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CONVENTIONAL DIPLOMACY VS. DIGITAL REALITY

Viktoriia Gulenko

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine ¹

Rapidly changing environmental conditions, technological development, and the emergence of artificial intelligence inevitably encourage diplomats to seek ways to remain relevant given the volume of information, speedup of the processes, and the need to improve the quality of services and change communication methods. Will diplomacy remain competitive in the era of new threats and opportunities? This article provides a glance at the alternatives to be used along with traditional tools of diplomacy to fulfil complex multifunctional diplomatic tasks for the benefit of foreign policy.

What Is Diplomacy and What Are Its Main Functions?

Diplomacy as an instrument of foreign policy is seen, in its conventional sense, as an art of conducting negotiations between representatives of states who help governments to implement, as well as protect, interests of their states abroad. According to the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of 1961², the main functions of a diplomat are to represent a state in another state, protect its interests and interests of its nationals, negotiate, promote friendly relations between the states, and develop economic, cultural, and scientific relations.

However, the context of diplomatic work is changing constantly. If we take a bilateral format, there are many cases of transformations in the foreign policy of the state depending on the change of the

government or one or the other policy direction. Nuances of politics, culture, and worldview based mainly on age-old traditions and sometimes on the religion of the receiving state can differ considerably from those of the sending state. This makes it more difficult to search for common grounds and interests between the two states.

Promotion of national interests of the sending state with an eye on policy and interests of the receiving state may vary significantly. This should envisage the generation of alternative scenarios for the promotion of national interests in a particular state. A multilateral format provides for negotiation in the interests of the home state.

Negotiation is a dialogue between two or more parties with an aim to reach a beneficial outcome. The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines negotiation as

1 The views expressed in the article are the author's only and do not necessarily reflect those of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine.

2 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, "United Nations Treaty Collection", 1961 [https://treaties.un.org/pages/viewdetails.aspx?src=treaty&mtdsg_no=iii-3&chapter=3&lang=en].

a "formal discussion between parties who are trying to reach an agreement".³ The UN Charter considers it as a "peaceful mean of the pacific settlement of disputes".⁴ At the same time, negotiation is a challenging process and its success depends on the political will of the parties as well as the preparedness of the diplomats involved.



Global Affairs Canada and the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office have been already effectively using geocoding and social media mapping to identify the needs of their nationals abroad and to develop the most resonating messages

As a general rule, negotiations lead to a conclusion of an international agreement that should take into consideration the interests of all parties, leaving a little gap for the parties to approve it at the national level. However, enforcement of international agreements requires the goodwill of the governments to respect them due to the natural sovereignty of states and the lack of international coercive mechanisms. In this context, diplomacy represents a complex tool with a purpose to get an adversary or an ally on one's side at least for some time.

The bigger part of diplomatic work also involves providing consular services and protection. This includes facilitating travel, including disaster and crisis management, acting as notary and civil registrar, performing other administrative functions, safeguarding the interests of minors and other persons lacking full capacity, representing nationals before tribunals

and other authorities, exercising rights of supervision and inspection, extending assistance to vessels and aircraft registered in that state and to their crews, and many others.

All these complex processes provide diplomats with the need to set multifunctional tasks. However, the classic performance of complex diplomatic tasks is facing in the recent decade the fastest ever evolution of the information accompanied by a change of mindsets of the people, governments, and the way business is done.

What the World Looks Like Today in the Information Age

Rapidly changing environmental conditions, technological development, and emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) lead to the need to adapt to new realities. There is an urgent need to simplify processes, increase efficiency due to the enormous volumes of information and speeding up of the processes, improve the quality of services in consular protection, and change the way messages are delivered.

AI and Big Data

One could argue about a disruptive impact of AI applications on our societies, but we had better look for opportunities that AI can bring to facilitate the management of the increasing data volumes that an ordinary person cannot cover. AI machines are programmed to process big data with a multitude of algorithms, but they can be used to spread massive disinformation campaigns and as a tool to predict possible humanitarian crises, forecast election results and economic development, design multilevel negotiations, and help to provide efficient public services.

³ Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, n.d. [<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>].

⁴ Charter of the United Nations, 26 June 1945 [<https://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/un-charter-full-text/>].

While some countries are struggling with human rights and promotion of democracy, and Russia and Brazil are still depending on foreign internet companies to sustain the Web, the liberal democratic order is facing a new reality as China is investing in AI, intending to be the world leader in AI theories, technologies, and applications by 2030⁵. Information and data security are at the heart of Chinese national security and defense strategies. Facial and voice recognition technologies, drones and automated submarines, social networks and payment systems are the main features of its authoritarian governance exercising tight control over population. That may be a reason why the United States and most EU countries are highly opposing the dissemination of 5G on their territories.

