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Critical Digital Diplomacy and How Theory Can Inform Practice

A debate on the impact of digitization on diplomatic practice is currently taking place in most of the world's diplomatic services. This debate serves as a reminder of how important it is to continue discerning the political significance of digital technologies in diplomacy and to confront the emerging reality of diplomatic engagement in a digitized world, rather than focusing exclusively on applying digital tools to existing practices. In 2016 and 2017, illicit electronic intervention in democratic elections and referenda in Europe and the United States has turned the issue of digital diplomacy's 'weaponization' into headline news. In just a couple of years the dominant tone in the narrative on digital diplomacy has transformed from one of optimism about social media's mobilization potential and a boost for democratization, to one of gloominess about 'fake news' and the stealthy intrusion in social media conversations by bots and trolls controlled from authoritarian countries. U.S.-based tech giants are accused of ethically questionable trade in personal data harvested from social networking sites, whilst the influence operations of the UK-based company Cambridge Analytica have caused alarm about the commercial behaviour of web developers in the social and political realm. More than five years after the social media optimism associated with the Arab Spring, some ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) that wanted to be seen as early social media adopters may wonder whether they have rushed into the social media domain without sufficient critical reflection.

Rather than joining current affairs commentary on the impact of social media in international politics, we will, in this chapter, first turn to literature that can help throw a light on underlying issues. We take a close look at new media studies to add to our understanding of the role of digital technologies as media and infrastructures to current diplomatic processes. It is our aim to inform the study of diplomacy as well as diplomatic practice with relevant theoretical insights

and conceptualizations from this field. We conclude with general policy recommendations for MFAs.

Technology and Diplomatic Practice

Agreement on essential terminology and a shared understanding of core concepts matters — and is not just relevant for academics. Reminiscent of references to 'soft power' in the past 25 years, by politicians and diplomats as much as scholars, basic terminology in the digital diplomacy debate is used rather loosely. In this context of changing practices, we need to reflect on the depth and extent of digital technology, first as a new medium for states and other international actors to communicate and conduct relations, and secondly as a condition. The digital age is increasingly permeating the way in which new generations experience their life and work.

Before arriving at conclusions about the impact of technological change in the practice of international relations, it is worthwhile to continue reflecting on the capacities of these new technologies. It is safe to suggest that many MFAs' initiatives aimed at encouraging the use of social media have been insufficiently grounded in an analysis of digital technologies in terms of what they bring to modern literacy and to the conditions in which diplomacy is now practiced. Comprising these conditions are the underlying techniques that constitute digital technologies, whether they are referred to generally as algorithms or to other types of computational systems, including search engines, recommenders or newsfeeds. Benefitting from the mediatory capacity of digitization and datafication practices, these techniques have become ubiquitous access points to culture, politics and economic activities. Designing these and other pieces of software grants tech actors a powerful political impact in how they formalize, organize and repurpose information and cultural capital today.

This invites the field of digital diplomacy to interrogate how digital technologies go about redesigning one's access to processes relevant to diplomacy. Just as Facebook may have altered one's access to social life, political action and the marketplace of ideas, other tech actors and their platforms have leverage in redesigning several processes that constitute international relations. The potential of new technologies to assist knowledge management combined with the potential of big data concerning intricate issue areas and for the purposes of forecasting, are bound to have a great impact on diplomacy's chief function: international negotiation. Human decisions will remain as important as ever and data do not speak; but acting upon how data and the ideas they constitute are organized by important algorithmic systems and platform affordances may add to 'the art of negotiation' and involve a great deal of complexity management.

In this sense, we see in the broader realm of cultural relations how digital culture impacts on transnational exchange and conditions for the creation of new ideas in ways that interplay with international and domestic public consensus. New warfare tactics used by Russian military intelligence during the U.S. 2016 presidential elections have in fact directly tapped into this question by interplaying with popularity and attention metrics as they distributed sensational, 'fake' news to feed into partisan divide on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The influence of digital platforms in the fields of culture and social relations may equally mean that they are of greater relevance to increasingly 'societized' diplomatic practices, ones that include diverse stakeholders and address a variety of non-traditional issues on the international agenda. Concretely, such societized diplomacy results in new dynamics in government-society relations and, arguably, more domestically oriented MFAs.

