

# Working Paper

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## The Case for Critical Digital Diplomacy<sup>1</sup>

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## The Case for Critical Digital Diplomacy<sup>2</sup>

A debate on the impact of digitization on diplomatic practice is currently taking place in most of the world's diplomatic services. It is important to articulate the politics behind digital diplomacy rather than just applying digital tools to existing practices, and to confront the emerging reality of diplomatic engagement in a digitized world. We look at new media studies to understand these issues, inform the literature on diplomacy, and we make policy recommendations for foreign ministries.

### Diplomacy in a transformative digital environment

Neither practitioners nor pundits debating “digital diplomacy” can afford to ignore the underlying infrastructures of digital technologies, such as algorithms and other encoded mechanisms. In a matter of years, new media have become ubiquitous access points to culture, politics and economic activities, having an exceptional mediatory capacity. Actors behind popular platforms have a powerful political impact in how they organize our access to information and capital today. How do digital technologies redesign people's access and engagement with these processes? Just as Facebook may have redesigned much of social life, online infrastructures may also have a role in redesigning international relations, political dialogue, cultural exchange and the conditions for the creation of new ideas in ways that are directly relevant to the very nature of diplomacy.

Reminiscent of references about “soft power” in the past 25 years, basic terminology in the digital diplomacy debate is used rather loosely. Participants in this debate often have little common understanding of what “digital” means, which is of course an important prerequisite for a discussion about its influence on diplomatic practice.

The impact of numerical language in restructuring international relations and communication is not an esoteric question. Digital platforms are progressively influential in the fields of culture and social relations, meaning that they are also of greater relevance to an increasingly “societized” diplomatic institution. We need to reflect on the depth and extent of digital technology as a new *environment* in which states and other international actors communicate and conduct relations.

Digital technologies should also be recognized as a source of creativity for diplomats. They can be more than simply using devices and services such as email, Twitter or Facebook. Their relevance comes above all from their transformative capacities. In a sense, these new technologies “digitize” workplaces, to the extent that they render objects manageable, collectible and reusable data. Big powers, small non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and, indeed, diplomatic actors of any kind can employ programming languages as tools to operationalize ideas, interests and objectives into usable software. Many international challenges of our time have acquired some kind of digital dimension, and their corresponding technologies provide a platform for social, political and economic activities that should be understood as acquiring technical significance.

What are the consequences of platforms that organize and systematize human relations, information and culture? It is one thing to assess Facebook as a vector of diplomatic messages. Another aspect would be to assess the self-same politics proper to the way in which the platform functions and that can be relevant to foreign policy. How does Facebook aggregate its users and the information they share? What is the role of algorithms behind the Newsfeed in picking and retrieving posts that belong most to a certain political viewpoint? Does Facebook seek to aggregate ideas that are diverse enough for users to be exposed to different worldviews, and hence to promote dialogue?

<sup>2</sup> This argument is based on a forthcoming article that includes a detailed case study: Jan Melissen/Emillie V. de Keulenaar, »Critical Digital Diplomacy as a Global Challenge: the South Korean Experience«, in: *Global Policy*, forthcoming 2017.

## Digital literacy and awareness in diplomacy

The so-called “digital divide” is not just one between populations that have or lack the means to access these technologies, but also a divide between more or less “digitally literate” citizens. In this perspective, meta-literacy does not appear to be so much of a matter of “catching up”. It would be about the individual ability to make an informed assessment of the role and impact of digital technologies upon people’s personal lives and on politics, and in being able to act with instruments that are attuned to contemporary forms of power, such as with software.

One of the problems may be that many diplomats still view “digital” as synonymous with Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Google, and the economic and social disruption caused by platforms such as Uber and Airbnb. “Digital diplomacy” would then correspond to the use of popular software for diplomatic purposes and relations with the actors producing them, with the consequence being that diplomacy “as we know it” is superimposed onto digital technologies “as we know them” – that is, as mere tools for statecraft that is essentially the same as yesterday. Old-school voices in the debate about the impact of digitization on international relations even maintain that the nature of the “revolution” should not be exaggerated as ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) have dealt with earlier technological shifts such as the introduction of the electric telegraph in the nineteenth century, and that present changes are not qualitatively different from such earlier developments.

But diplomacy is no longer just a trade occurring of closed spaces and physical encounters. MFAs have therefore started thinking about the fundamental implications of digital transformation for the physical structures of their headquarters and embassies. A real challenge for foreign policy bureaucracies that are steeped in centuries of diplomatic tradition is now that they lack the intuitive, post-disciplinary, “native” character of some NGOs and companies that are thriving with the investment and management of data.

