

UA: UKRAINE ANALYTICA

Issue 2 (20), 2020

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YEARS

Diplomacy

Editors

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Publisher:

Published by NGO "Promotion of Intercultural Cooperation" (Ukraine), Centre of International Studies (Ukraine), with the financial support of the Representation of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Ukraine, the Black Sea Trust.

UA: Ukraine Analytica is the first Ukrainian analytical journal in English on International Relations, Politics and Economics. The journal is aimed for experts, diplomats, academics, students interested in the international relations and Ukraine in particular.

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ISSN 2518-7481

500 copies

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DIGITAL DIPLOMACY: HOW INTERNATIONAL ACTORS TRANSFORM THEIR FOREIGN POLICY ACTIVITY

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Communication technologies have created new opportunities for the promotion of states' interests, ensuring interactive dialogue with the world. Digital diplomacy has gone beyond foreign policy institutions, reaching more target groups and changing the efficiency of the diplomatic missions' activity abroad. After the first meeting between diplomats and officials, online technologies enable further communication through devices or social platforms as well as ensure regular receipt of information by potential audiences. As a result, the role of ambassadors is being reviewed, not in legal terms, but in the sense of transforming their activities in the host country. Sometimes diplomats can be transformed into media stars or lifesavers. The article also presents current positive practices of the USA, the EU, and Ukraine in digital diplomacy.

Technologies are changing the traditional understanding of communication in foreign policy, which contributes to the transformation of feedback, conversion of one-way communication into interactive conversations, and development of new international ties. The interactive components of modern communication technologies have modified the classical concepts of “sender” and “receiver” of information, turning them into active political actors. As a result, international actors can have intense and unlimited informational and political influence on the audience, regardless of its location and

nationality, taking into account cultural or social characteristics of the communities¹.

Impact of the Internet on Diplomatic Activity

The development of the information space has led to an increase in the number of international participants. The state remains one of the leading actors as the initiator of international communication, which controls and manages the spheres of foreign and domestic policy. Transnational corporations expand their external influence through collaboration with

1 This research was supported by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union within the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence Project No. 611625-EPP-1-2019-1-UA-EPPJMO-CoE “Advancing European Studies in Ukraine: Interdisciplinary Approach”.

The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

national media or investment in foreign regional and local media, efficiently lobbying the interests of the transnational owners. Global media corporations mediate between the source of information and the audience, disseminating their corporate interests through news. Civil institutions or non-profit organisations can shape an alternative political and economic ideology in host states, protecting the interests of social groups, supporting human rights, carrying out charitable or environmental activities, and promoting social activity. Social and political movements of anti-globalists, environmentalists, pacifists, or other groups without formal legal status interact with their members and external audiences mainly through the internet and can influence foreign or domestic policies of states.²



Technologies are changing the traditional understanding of communication in foreign policy, which contributes to the transformation of feedback, conversion of one-way communication into interactive conversations, and development of new international ties

As a result, a new model of international politics is emerging on the internet, where commercial companies and civil organisations, together with states, act as political actors; therefore, influential states

do not always manage the processes in the global information space and should follow the trends created by leading online companies. At the same time, the role of an individual is also growing because each person with a minimum of communication skills can be a political actor using a social media account. Besides, such “new actors” as hacker associations, quasi-states, or gaming communities have an impact on international relations and a state’s positioning in the world. Using internet communication instruments allows non-state international participants to efficiently conduct foreign policy activities as well as demonstrate private influence on international political and economic processes by attracting supporters and spreading ideas in the global network.

Under the influence of communication instruments, a state’s power is determined by the possession of information and communication technologies as well as the status in the modern information space. This leads to a new international confrontation where a country’s desire for global information domination creates resistance and opposition from others.^{3,4} Internet governance has now become a political context because government officials are aware of the impact of information infrastructure on increasing international interaction and negative effects of the network for development of the world community. However, the creation of double infrastructure at the national level cannot be a counterbalance for the existing internet system, since states are not ready to spend money on an additional information