Many international challenges of our time have acquired some kind of digital dimension, such that their corresponding technologies provide a platform for social, political and economic activities that could be understood as being computationally formalized. It is one thing to assess Facebook as a vector of diplomatic messages. Another aspect would be to assess the self-same politics partly as products of the platform mechanisms that process and organize them as data – or indeed to assess platform mechanisms and other algorithms as political processes in their own right. Doing so may invite diplomats to locate various issues relevant to foreign policy within their respec-

tive technical context. For example, to what extent do information filtering systems such as YouTube's recommender follow EU guidelines to distribute and 'recommend' videos in a pluralistic and diverse fashion? Possible answers to this question touch directly upon how the systematic organization of information through algorithms constitutes the means through which political solutions may be applied. Facebook and Google have already been attempting to tackle problems such as filter bubbles and fake news from a technical standpoint – yet, they may greatly benefit from the perspective of those specialized in interpreting and resolving the nature of such issues, such as conflict and misinformation. Diplomats are in a unique place not just to offer their expertise, but also to formulate their own political philosophy of computational foreign policy by moulding values, strategies and processes proper to their field into information and information-organizing systems.

Such initiatives may come across as naïve for expecting too much of companies driven by private gains and peculiar platform business models. But it is this very problem that pushes public policy makers to balance the public responsibility of tech actors and their patented systems, both widely originating from the United States, precisely by inviting the actors that design them to share a continuous, collaborative responsibility with foreign, public counterparts. This collaborative responsibility would be facilitated by diplomats attuned to the technical and political dimensions of the issues that such systems reproduce.

Digital Literacy and Awareness in Diplomacy

As mentioned above, pessimism and the extent to which misuse of social media complicates international relationships seem to have become dominant in recent debates about digital diplomacy. We maintain nevertheless that, because they provide one with additional capacities to put ideas and policy into (technical) practice, digital technologies should above all be recognized as a source of creativity for diplomats. Their relevance comes above all from their capacities as media, and, in this sense, as grounds for new literacies. They can be more than simply using available devices and services such as email, Twitter or Facebook. Digital technologies can be compared to writing and speech in that they allow users or 'writers' to collect, organize and repurpose information on various

aspects of reality, whether it be data about or from individual users, objects, institutions, or from more complex processes. Digital literacy would then range from engaging with ready-made software as a user all the way to coding it, gaining leverage over how users shall access it and what it allows one to do with it.

The so-called ‘digital divide’ may then not be just one between populations that have or lack the means to access these technologies, but also one between more or less ‘digitally literate’ citizens and governance. Big powers, small non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and diplomatic actors of any kind could employ programming languages as tools to operationalize data by way of realizing certain interests and objectives in the form of usable software for public usage or techniques designed for internal purposes, whether they be for reference (for example, with data analysis), communication or other programmable purposes. In the same way that certain companies conceive of sociality, transportation or marketing in terms of information and information systems, digital diplomacy would invite policy to conceive of entities, processes, strategies and values relevant to diplomacy at least partly as computational entities. Digital literacy would then also refer to the ability to take on computation as a form of governance attuned to contemporary instruments of power, such as software. Adopting these means to digital literacy is what allows an institution such as diplomacy to exercise active decision-making with technical actors and towards the programs and data that touch upon their craft.

One of the challenges lies in conceiving of ways to mediate the interests of tech actors and public actors.

Thus, digital literacy would equally amount to the individual ability to make an informed assessment of how these technologies are designed, and in what terms diplomats can approach those that design them: tech actors. The value of approaching them lies in gaining access to information about how their systems work, what they do with data tied to issues at stake for MFAs, and in negotiating ways to alter their systems, the collection and curation of platform-owned data in ways favourable to all actors affected by those issues. One of the challenges, here, would lie in conceiving of ways to mediate the interests of tech actors, whose primary goal is to think in terms of product design, and public actors, who would in most

cases advance the causes of several normative questions. Ultimately, combining essentially technical and political rationales is what the deliberative process of digital diplomats could come down to. Part of this process entails proposing how tech actors could formalize the normative values that drive the agenda of diplomacy as computational values – an exercise that may well invite diplomats and their tech actors into a joint deliberation.

