

Has the rise of digital communication fundamentally changed the practice and purpose of diplomacy in recent decades?

Introduction

This essay discusses whether the rise of digital communication (i.e., the internet and digital diplomacy) has altered the practice and purpose of diplomacy in recent decades. Whilst Hocking and Melissen (2015) note that there is a lack of precision around the definitions offered for digital diplomacy, for the purposes of the essay, digital diplomacy is defined as, “a strategy for managing change through digital tools and virtual collaborations” (Bjola and Holmes, 2018; p. 4). This definition was chosen, from amongst the multiple definitions of digital diplomacy, because it emphasises the role that digital technologies play in diplomatic efforts and also refers to international relations and how this field is evolving due to the emergence of digital communication.

Discussion

Digital diplomacy, which is a product of globalisation and the emergence of public diplomacy, is considered a significant threat to diplomatic communication (Rashica, 2018). As Hocking and Melissen (2015) note, digitalization has had a major impact on both the structure of diplomacy, at all levels, and the forms/ways in which diplomacy is conducted. The different models of diplomacy are all being affected by the developments in digital communication: consular diplomacy has been affected by the demand, from citizens, for government services to be delivered speedily, meeting the expected technological standards (Hocking and Melissen, 2015). Public diplomacy has been, and continues to be, affected by the new dynamics introduced by social media, offering both unimaginable opportunities for public diplomacy but also a leading to a plethora of challenges to those involved in delivering public diplomacy (Hocking and Melissen, 2015).

International diplomacy, involving international negotiation, has experienced a fundamental shift in its structures and processes due to the development of digital diplomacy: what, previously, would have been undertaken face-to-face is now often performed in a hybrid state: partly offline and partly online, which facilitates opportunities but which presents multiple challenges (Hocking and Melissen, 2015). This means that pre-existing forms of communication have adapted to the emergence of new digital technologies, generating hybrid media environments in

which there is a mix of old and new modes of communication available within government, in transnational multi-stake environments and also in the relations (both friendly and unfriendly) between states (Chadwick, 2013).

This tendency towards hybridity appears to be creating more complex diplomatic scenarios, given the widening number of forms/ways of making statements in the digital world (Chadwick, 2013). This has had multiple impacts on foreign policy development and negotiation, including a transformation of diplomatic agendas, as governments assert less control over events and agendas, and the emergence of cyber-agendas including concerns about digital freedom, internet governance and cyber-security (Hocking and Melissen, 2015). Additionally, digital democracy has not only led to public diplomacy but is also affecting diplomatic functions which is shaping how foreign policy is operationalised (Hocking and Melissen, 2015). Given that digital diplomacy is changing the foreign policy landscape, it is imperative that governments adapt and position themselves to be able to use digital communication to their advantage (Hocking and Melissen, 2015).

Schmidt and Cohen (2013) suggest that governments need to strategize for two forms of diplomacy: online and offline, but it is likely that governments will need to integrate these two forms of diplomacy into a more evolved hybrid model to accommodate both the old and new ways of addressing diplomacy. As Hocking and Melissen (2015) discuss, social media has led to ultra-fast communication that is less precise and within which mistakes are accepted as a natural consequence of this fast-paced environment. This would have been unheard of in traditional, non-digital, forms of diplomacy, where a mistake could have wreaked havoc on both diplomatic efforts and the tentative agreements emerging from negotiations.

As Hocking and Melissen (2015) note, forms of communication have changed significantly throughout history and the key questions to answer when pondering whether digital diplomacy has, and will, fundamentally change the practice of diplomacy is whether the new form of communication alters human behaviour and whether it acts as a useful tool or as a constraint. It is clear that the digital tools that are enabling digital democracy are altering human behaviour in that they have encouraged a sense of immediacy in users, which is often not favourable for the

practice of diplomacy. Whilst they act as a tool for enabling these hybrid forms of diplomacy, they can also act as a constraint on the delivery of considered responses and allowing time for negotiations to play out, given the behavioural changes they have ushered in.