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2. A. Гуменский, *Управление международной информацией, “Международные процессы”* (A. Gumensky, *International Information Management, “International Processes”*), vol. 8, no. 1(22), 2010 [<http://intertrends.ru/system/Doc/ArticlePdf/585/Gumensky-22.pdf> access: 15 April 2020].
 3. K. N. Cukier, *Internet Governance, National Interest and International Relations*, [in:] D. MacLean (ed.), *Internet Governance: A Grand Collaboration*, “Collection of Papers Contributed to the United Nations Global Forum on Internet Governance”, United Nations: New York 2004, p. 276.
 4. M. Ermert, C. Hughes, *What Is in a Name? China and the Domain Name System, China and Internet Politics of the Digital Leap*, Routledge: London 2003, pp. 134-135.

infrastructure that is still imperfect and poorly developed. The ideas of Russia and Brazil on the creation of a separate national segment of the internet remain unimplemented. Therefore, governments should solve current international legal issues in network regulation because key network resources (domain names, IP addresses, internet protocols, etc.) have practical political significance and are not neutral.

Given the prospects of growing impact of the internet on international relations, diplomatic staff should not only use the network as a communication instrument but also understand the mechanism of its operation and foresee the consequences of its use. Knowledge of the basic resources of the network allows diplomats to manage and efficiently use online platforms, blogs, or social media for supporting national interests or conducting foreign policy activity. Also, they have to understand the consequences of using the internet in the area of free speech, security, protection of intellectual property rights, and privacy. We should take into account that the activity of ministries of foreign affairs cannot be open to a wide audience, so the rules of external and internal communication help diplomats to interact with the target groups, ensuring a balance between privacy and openness.

The essence of digital diplomacy is the use of methods, technologies, and instruments with a profound soft ideological influence on the global public as well as the creation of fundamental political values and ideas perceived by people as own beliefs. As a result, we can see the changes in the activities of diplomatic missions and the professional training of diplomats, who need to have special communication tools and

skills. The advantages of digital diplomacy include overcoming political, economic, cultural, and social barriers between countries and nations, even in the face of asymmetric technological development in the world. Digital diplomacy furthers the integration of political values and peaceful dialogue between different countries and could be used as a basis for shaping world public opinion through the interplay of context and content of online messages.



The essence of digital diplomacy is the use of methods, technologies, and instruments with a profound soft ideological influence on the global public as well as the creation of fundamental political values and ideas

A combination of traditional foreign policy activities with modern communication technologies allows presidents, prime ministers, ministers, ambassadors to actively use social media for communicating with external and internal public. We can monitor their impact on international political processes. For example, BCW (Burson Cohn & Wolfe) conducted several studies called the Twiplomacy Study⁵ for analysing social media accounts of officials and institutions and identifying not only the number of followers but also ways of efficient communication of political leaders with the audience. According to BCW, Twitter is the most popular platform used by government and foreign policy institutions for communicating and informing audiences; Facebook is in the second, and Instagram is in the third place.

5 *Twiplomacy Study*, "Burson Cohn & Wolfe", 2019 [<https://twiplomacy.com/blog/category/studies/> access: 15 April 2020].

Facebook pages are more popular among users than Twitter accounts.

Such advantages of social media as multimedia, personification, and interactivity are used by the ministries of foreign affairs, diplomatic missions, and cultural institutions for disseminating official information, coordinating the activity of different structures, providing online services, and communicating with target groups. At the same time, activities of the communication departments of the ministries of foreign affairs deal with providing various information on national interest; the partner with whom diplomats interact is an independent actor associated with any organisation. The ministry cannot randomly set communication rules and be fully open to the general public.

Thus, social media platforms are instruments of foreign and domestic political activity that can create conditions for developing friendly relations between countries or have a destructive influence on political, economic, and social processes in the country, region, or the world. The use of social media in foreign policy allows:

- to shape ideas on the country, state power, and political leader;
- to provide up-to-date information for existing and potential audiences;
- to attract the attention of several target groups for discussing current topics;
- to support direct communication with different groups (feedback);
- to increase the volume of quality traffic on the official Web portal.

