

Social Media as a Tool for Digital Diplomacy

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Abstract

Social media has become a significant part of our lives in the modern digital era. It has transformed the way we communicate, share information, and connect with people from all over the world. And it also may be considered as a powerful tool for diplomacy, providing a platform for countries to promote their interests.

The article examines the role of social media in digital diplomacy. The introductory part of the article is dedicated to the phenomenon of digital diplomacy, its role in the process of shaping public opinion and political agenda-setting. It then looks at the challenges and risks of digital diplomacy.

Key words: digital diplomacy, hybrid warfare, cognitive warfare, social media, political agenda-setting, ICT

Introduction

The phenomenon of digital diplomacy named by Silicon Valley experts as Web 2.0 Diplomacy has appeared relatively recently. There are many definitions of the concept given by official institutions such as The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office that defined digital diplomacy as “solving foreign policy problems using the

internet”¹ or the US State Department that characterized it as “21st Century Statecraft”. Thus, digital diplomacy is a form of new public diplomacy, which uses the internet, ICT and social media to achieve diplomatic objectives. And today, social networks make a great contribution to digital diplomacy and shaping public opinion, influencing people's minds.

In the last fifteen years, the number of internet users worldwide increased more than three times, reaching about 4 billions. Communities changed into networked societies. It is called social media since people are the main actors of the use of the media, both as active participants who create and share information and passive actors receiving this information through social media. There is a wide range of social media that international actors use: Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat. But for now, Twitter (X) is the most used social network, which has become a very important communicative tool for many politicians.

Regarding the roles of social media in digital diplomacy, we can summarize 3 main points:

- 1) developing issues on foreign policy which involve ICT in gathering and using information.
- 2) organizing and change information sources related to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its departments overseas.
- 3) influencing public opinion as well as to direct the interest of the society to take a role in public diplomacy

Setting agenda via social media (UAE case)

Social media has become integral to the practice of digital diplomacy, playing a significant role in shaping public opinion and influencing international relations and

¹ Baker N., Spadaro A. Digital diplomacy, social media and the Holy See // GOV.UK. – 2014. – URL: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/digital-diplomacy-social-media-and-the-holy-see>

this turns the two faces of power - setting agenda and thought control². The rapid dissemination of information through these platforms has the potential to impact the way countries are perceived and diplomatic efforts are conducted.

Under the present conditions, social media has become deeply rooted in diplomatic practice and public policy in many countries, and the United Arab Emirates is no exception.

The UAE case can be considered a vivid illustration of successful implementation of social networks, ICT platforms into the public diplomacy agenda. The country has a strong presence on social media, including Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, where it engages with its citizens, other countries and international organizations³. The United Arab Emirates also follows digital maturity standards⁴ and uses its official website to disseminate its political views and ideology to a global audience. Moreover, the country has invested in digital technologies, such as blockchain and artificial intelligence, to broaden its diplomatic endeavor.

The UAE has been actively using digital diplomacy to promote its foreign policy objectives. Now we would like to distinguish the main goals that the UAE is striving to achieve in the “digital space”⁵. Through these digital tools, the UAE aims to:

1. Increase the investment attractiveness: the UAE government uses social media to attract investors and boost economic growth of the country;
2. Support tourism: the UAE uses social media to expand its country's tourism opportunities;
3. Strengthen its relationships with other nations;

² Antwi-Boateng O., Al Mazrouei K. A. M. The challenges of digital diplomacy in the era of globalization: The case of the United Arab Emirates //International Journal of Communication. – 2021. – T. 15. – C. 19.

³ Antwi-Boateng O., Al Mazrouei K. A. M. The challenges of digital diplomacy in the era of globalization: The case of the United Arab Emirates //International Journal of Communication. – 2021. – T. 15. – C. 19.

⁴ United Arab Emirates. URL: <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/digital-uae/digital-inclusion/uae-government-social-media-accounts>

⁵ Antwi-Boateng O., Al Mazrouei K. A. M. The challenges of digital diplomacy in the era of globalization: The case of the United Arab Emirates //International Journal of Communication. – 2021. – T. 15. – C. 19.

4. Promote cultural and historical values;
5. Digitize administrative services to provide more efficient public services;
6. Win the status of the most digitally advanced country in the Middle East.

Challenges and risks of digital diplomacy

The popularity of media-based diplomacy has increased in the past ten years, however, it doesn't mean that it has been immune from criticism.

The first challenge is freedom from social media and the internet. Since the internet is perceived as a channel for the spread of terrorism, extremism and the imposition of foreign ideologies, ISIS and other terrorist groups in conflict with the United Arab Emirates operate several social media accounts to advance their terrorist agenda⁶.

The second risk is the lack of knowledge about the usage of the internet and social media. Meeting the risks of the digital age means that foreign ministries need to train their diplomats in how to use digital communication tools, thus avoiding another damage⁷. Besides, there are also worries about the lack of nuance and context in online communication, which can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of diplomatic messages. Critics argue that digital diplomacy may not be as effective in building trust and fostering meaningful dialogue as traditional face-to-face diplomacy. Social media platforms have been used to disseminate false information and manipulate public opinion, often with significant geopolitical implications. The lack of regulation and oversight on these platforms creates a fertile ground for the spread of disinformation, which can undermine trust and credibility in diplomatic efforts.

Disagreements are the third danger of media-based diplomacy, as diplomats can no longer be certain that their thoughts will not be revealed to the audiences they have

⁶ Aktaş H. Digital Diplomacy and Its implications in the 21st century //Antalya Diplomacy Forum. – 2022.

⁷ Rashica V. The benefits and risks of digital diplomacy //Seeu Review. – 2018. – T. 13. – №. 1. – C. 75-89.

never targeted. It seems that the “era of secrecy” has already been replaced with the “era of distribution” in which ordinary citizens spend hours reading and criticizing government policies each day.

Another pressing risk of digital diplomacy is the culture of anonymity. The use of digital technologies for diplomatic communications creates vulnerabilities to cyber attacks, data breaches, and other malicious activities. Foreign actors may exploit these vulnerabilities to gain access to sensitive diplomatic information or disrupt diplomatic processes, posing a threat to national security and international relations. The Gulf Cooperation Council has become a target of anonymous cyberattacks⁸. According to a Microsoft security report, this is both a result of the wealth of the council and a consequence of rising tensions in the region, such as the boycott of Qatar by the UAE and unfriendly actions by Iran⁹.

Findings

Today, the world is witnessing a dramatic change in the traditional means of warfare. It is clear that cognitive wars are continuous and unceasing. It is nearly impossible to spot the frames and limitations of such war. The examples provided in the article prove that cognitive attacks have existed long before the notion itself, however, the majority of these attacks were carried out casually, unwittingly. From now on these attacks have become very deliberate and very intentional up to creating think-tanks, hubs and departments the activity of which is specifically focused on engineering cognitive attacks and tactics. The considered examples confirm the relevance of the development of the concept "cognitive warfare". The findings of the article open a new perspective to studying the influence and consequences of cognitive warfare in the modern world.

⁸ Aktaş H. Digital Diplomacy and Its implications in the 21st century //Antalya Diplomacy Forum. – 2022.

⁹ Rashica V. The benefits and risks of digital diplomacy //Seeu Review. – 2018. – T. 13. – №. 1. – C. 75-89.

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¹ Rashica V. The benefits and risks of digital diplomacy //Seeu Review. – 2018. – T. 13. – №. 1. – C. 75-89.