Global Affairs Canada and the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office have been already effectively using geo-coding and social media mapping to identify the needs of their nationals abroad and to develop the most resonating messages. Using the good practices of our colleagues from the UK – such as apps that gather hundreds of thousands of multilingual news sources from around the world and local publications and translate them into your language, remove extremist behaviour information and disinformation targeted campaigns – could ease a huge load of diplomatic work, allowing diplomats to focus on a more proactive approach to crisis management and promotion of national

interests. According to Graham Nelson, the founder of the UK Foreign Office's Open Source Unit (OSU), "It's not about what data can do for diplomacy. It is how diplomacy can remain relevant unless we embrace data".⁶

Social Media

Social networking is one of the most popular online activities worldwide. Social media companies such as Facebook, Twitter, and Weibo are very influential in terms of online interaction and targeted messaging. They are not only a tool to connect people; all of them have their audience, purpose, and outcome.

To understand the tendency and the share of social networks worldwide, one should look at such criteria as the social network itself and the purpose of its creation, country of usage, distribution by age and gender. A look at countries' profiles can also help reveal some differences among major geopolitical players.

Facebook, primarily created as a networking tool for students, is now the biggest social network worldwide with more than 2.5 billion global monthly active users that enables a well-targeted space for promoting ideas and interests whether they are commercial or others. In the beginning of 2020, Facebook accounted for 76% of all social media site visits in the United Kingdom⁷, just like in India⁸. Facebook is

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- 5 *Mapping the Challenges and Opportunities of Artificial Intelligence for the Conduct of Diplomacy*, DiploFoundation, January 2019 [<https://www.diplomacy.edu/sites/default/files/AI-diplo-report.pdf>].
- 6 N. Rohaidi, *Exclusive: Meet the UK's 'Data Diplomat'*. Interview with Graham Nelson, Founder of the Open Source Unit in the Foreign Office, "GovInsider", 12 March 2019 [<https://govinsider.asia/innovation/uk-foreign-office-open-source-unit-data-diplomat-graham-nelson/>].
- 7 J. Johnson, *Leading Social Networks by Share of Visits in the UK as of April 2020*, "Statista", 15 May 2020 [<https://www.statista.com/statistics/280295/market-share-held-by-the-leading-social-networks-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>].
- 8 S. Diwanji, *Social Network Penetration India Q3 2019*, "Statista", 07 May 2020 [<https://www.statista.com/statistics/284436/india-social-network-penetration/>].

actively used in the United States⁹ and in Russia¹⁰.

Since its launch in 2005, YouTube has grown from a repository of amateur videos into the biggest online video platform worldwide, featuring a wide variety of content that ranges from music videos to educational clips, political discussions, and journalistic investigations. In 2019, YouTube recorded an estimated 1.68 billion users and is particularly popular with younger internet users. YouTube is the most active social network among internet users in the United Kingdom¹¹, India,¹² and Russia¹³.

Ranking behind Snapchat, Instagram is one of the most popular social networks among teenagers in the United States and has one billion followers worldwide. Instagram is dominated mostly by younger users below the age of 35¹⁴.

Twitter has become an increasingly relevant tool in domestic and international politics, with many elected officials, governments,

and ministries having official Twitter accounts to make announcements and engage with the general population. US President Donald Trump is known to be a prolific Twitter user¹⁵. In February 2020, Twitter ranked second of all US¹⁶ social media site visits, following Facebook. It is also very popular in the United Kingdom¹⁷ and Russia¹⁸.

While social networking in the United States, India, and some European countries looks pretty much the same, statistics in such countries as China and Russia are a bit different.

Although Western social networks have significant user bases in Russia, Russians tend to display a preference for home-grown services such as VKontakte and Ok.ru, or formerly Odnoklassniki¹⁹. Ok.ru, created as a platform for finding former classmates, was popular among the older rather than younger population of the country²⁰. In contrast, VKontakte is used mostly by younger users below the age of 35²¹.

9 J. Clement, *Social Media Usage in the United States – Statistics & Facts*, "Statista", 19 May 2020 [https://www.statista.com/topics/3196/social-media-usage-in-the-united-states/#dossierSummary_chapter2].

10 A. Melkadze, *Ranking of Social Media Platforms in Russia Q3 2019, by Users Share*, "Statista", 03 Mar 2020 [https://www.statista.com/statistics/284447/russia-social-network-penetration/].

11 J. Johnson, *YouTube: Share of Social Network Website Visits in the United Kingdom (UK) 2015-2020*, "Statista", 7 May 2020 [https://www.statista.com/statistics/280314/youtubes-social-network-market-share-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/].

12 Johnson, n7.

13 Clement, n9.

14 J. Clement, *Countries with the Most Instagram Users 2020*, "Statista", 24 April 2020 [https://www.statista.com/statistics/578364/countries-with-most-instagram-users/].