Virtual Ambassador, Virtual Embassy, and Web Portal of Diplomatic Mission: Pros and Cons

Nowadays, a non-profit organisation titled DiploFoundation presents the types of diplomatic missions on the internet, among which are: Virtual Ambassador, Virtual Embassy, and Web Portal of Diplomatic Mission abroad. The difference between a virtual embassy and a diplomatic online platform is that Web portals are additional means for providing diplomatic activity in the host country, while a virtual embassy exists only online.⁶ Such a virtual embassy not only provides a full range of diplomatic services but also plays the role of the official diplomatic mission abroad. A virtual embassy could be established for^{7,8}:

- solving the issues of representation of small or poor countries in the world;
- providing diplomatic and consular services to citizens in countries where there is a small number of diplomatic missions;
- issuing e-visas;
- supporting low-intensity bilateral relations;
- developing bilateral economic ties;
- advocating special political interests, etc.

A virtual embassy should not take over the functions of traditional diplomatic missions. The creation of a virtual embassy is necessary in cases when there is a need for interaction between the foreign policy institution and high-ranking officials with the host country's foreign policy office, and there is no physical embassy in the host country.

6 J. Kurbalija, *E-Diplomacy and Diplomatic Law in the Internet Era*, "DiploFoundation", 2013 [https://www.diplomacy.edu/sites/default/files/PeacetimeRegime-JK%20Chapter.pdf access: 15 April 2020].

7 D. Kappeler, J. Kurbalija, A. Matteucci, et al., *Virtual Embassies: Different Perspectives*, "Second International Conference on Web Management in Diplomacy", DiploFoundation, 2002.

8 D. Kappeler, *Websites as an Instrument of Diplomacy*, "Second International Conference on Web Management in Diplomacy", DiploFoundation, 2002.

Besides the described virtual diplomatic missions, there is also a Data Embassy⁹, defined as the possession of a server outside the state's territorial boundaries. The initiative is being developed since 2017 by the Estonian government for ensuring state e-services and data continuity as well as avoiding negative effects of natural disasters, cyberattacks, power outages, or other crises. Such an "embassy" builds on the principles of cloud technologies, but the state retains complete control and jurisdiction over the data and systems. The Data Embassy will have the same protection and immunity as a traditional embassy, meaning the Estonian government proposes to apply the principles of the Vienna Convention regarding "physical" embassies and their territorial affiliation to cyberspace.

Creating virtual embassies or virtual task forces allows us to involve experts in several programmes at once. Virtual meetings of officials do not replace confidential diplomatic meetings but save time and money. Therefore, information technologies are necessary for modern diplomacy and allow non-stop interacting with the public, diplomats, and governments.

Current Practices of the USA, the EU, and Ukraine in Digital Diplomacy

Since the mid-1990s, the US Department of State has been using the internet for multilingual communication with the international community and has created a separate intranet for secure communication with missions abroad. The current Strategic Plan for 2019-2022¹⁰ focuses on deepening IT modernisation of diplomatic missions

abroad and enhancing security of Web infrastructure and data sharing based on cloud technologies. In particular, the MyServices platform now supports the administrative activity of 95,000 users in 275 US diplomatic missions abroad. In addition, it is planned to develop the platforms for service (PaaS) and service infrastructure (IaaS) that will integrate the US Department of State into a common cloud @State system.



from 2003 to 2011, approximately 40 virtual US representations were established, but after analysing their activity in 2011, it was decided to discontinue such websites because they were not popular

Virtual Presence Posts (VPP)¹¹ without full-time employees belong to the official US diplomatic missions. Such missions represent the country in a region through websites for supporting the diplomatic relations or holding public events, while the diplomats make targeted visits as needed. In general, from 2003 to 2011, approximately 40 virtual US representations were established, but after analysing their activity in 2011, it was decided to discontinue such websites because they were not popular. In 2019, the State Department retained five virtual diplomatic missions abroad – the US Virtual Embassies to Iran (ir.usembassy.gov) and San Marino (sm.usmission.gov), the US Virtual Consulate in Guinea-Bissau (gw.usmission.gov), as well as the US Virtual

9 *Data Embassy*, Estonian government, 2017 [<https://e-estonia.com/solutions/e-governance/data-embassy/> access: 15 April 2020].

10 *IT Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2019–2022*, United States Department of State, 2018 [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/FY-2019-2022-ITSP_FINAL-508_with-Signature.pdf access: 15 April 2020].

11 *U.S. Government's Overseas Presence, Office of Origin: M/PRI*, 2 FAM 130, United States Department of State, 2019 [<https://fam.state.gov/FAM/02FAM/02FAM0130.html> access: 15 April 2020].

