming how states communicate their policies and foster international relationships. However, these tools cannot fully replace the nuanced, interpersonal negotiations of traditional diplomacy. Instead, experts argue for a hybrid approach, integrating the strengths of digital tools into conventional diplomatic frameworks to achieve a balanced and effective practice.

Accessibility and Speed in Digital Diplomacy

Digital platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube enable diplomats to engage directly with citizens and stakeholders in real-time, effectively bypassing traditional media channels. This newfound accessibility has significantly accelerated the pace at which governments can address crises, clarify their policy positions, or promote cultural initiatives. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, digital diplomacy played a crucial role in coordinating international responses, sharing health information, and countering misinformation. Countries like the United States and Sweden utilized Twitter to provide real-time updates on travel restrictions, vaccine distributions, and public health guidelines, demonstrating how these platforms can improve efficiency and transparency. Nevertheless, while digital diplomacy is impressive in terms of speed and reach, it often falls short in the depth and complexity that traditional diplomatic negotiations offer. Traditional diplomacy allows for more nuanced discussions that are not limited by the concise or performative nature of social media.

The Hybrid Approach: Complementing, Not Replacing

Hocking and Melissen (2015)[12] propose a hybrid approach to diplomacy, emphasizing the use of digital tools to enhance, rather than replace, traditional methods. This perspective highlights that digital diplomacy achieves the best results when it is woven into broader diplomatic strategies. For example, social media can play a crucial role in preparing for negotiations by influencing public opinion or signalling intentions, while traditional diplomacy is utilized to finalize agreements and tackle complex issues. A concrete illustration of this hybrid strategy is the European Union's engagement with digital platforms to advance its climate change agenda. The EU employs social media campaigns to increase awareness, rally public support, and convey its policy objectives. Concurrently, it relies on traditional diplomatic channels to negotiate agreements with other countries, ensuring that public messaging is supported by meaningful actions. This blend of digital and traditional approaches enables the EU to harness the advantages of both, thereby improving its overall diplomatic effectiveness.

Challenges of Balancing Digital and Traditional Practices

While the hybrid approach offers various advantages, it also presents certain challenges. A major concern is that digital tools might weaken traditional diplomacy by emphasizing public relations over meaningful engagement. The performative aspect of social media can lead to a "diplomatic theatre," where governments concentrate on crafting favourable images instead of tackling core issues. This lack of depth can damage trust and credibility, especially when online campaigns do not reflect genuine actions in the real world. Furthermore, incorporating digital tools into established practices necessitates that diplomats develop new skills and adapt to changing technologies. This technological expertise needs to be complemented by traditional skills like negotiation, cultural awareness, and strategic thinking, underscoring the intricacies of the hybrid approach.

CONCLUSION:

Digital diplomacy has significantly changed the landscape of international relations, providing governments with innovative tools to improve transparency, connect with global audiences, and react to crises in real-time. The quick and accessible nature of digital platforms enables direct communication that sidesteps traditional media filters, promoting public trust and engagement. However, this enhanced transparency can be limited by the selective nature of digital content, which may obscure deeper political motives. Additionally, the emergence of misinformation campaigns and digital propaganda presents serious challenges to the credibility of digital diplomacy, making it harder to establish trust and foster mutual understanding. Another drawback of digital diplomacy is its inability to capture the depth and intricacies of traditional diplomatic negotiations. While social media is effective for outreach and public interaction, it cannot substitute for the personal relationships, discretion, and trust-building that is vital to conventional diplomacy.

Findings

· Digital diplomacy enhances transparency, engagement, and crisis communication, allowing states to interact directly with global audiences.

· Smaller states and non-state actors benefit from digital diplomacy by amplifying their voices and influencing global narratives.

· Challenges include misinformation, cybersecurity threats, and the potential misuse of digital platforms for propaganda or disinformation.

· The success of digital diplomacy depends on factors such as technological infrastructure, political context, and institutional readiness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

· Governments should invest in digital infrastructure and training programs to enhance diplomats' digital communication skills.

· Diplomatic institutions must develop strategies to counter misinformation and cyber threats effectively.

· A balanced approach is needed, integrating digital diplomacy while preserving core diplomatic principles such as trust, discretion, and mutual understanding.

· International organizations should establish guidelines for ethical and responsible digital diplomacy to prevent misuse and enhance global cooperation.

As digital diplomacy continues to evolve, diplomats must adapt to the changing landscape while maintaining the foundational values of traditional diplomacy.

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