15 J. Clement, *World Leaders with the Most Twitter Followers 2020*, "Statista", 06 May 2020 [https://www.statista.com/statistics/281375/heads-of-state-with-the-most-twitter-followers/].

16 J. Clement, *Countries with the Most Twitter Users 2020*, "Statista", 24 April 2020 [https://www.statista.com/statistics/242606/number-of-active-twitter-users-in-selected-countries/].

17 Rohaidi, n6.

18 Clement, n9.

19 Clement, n9.

20 D. Elagina, *Age Distribution of Ok.ru Users in Russia in 2018*, "Statista", 07 November 2019 [https://www.statista.com/statistics/1065018/russia-odnoklassniki-users-share-by-age/].

21 A. Melkadze, *Vk.com Users in Russia 2019, by Age*, "Statista", 09 April 2020 [https://www.statista.com/statistics/990462/vk-users-age-distribution-russia/].

Due to the Chinese government's internet censorship, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, the leading international social media players, are all blocked in China. However, China's social media landscape is not incomparable with its Western counterparts. Tencent's Qzone, one of the best-known social network sites, microblogging site Sina Weibo, video sharing app Youku Tudou, short-form video app Douyin (aka TikTok) are just a few among the most popular Chinese social media examples²².

Today, the delivery of information should not necessarily be direct but should be designated to the right audience. The youngest Americans will hear a message delivered not through Twitter but rather via Instagram; the youngest Russians would prefer to receive it through VKontakte; the Chinese will not hear it through any of Western social networks. And it doesn't matter if one writes a no-name single tweet or if it is one of the famous politicians as long as one writes the things that people are worried about in a specific country, using the right platform and language. Today we can no longer ignore the presence of social media in our lives, and that will last for a long time.

Mindset of a New Generation

The increasing role of social networks should be owed to the generation of millennials, who were born at the time of active development of the Information Age. This is a generation that cannot imagine their life without digital technology and social media. At the same time, their superficial knowledge does not make them foolish but forces millennials to be critical about the massive amount of the information they receive through the Web.

The way in which the generation X or baby boomers perceive them differs a lot from their view of the world.



Understanding the audience gives diplomats the power to manage it and to lead in the needed direction

In *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, Neil Howe and William Strauss wrote that millennials "will correct what they will perceive to be the mistakes of boomers, by placing positivism over negativism, trust over cynicism, science over spiritualism, the team over self, duties over rights, honor over feeling, action over words". A 2000 *New York Times* review of this book, titled "What's the Matter with Kids Today? Not a Thing", described millennials as "a cohort of kids who are smarter, more industrious and better behaved than any generation before".²³

Understanding the audience gives diplomats the power to manage it and to lead in the needed direction.

Desired Outcomes and Alternatives for Traditional Diplomacy

The main purpose of diplomacy is to establish mutually beneficial cooperation between states using peaceful means. No one would disagree that the traditional tools of diplomacy like negotiations are effective for this purpose. But today we have to consider that due to the continuous digital transformation of the world and the value of social media in everyday lives, the concept

22 J. Clement, *Global Social Networks Ranked by Number of Users 2020*, "Statista", 24 April 2020 [<https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>].

23 *New York Times* Book Review "What's the Matter with Kids Today? Not a Thing", 05 November 2000 [<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/11/05/reviews/001105.05brookst.html?mcubz=3>].

of delivering the message has completely changed. Social media play a prominent role in fostering a true dialogue between decision makers and citizens, diplomats and foreign publics.

This flips upside down the communication between governments. Today it appears if you want to reach out to your counterparts in a foreign government, first you have to deliver your message to the foreign public, which will automatically ensure that your message has been heard. Without realising the effectiveness of this process, policymakers may lose their advantage in negotiations.



Today it appears if you want to reach out to your counterparts in a foreign government, first you have to deliver your message to the foreign public

“Public diplomacy”, “cultural diplomacy”, or “strategic communication”, whatever you call it, is seen today as the most promising sphere of diplomacy in general. Sometimes also called “people’s diplomacy”, it is a direct communication between government and foreign public. The concept was invented by a former US diplomat Edmund Gullion in the mid-1960s to distance Western information campaigns from the Soviet propaganda. Unlike propaganda, *public diplomacy* is considered a transparent tool that a state uses to communicate with the foreign public to inform and influence overseas audiences, aiming at promoting national interests and implementing foreign policy’s strategic goals.

As experience shows, the formation of a person’s position or change of his/her opinion on a particular issue is a long and difficult process. Public diplomacy is used in the framework of building a long-term

strategy to influence the formation of mass consciousness to change certain frameworks of worldview and behaviour.