Presence Post in Seychelles (mu.usembassy.gov) and Comoros (mg.usembassy.gov).

The State Department develops innovative projects and services on the use of social media for promoting US foreign policy interests. In particular, accounts have been created on such media platforms as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, and Instagram. For example, seven official accounts on Twitter provide information in Arabic, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Russian, Farsi, and Urdu. US diplomatic missions have 1,159 accounts on various social media; therefore, for better management, official rules of using social media by the US government agencies have been developed. In addition, separate online platforms, the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (step.state.gov) and MyTravelGov (travel.state.gov), have been created for travelling Americans.

The essence of the EU digital diplomacy is to form a positive media space on the regional development of the European community and foreign policy initiatives of the Union using online tools. In particular, more than 216 accounts open on various social media platforms (Facebook, MySpace, Hyves, LinkedIn, Twitter, Blip, Flickr, Picasa, Daily Motion, YouTube, and Vimeo) for numerous EU institutions, allow European officials and European thematic projects to keep the first place in the world for reaching the audience. The European External Action Service, without replacing national foreign ministries, successfully complements the activity of diplomatic missions of the EU member states through effective communication with the world community using social media.

About 142 official accounts of the EU delegations abroad have been created on social media; in addition to the globally popular profiles on Facebook, Twitter, and

YouTube, thematic accounts have been opened on national social media (Sina Weibo, Tencent Weibo, Flickr, or Storify), indicating that the EU wants not only to communicate with its audience in native languages but also to take into account cultural features of different regions of the world. For the correct Web presence of the European Commission, the Europa Web Guide,¹² which defines the official editorial, legal, technical, visual, and contractual rules, has been created. Within the European Union, digital diplomacy instruments are used for supporting the EU's political priorities, developing a common position on international events, promoting economic attractiveness of the European region, or personal and professional communicating.

Among the digital diplomacy tools of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, there is an online platform "Friend" (friend.mfa.gov.ua) for registering Ukrainian citizens and providing support in case of emergency. The directorate-general for consular service of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine developed an online platform "Trip Advisor" (tripadvisor.mfa.gov.ua), which together with "Friend" promotes safe travel of Ukrainians abroad, protects their rights and interests, as well as seeks to create a positive attitude toward the work of Ukrainian consuls within the idea of #ConsulNearby. Based on these platforms and accounts of Ukrainian diplomatic missions on Facebook, the programme "Protection" has been launched for helping Ukrainian citizens who were stranded abroad after the closure of borders and the interruption of passenger traffic since March 2020.

In the programme of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, among the tasks of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine attributed to digital diplomacy, there are the following:

12 *The Europa Web Guide*, European Commission, 2019
[<https://wikis.ec.europa.eu/display/WEBGUIDE> access: 15 April 2020].

- the development of existing consular information systems (Visa, e-Consul, EU Visa Information System, “Friend”) for the purpose of providing online consular services;
- the integration of consular information systems into public registers and the provision of data exchange in “Trembita,” which is developed and implemented with the support of the EGOV4UKRAINE and funded by the EU and its member states (Estonia, Denmark, Germany, Poland, and Sweden);
- the introduction of e-consular registration in Ukraine’s missions abroad.

The use of social media as an important diplomatic tool for informing foreign audiences about Ukraine and its foreign policy is carried out through active communication of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Telegram. Since 2014, as a result of the aggravation of Ukrainian-Russian relations, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs revised the instruments for supporting Ukraine’s foreign policy interests and initiatives, as well as intensified the work of Ukrainian diplomatic missions. The ministry improved information content of its online platforms, introduced thematic sections on foreign policy initiatives, carried out a rebranding, and intensified multilingual dialogue with the public.

Innovations change the intellectual parameters of international relations and the nature of foreign policy institutions, shaping global awareness on the course of international events and influencing the efficiency of the MFA and diplomatic missions abroad. The location of a diplomatic mission during the development of ICTs is not so important because the access to the necessary information can be ensured through diplomatic online platforms. The beginning of 2020 demonstrated that ICTs and their skilful use can assist diplomats during organising day-and-night support of citizens abroad, conducting online meetings at various levels, creating online platforms for diplomatic activity, and disseminating thematic cultural, economic, or social information about the country.

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Issue 2 (20), 2020

ISSN 2518-7481