This leads to the effects we are seeing now with social media leading to an erosion of democratic power structures with social media platforms, which are being increasingly manipulated to skew to a certain political persuasion, reinforcing authoritarian power structures (Al-Zaman and Norman, 2024). This ultimately reduces the scope for action for diplomats and ambassadors, essentially reducing their diplomatic utility (Hocking and Melissen, 2015). The recent takeover of Twitter by the far-right leaning Elon Musk (Anderson, 2023), which has boosted contentious actors on the platform (Barrie, 2023), and the recent decision to remove fact checking on Meta (Savov, 2024) has the potential to hasten the descent of social media into hotbeds of misinformation which can be manipulated in favour of authoritarianism (Ospina et al., 2023).

As Hocking and Melissen (2015) note, the increasing size of the data shared on social media platforms leads to the acceptance of inaccuracy, by virtue of the fact that large size leads to an increasing number of inaccuracies, with causality being replaced by correlation when it comes to the reasoning behind arguments. The capacity of Big Data to predict patterns has also been subject to inappropriate use such as profiling and the targeting of certain voters, as occurred in the Cambridge Analytica scandal (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, 2018). This appears to be leading to a situation in which there is a triumph of data over politics, as governments (and diplomats) come to accept that sheer quantities of information hold greater sway with the public than political debate, policy development and sound, fact-based, reasoning to support policy choices (Hocking and Melissen, 2015).

Whilst Big Data can have beneficial applications, including supporting crisis management and speeding up policy making and negotiation, alongside mapping the emergence, movement and spread of social movements (such as the Arab Spring), access to large databases has negative implications for age-old diplomatic

processes including information gathering (Hocking and Melissen, 2015). This is weakening the hierarchical links between the people and institutions of diplomacy and is also encouraging government to view citizens as consumers (Hocking and Melissen, 2015).

This has meant that power has shifted from the few to the many which, coupled with the behavioural and political changes being ushered in by social media, means that the transfer of data and the execution of operations, plus the lack of privacy enabled by digital tools, is eroding the concept of a private life. This erosion of privacy has significant implications for diplomacy both due to the increased transparency this enables but also due to the possibilities for undermining diplomacy embedded within this eroded state. As Edward Snowden revealed (Gray, 2014), this erosion of privacy led to much more than just state-led surveillance: it has already led to, or has the potential to lead to, systemic overreach, increasing fragility of international trust and a distortion of the balance between national security and the infringement of individual rights (Park and Jang, 2017).

Following Snowden's arguably heroic actions, diplomatic tensions increased as nation states became wary of other nation states because of the suspicion that information gained through surveillance was being used to manipulate diplomatic procedures (Lucas, 2014). This has led to a general sense of suspicion and to challenges to diplomatic norms including confidentiality (Lucas, 2014). This means that, in essence, these diplomatic norms have been fundamentally changed by digital communication methods and the surveillance these enabled (Gray, 2014).

This has led to a situation in which new diplomatic frameworks (potentially cyber diplomacy-based frameworks) are needed to address privacy concerns, establish new boundaries for transparency and establish new conditions for the establishment of trust between nation states (Radanliev, 2023). Yet, as Hocking and Melissen (2015) note, few governments are currently attempting to leverage social media to involve people in public policy processes or to improve the delivery of public services, let alone to reinforce diplomatic standards, processes and norms.

As Fletcher (2016) notes, in the *Future FCO* report, these disruptions to diplomacy have been occurring at a time when diplomatic efforts already lack adequate resources, political will and organisational energy to effect long-lasting and effective change. This is because the very things that diplomacy represents – states, hierarchies, authority and sovereignty – are being eroded by digital communication (Timmers, 2023). This means that digital communication is simultaneously increasing the challenges to diplomacy whilst reducing the ability of governments to shore up diplomatic efforts by addressing these challenges (Fletcher, 2016).