MFAs have therefore started thinking about the fundamental implications of digital transformation for the physical structures of their headquarters and embassies. Following the private sector and other government departments, they are currently enhancing their capacity to take advantage of big data analysis in the interests of foreign policy-making. A challenge for foreign policy bureaucracies steeped in centuries of diplomatic tradition is that they lack the intuitive, post-disciplinary, ‘native’ character of some NGOs and companies that are thriving with the investment and management of data. What may lie further ahead is that MFAs re-conceptualize diplomacy as the management of complexity as much as the management of international relations.

The Softwarization of Diplomatic Practice

Many practitioners appear to see ‘digital diplomacy’ almost uniquely as an extension of public diplomacy. Within this restricted understanding of the purposes of digital diplomacy, the decreasing trust in information, the privacy concerns of internet users, and the mobility across platforms of young generations amount to new challenges for MFA communication departments. There is however the need to take a broader look and analyse digital technologies as mediating political processes. 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 technicality. The relationship between individual diplomats and digital technology suggests a 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, 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 years, many

MFAs have invested a great deal in introducing themselves to 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 currently used is often fundamentally similar to the incorporation of various types of ‘machines’ in 19th and 20th century diplomatic practice: diplomats use what technology offers and is designed to do. Yet, as previously mentioned, part of understanding the digital dimensions of diplomacy today is to make use of digital technologies as metamedia: media that can be used actively and imaginatively to create yet more media, such as 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. This 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 (at the centre of the debate about the ethical practices of commercial tech giants and the need to tame the influence of the corporate sector). There is now growing awareness that 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.

One important consequence of these fast-moving developments is that the governance of the digital realm needs to catch up. Although not analysed here, reigning in undesirable practices is a collective responsibility of national governments, digital platforms and end-users, which requires innovative forms of governance.

More than a Search for Attention Online

In terms of the kinds of skills needed by foreign policy actors, there is little doubt that the multifaceted nature of the digitization of diplomatic practice amounts to the largest upskilling exercise in the history of diplomacy. For many future diplomats the most important learning will consist of critical knowledge and the use of software and other technical, but no less political, elements constituting digital technologies. 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.

The technical aspects of everything digital are profoundly political.

The technical aspects of everything digital are profoundly political, as debates about foreign interference in the 2016 and 2017 U.S. and European election campaigns and the 2018 public outrage about Cambridge Analytica’s practices have made abundantly clear. Much more remains hidden in the expanding realm where diplomacy and intelligence increasingly overlap. Common sense in the digital age therefore dictates that diplomats should remain critical of real-life actors behind software, of their intentions and of how they pursue their aims, and to what effect. Politics happens at the earliest stages of the design of software used in the context of international relationships. In recent years, some western governments have lost their relative innocence. They follow the lead of more astute countries — ranging from Russia to Sudan and Israel to Iran — as well as non-governmental actors working in the interests of a better world, or engaged in violent action and with contested motives, such as terrorist groups or rebel movements.

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Digital diplomacy is then not so much an active and continuous search for attention online, as it is in a lot of public diplomacy. The practices of digital communication and outreach to foreign and domestic audiences do in fact seem to have disrupted public diplomacy to an extent that deserves urgent examina-

tion. As to critical digital diplomacy: it constitutes diplomatic engagement with how culture, information and relations are systematized 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 is thus to explore all of this and put it into practice. Individual diplomats are in need of concepts to critique and comprehend technicality as a medium for diplomatic strategy and policy implementation. After all, contemporary diplomacy is already enacted in rapidly changing landscapes where new technological tools impact on the nature of international relationships.

Five Policy Recommendations

1. Diplomats should realize that digital diplomacy constitutes engagement with how culture, information and relations are systematized in software, such as with the counteracting of algorithms that do not work in one's favour.
2. 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 to what effect.
3. 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.
4. Mechanisms constituting digital technologies can be used as a medium to operationalize political and diplomatic interests.
5. Diplomats may act as mediators between platform actors and all others affected by platform systems and data, honing a capacity to invite a dialogue between technical and normative interests.