

## **DIPLOMACY IN THE DIGITAL ERA: BETWEEN OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS**

<b>Abstract:</b>	<i>In a constantly changing world, digital tools have become an essential part of our lives. Digital revolution has influenced every field of activity, and even the diplomacy, a domain rooted in protocol and etiquette, has been shaped by this process. With an impact to daily diplomatic activities, new technologies bring speed and efficiency in domains like public diplomacy, consular affairs, analyzing process and of course, internal communication. At the same time, digital changes have become a subject of negotiation at the international level, in this way shaping the diplomatic agenda. And even the negotiation table has been influenced by the Third Industrial Revolution, by bringing new non-state actors to the discussions.</i> <i>New digital opportunities bring more complexity to the diplomatic activity and certainly new risks and vulnerabilities. In this context, a proper analyze of new technologies that emphasize both strengths and weaknesses are essential for the security of the sensitive information with which diplomats operate. At the same time, the speed of technological changes requires new abilities of the diplomatic services' employees, constant training for efficiency and security reasons being fundamental.</i>
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### **Introduction**

The Digital Revolution, also known as Third Industrial Revolution, is the one that shapes the way we interact, the way we carry out our professional and personal activities, even the way we relate to world. Digitization has become a process omnipresent in all fields of life, an irreversible and accelerated process that

cannot be neglected, and the Internet, one of the basic tools of this process “has reached the point when nobody can afford to ignore it, at their own loss”<sup>1</sup>.

The field of international relations is also influenced by new technologies, which bring a great number of development opportunities, but also many challenges. Due to the adoption of new technologies and to the emergence of new topics on the negotiating agenda, diplomacy - the main instrument of foreign policy, is in a continuous need of developing new abilities. At the same time, in the new digital context, the weight of non-state actors on the international arena is growing, and big technology corporations represent one of these actors which is becoming increasingly vocal and important. In support of this assertion, we bring the example of Denmark, the first state to establish a position of tech ambassador<sup>2</sup>, which accomplishes his special portfolio since 2017 from the office in Silicon Valley. Thus, the international environment is becoming more dynamic, complex and even challenging. In this new conjuncture the soft power of a state is becoming an important tool which is exercised by diplomacy, with the support of new technologies<sup>3</sup>.

One of the first technologies that influenced the diplomatic activities by streamlining communication between a state's embassies and its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was the telegraph. Even though some diplomats initially saw the new technology as a major threat to diplomacy<sup>4</sup>, the telegraph became an indispensable tool in the diplomatic activities. The same happened with other subsequent technologies: telephone, radio, television, internet. In the light of recent events, we can firmly say that the COVID-19 pandemic has further boosted the digitization of all areas of activity, including diplomacy. Due to pandemic context, in some cases even the copies of credentials were presented via video-conference<sup>5</sup>.

In this article we aim to analyze the way in which diplomacy has been influenced by the digital revolution. We will present the benefits of the digitization process in terms of diplomatic practice and will highlight the risks that may arise in different situations. The analysis does not lack real-life examples of such practices that reflect the impact of digitalization on several segments of diplomatic activity: public diplomacy, consular affairs, internal communication and even the diplomatic agenda.

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<sup>1</sup> Osezua Stanley Ehiane, Mosud Yinusa Olumoye, *Information and Communication Technology (Ict) and Diplomacy: A Conceptual Overview*, "International Affairs and Global Strategy", Vol. 17, 2017, p. 38

<sup>2</sup> Office of Denmark's Tech Ambassador, <https://techamb.um.dk/>, (11.10.2021)

<sup>3</sup> Osezua Stanley Ehiane, Mosud Yinusa Olumoye, *Op. cit.*, p. 41

<sup>4</sup> The reaction of British Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston when he received in 1850<sup>5</sup> the first telegraph message was reported to be: "My God, this is the end of diplomacy"

<sup>5</sup> Burson Cohn&Wolfe (BCW), *Twiplomacy 2020*, July 2020, p. 16, <https://twiplomacy.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Twiplomacy-Study-2020.pdf>, (13.10.2021)

Although the analysis of notions and definitions may be of interest to readers, this aspect is outside the scope of this paper, limiting us in this case to a brief presentation of these aspects. The impact of digitalization processes on diplomacy is reflected in different terms used in specialized analyses, but also in the international relations environment: digital diplomacy, techplomacy, net diplomacy, cyber diplomacy, diplomacy in the digital age, diplomacy 2.0, real-time diplomacy, 21st century statecraft, networked diplomacy, the digitalization of diplomacy and even Twiplomacy. At the same time, among the definitions of the concept some approaches can be mentioned: in 2012 Evan Potter refers to it as “the diplomatic practices through digital and networked technologies, including the Internet, mobile devices, and social media channels”, in 2016 Ilan Manor defines it as “the overall impact ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) have had on the conduct of diplomacy - ranging from the email to smartphone applications”.