The promotion of state interests only in the political sphere is ineffective due to the conservatism of some societies, their nationalist orientation, consideration of partners through the prism of their interests, reluctance to progressive change, the pursuit of stability that is generally normal for modern societies. Politics in its purest form is not interesting to the public, which is not accustomed to compromising the comfort today for a better future imposed on them from abroad.

Public diplomacy can be differentiated into two types, according to long-term or short-term desired outcomes.

A long-standing strategy of promotion of national interests includes branding or cultural communication that is closely linked with the image of a country in the world. It helps to build cultural and social ties with a foreign audience, which would facilitate long-term cooperation in multiple domains. During the Cold War, for example, the United States used public diplomacy to promote freedom and human rights as components of democracy and alternatives to the Soviet authoritarian regime. Voice of America broadcasted directly into the Warsaw Pact nations of Eastern Europe to dispel myths about the West and to support values of Western democracies among European states.

Along with state branding exchanges of schoolchildren, scholars, and students, school and university partnerships used by the US during the Cold War until now have proven their effectiveness and made millions of people change their attitude towards the West. The main objective of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), created by President John F. Kennedy in 1961, is “in support of

America's foreign policy" to "strengthen democratic governance abroad", "promote American prosperity through investments that expand markets for U.S. exports, create a level playing field for U.S. businesses".²⁴

Other good examples of foreign cultural diplomacy are: Institut Français, with its aim to spread the French language and culture, as well as establish long-term partnerships with host-country actors in the fields of education, science, culture, and creativity; British Council, with a purpose to strengthen interstate ties in the arts, English, higher education, and society; Goethe Institute, aimed at spreading the German language abroad, information about Germany, its cultural, social, and political life, promoting intercultural cooperation and dialogue, supporting the development of civil society structures, and promoting global mobility.

The second type of public diplomacy includes various policies aimed at fostering more rapid results, sometimes called political advocacy. Political advocacy campaigns are aimed at convincing quickly foreign audiences to support one or the other policy direction. For these purposes, the use of social media and opinion leaders should be essential.

Whether we like it or not, we should not underestimate the role of social networks in shaping the opinion of social groups and encouraging the governments to take popular or unpopular decisions, justified or not. Knowing how to write a *note verbale* is not enough anymore to be a brother-in-law among the foreign public and to be able to form an opinion. Instead, 280 characters of a tweet cope better with this task and can roll the world upside down. It is amazing how unknown bloggers create a new reality that the governments have to face in their politics.

While searching for opinion leaders, it is important not to forget religious leaders and communities, which may play a very strong political and ethical role in a society, as well as the diaspora, which may be influential in the receiving state.



our main job should be to identify the opportunities that new technologies could bring to better serve diplomacy and foreign policy goals

However, using the wrong social network or language may lead to serious mistakes that the ministries of foreign affairs are not always informed about. So it is better to be aware and use the opportunities of new technologies to facilitate better results in promoting national interests.

Conclusions

Diplomacy as a tool of foreign policy requires setting multifunctional tasks. Facing rapidly changing environmental conditions, technological development, and the emergence of artificial intelligence, our main job should be to identify the opportunities that new technologies could bring to better serve diplomacy and foreign policy goals.

The urgent need to simplify the processes and increase efficiency encourages diplomats to seek ways to remain relevant and not to get confused given the large volumes of information. Improvement of the quality of services, as in the case of consular protection, is a key to securing trust of the citizens and may be used for political

²⁴ *Mission, Vision, Values*, United States Agency for International Development, n.d. [<https://www.usaid.gov/who-we-are/mission-vision-values>].

advocacy. There is no need to reinvent the wheel, but it is essential to use the best practices of our counterparts and private sector companies.

The use of different social media by applying an analytical approach identifying its purpose, desired outcome, popularity in the country, language of communication, social and gender distribution could foster a long-standing dialogue with foreign publics, aiming at the promotion of foreign policy goals. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube remain the most popular social networks in the Western part of the world. Instagram and TikTok are dominated mostly by younger users below the age of 35. In Russia and China, people prefer domestically produced networks such as VKontakte, Weibo, and Youku Tudou.

As defined in the *Sustainable Development Agenda*, the main goal of diplomacy is to serve future generations for better living. Understanding the needs of new generations and mostly younger people gives policymakers and diplomats the true power to reach their hearts and build self-reliant relationships.

Change in the way of message delivery forces governments to compete for wider influence by changing worldview and

behaviour frameworks of the foreign public. Public diplomacy gives us effective tools for competitiveness, self-defence, tackling disinformation campaigns, and promoting a positive image of a country abroad.

It is extremely important to convey to foreign audiences the diversity of modern Ukrainian culture and create a new vision of Ukraine in the world. This could be possible by means of a long-term strategy for cultural and social cooperation around the world with hidden elements of political messaging that would expose common grounds between cultures and traditions of different societies and Ukraine and create long-lasting ties between the people of different states in the future.

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