## The softwarization of diplomatic practice

Many practitioners appear to see “digital diplomacy” almost uniquely as an extension of public diplomacy. There is an urgent need to analyse digital technologies as mediating political processes. The concept of diplomacy as a practice with its own “digitally native” forms departs from millennia of pre-digital practice. Diplomatic engagement with digital technologies and the utilization of software for diplomatic purposes is thus to be based on an understanding of the political significance of “digital”.

The relationship between individual diplomats and digital technology can suggest a slightly different history than the way in which predecessors have adopted the use of the telephone (to call), the typewriter (to write), the telegraph (to send encrypted messages) and the personal computer (to write, and store, organize and send information). To be sure, the advent of social media has shown entirely new dynamics in the relationship between diplomacy and technology. Over the past five years, many MFAs have invested a great deal in catching up with the social media phenomenon and have started making use of its potential in more and more areas of foreign policy. Following the Arab Spring, a variety of international crises between 2011 and 2015 were major learning opportunities for governments. In a relatively short time span, social media have become indispensable in the delivery of key MFA functions such as public diplomacy and assistance to nationals abroad.

The way in which digital technologies are presently used is often fundamentally similar to the incorporation of various types of “machines” in nineteenth- and twentieth-century diplomatic practice: diplomats use what technology offers and was designed to do. Yet, as mentioned before, part of understanding the digital dimensions of diplomacy today is to understand what digital technologies comprise. Besides platforms, there are different operating systems, websites, apps and smaller components such as links, widgets and trackers. Moreover, behind all of these interfaces there is a universe of

code, programming languages and the algorithms that mechanize them. These various layers of digital technologies give us an idea of how much there is to explore in the practice of digital diplomacy – and is already being explored by governments, although often quietly.

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of digital technologies is that they are meta-machines: machines that can be used actively and creatively to create yet other machines – software. They offer ready-to-use products such as computers and other hands-on devices, but they also provide the means to create software that is tailored to internal or proactive diplomatic needs. Such seems to be the case with what Uber does for transportation, Airbnb for the hospitality industry, Google for documentation, YouTube for filmmaking, Spotify for music, and Facebook and Twitter for personal relations, political careers and political activism. The influence of these platforms resides partly in their organizing and systematizing of digitized data and the transnational mediation of content, whether it is in the form of culture, ideas, knowledge, relations or capital. Such is the power of the daily bread-and-butter in the “walled gardens” of Google (using its PageRank algorithm), Twitter (selling algorithms to private-sector clients doing business in personal data with governments), YouTube (the second largest engine on the web) and Facebook (claiming digital recognition of contested states like Kosovo). The mediation capacity of these platforms as controlled informational environments is as relevant to the world of diplomacy as it is to the commercial sector.

### **More than a search for attention online**

For many diplomats the most important learning, and indeed catching up with the world outside, is still to come: it concerns a critical knowledge and use of software and other technical, but no less political, elements constituting digital technologies. The technical aspects of everything digital are profoundly political, as debates about foreign interference in the 2016 and 2017 US and European election campaigns have

made clear. Diplomats should remain critical of real-life actors behind software, of their intentions and of how they pursue their aims, and with what effect. They better realize that politics happens at the earliest stages of the design of software that is used in the context of international relationships. Not doing so would place many foreign ministries at a disadvantage in comparison with more astute counterparts and non-governmental actors. From user-friendly interfaces to codes and algorithms, it is this design that they need to examine, critique, and improve in the interests of enhancing policy capacity.

Critical digital diplomacy is then not so much an active and continuous search for attention online, as in a lot of public diplomacy. It constitutes diplomatic engagement with how culture, information and relations are systematised in software, such as with the counteracting of algorithms that do not work in one’s favour. Mechanisms constituting digital technologies can be actively used as tools to operationalize political and diplomatic interests. The challenge for MFAs the world over is thus to explore all this and put it into practice. Individual diplomats are in need of the concepts to critique and comprehend the digital realm. Future diplomacy will increasingly be enacted in this new environment.

### **Five policy recommendations:**

1. Foreign ministries (MFAs) across the world should embrace conceptions of technology that no longer separate substance from technique, and instruments from language.
2. Diplomats should realize that digital diplomacy constitutes engagement with how culture, information and relations are systematised in software, such as with the counteracting of algorithms that do not work in one’s favour.
3. As diplomacy is increasingly enacted in a digital environment, diplomats should be critical of real-life actors behind software, of their intentions

- and how they pursue their aims, and with what effect.
4. MFAs that have the capability to create software for diplomatic purposes but do not yet do so are at a disadvantage in comparison with more astute counterparts and non-governmental actors.
  5. Mechanisms constituting digital technologies can be used as a medium to operationalize political and diplomatic interests. MFAs should explore all this and put it into practice to improve policy-making.

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