Despite this recognition, Fletcher (2016) makes several recommendations to address the challenges to diplomacy, including adopting a more purposeful approach to democracy, so that diplomacy aligns with national interests and strategic international interests, ensuring that all acts of diplomacy contribute to the global objectives of the UK. Other recommendations include making diplomatic structures more agile, and therefore more flexible and responsive, and increasing digital proficiency of staff and increasing digital literacy to improve engagement, understanding and critical analysis of diplomatic communications, regardless of the medium of choice (Fletcher, 2016).

Other suggestions for improvement include building in greater transparency and inter-department and international collaborations with a view to encouraging the collective addressing of diplomatic challenges (Fletcher, 2016). Yet whilst the recommendations made in the *Future FCO* report (Fletcher, 2016) aim to address some basic flaws in forms and practices in diplomacy, they appear inadequate to address the many and varied threats to diplomacy posed by digital communication and the largely unguided evolution of digital diplomacy (Adesina and Summers, 2017). It is clear that ongoing changes will be needed to address the dynamic threats to diplomacy posed by the rise of multiple forms of digital communication, including cybersecurity threats (Rashica, 2018).

Aside from privacy concerns and concerns about the erosion of democratic processes and the rise of authoritarianism, another cause for concern regarding digital communication was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Bjola and Manor (2020) discuss, during the COVID-19 pandemic, unscientific information, and

misinformation, spread rapidly across social media, leading to situations in which large swathes of the populations of certain nations (including the US and the UK) refused to accept mask mandates. A scientifically-based public health recommendation was challenged, and became a politically charged issue and a point of political division and contention, largely due to misinformation spread across social media.

As Bjola and Manor (2020) note, despite this emergence of this wave of anti-scientific beliefs causing political division, the benefits of digital diplomacy were highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing international efforts to stem the spread of the virus, allowing consular assistance to be provided to citizens stranded abroad and allowing equipment and vaccines to be sought and acquired from abroad. Digital diplomacy played a crucial role in the diplomatic management of the COVID-19 crisis, without which the situation was ripe for a descent into chaos and the loss of an even greater number of lives worldwide. As Bjola and Manor (2020) discuss, during the COVID-19 pandemic, digital diplomacy proved its utility in crisis management and also, to some extent, its ability to combat misinformation.

As the fully digital, and networked, approach to diplomacy used during the COVID-19 pandemic showed, and as the network diplomacy theory (Metzl, 2001) suggests, digital communication has led to a more decentralised form of diplomacy, leading to a broader-based, networked, form of diplomacy, with this establishing a basis for new relationships between government foreign policy actors and global constituencies and for nurturing internal governmental networks and the broader networks outside of government (Sevin and Manor, 2019). Yet, as Hocking and Melissen (2015) point out, digital diplomacy and hybrid forms of diplomacy are vulnerable to misinformation, to cyberattacks and also to espionage, given their digital, networked nature, meaning that either greater security measures or an entirely new approach to diplomacy are developed and implemented. As Fletcher (2016) reveals, however, it is clear that the UK government, at least, is not adequately prepared to fully embrace digital diplomacy in this manner.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in response to the question, “Has the rise of digital communication fundamentally changed the practice and purpose of diplomacy in recent decades?”, the essay has argued that, yes, digital communication has fundamentally changed the practice of diplomacy, and the forms in which diplomacy is delivered. The purpose of diplomacy, however, as highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, remains largely the same: to prevent conflicts and thereby maintain peace and stability, to promote national interests and to foster cooperation internationally. It is clear, however, that certain developments (including the rise of misinformation and cybersecurity threats, amongst others) have the potential to destabilize digital diplomacy. As such, the UK government must develop and implement effective safeguards to protect the integrity of their digital diplomacy platforms and must develop new models of digital diplomacy to protect both governmental and national strategic aims.

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