### **The impact of digital revolution on diplomacy**

Opportunities given by digitization can be explored in different ways, sometimes with real enthusiasm, even with revolutionary approaches. One example in this sense can be considered the launch of a virtual embassy to Second Life<sup>1</sup> by Sweden. The event took place in 2007 and was hosted by the Sweden’s Foreign Minister at that time<sup>2</sup>. Another similar example is the U.S. Virtual Embassy in Iran<sup>3</sup>, a website launched online in 2011, which comes to replace a missing physical embassy. However, the two examples presented above did not prove to be successful: Swedish embassy in Second Life was closed in 2013, while the US embassy in Iran, although active to this day, has a limited impact as the webpage has been blocked by Tehran authorities<sup>4</sup>. Thus, from the beginning we understand that, at least at the moment, digital instruments cannot replace the need for physical embassies and consulates. However, in a less revolutionary way, the digital innovations have left their mark on the diplomatic field.

As we mentioned above, the telegraph was the first technology that greatly streamlined the communication between MFAs, embassies and consulates. In the same way, nowadays digital tools contribute to the creation of an efficient and fast communication available almost in any part of the world. One of the first examples of the use of digital tools in diplomatic activities dates back to 1992, when at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro for the first time civil society e-mails were used for lobbying in the negotiations as well as at the same time in Malta, at the

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<sup>1</sup> A virtual world imagined and created by its residents: <https://secondlife.com/>, (11.10.2021)

<sup>2</sup> Karl Peterson, *A farewell*, <https://secondhouseofsweden.wordpress.com/>, (11.10.2021)

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Virtual Embassy Iran, <https://ir.usembassy.gov/>, (11.10.2021)

<sup>4</sup> *On Virtual Embassies in the Age of Digital Diplomacy*, <https://digdipblog.com/2014/06/25/on-virtual-embassies-in-the-age-of-digital-diplomacy/>, (11.10.2021)

Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies, was founded the first unit for computer applications in diplomacy<sup>1</sup>.

In daily communication diplomats use a number of tools such as e-mail, messaging apps, video conferencing softwares. Correspondence with a higher degree of officiality, as well as files are sent by e-mail, while meetings (either fully online or hybrid) can be conducted using different platforms such as Zoom, Skype or Google Workspace. Messaging apps such as WhatsApp, WeChat, Signal, Telegram, are a less official, but still largely used communication channel. These apps are a good tool for fast communication, and for exchange of messages within specific working groups. All of the listed instruments ensure the continuity of diplomatic activity even in crisis conditions, such as the recent health crisis caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

One area that is being highly influenced by the digital revolution is certainly *public diplomacy*, as the information technology help to streamline communication with the public. Such digital tools as websites and social media platforms contribute to the efficient achievement of public diplomacy's goals at low costs. At the same time, digital tools leave room for imagination and can be used in different creative ways in order to promote the country outside its borders. Such an example is presented to us by Finland through a unique collection of emojis that reflect the national identity of the republic with an umoristic approach, without avoiding stereotypes<sup>2</sup>.

A widely used tool in public diplomacy is social media, which is also reflected in the use of such terms as "Twitter Diplomacy". According to the study *Twiplomacy 2020*<sup>3</sup>, 98% of UN member states are present on the social network Twitter, and 132 foreign ministers have a personal Twitter account. Another platform favored by world leaders, MFAs, embassies and consulates is Facebook. This social network enables an active interaction between users, being an efficient communication channel between diplomats and citizens in any corner of the world. According to the study *World Leaders on Facebook 2020*<sup>4</sup>, 95% of UN member states are present on the social network Facebook, and 90 foreign ministers have a personal Facebook page, the observation being that the personal pages tend to enjoy a greater popularity than the institutions' official pages.

Communication through social networks has been intensified in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, which generated an increase in the number of likes of official pages, changed the type of posts and distributed messages. In this context

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<sup>1</sup> Viona Rashica, *The benefits and risks of digital diplomacy*, "SEEU Review", Vol. 13, No. 1, 2018, p. 78

<sup>2</sup> *Finland emojis*, <https://finland.fi/emoji/>, (15.10.2021)

<sup>3</sup> Burson Cohn&Wolfe (BCW), *Twiplomacy 2020*, July 2020, pp. 2-4, <https://twiplomacy.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Twiplomacy-Study-2020.pdf>, (13.10.2021)

<sup>4</sup> *World Leaders on Facebook 2020*, April 2020, p.5, <https://twiplomacy.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/World-Leaders-on-Facebook-Study-2020.pdf>, (13.10.2021)

of the emergency situation, foreign ministries, embassies and consulates have been very active on social networks in order to quickly provide important information to their citizens in difficulty<sup>1</sup>. In the same way, Denmark has used the opportunity to create closed groups on Facebook to facilitate assistance with practical issues of Danish travelers<sup>2</sup>.

The use of social networks for achieving public diplomacy goals has been seen as opportune by the US since 2008, when it launched *Public Diplomacy 2.0*<sup>3</sup>, a strategy in American public diplomacy that involves, among other things, the use of social networks in order to promote US values abroad. At the same time, the US Bureau of Global Public Affairs is working to liaise closely with social media leaders in order to ensure the continuous development of the skills necessary for an efficient communication through social networks, which represent a constantly changing environment<sup>4</sup>.

Another field of diplomacy that has the potential to be shaped and streamlined by new technologies is presented by *consular services*. The process of globalization has brought with it an unprecedented freedom of movement, has intensified the migration process, diaspora communities becoming more and more numerous. Thus, the consular activity gains a new degree of importance, as it is expected to respond quickly to the multiple requests submitted in its address. Digitization has the potential to significantly improve the performing of consular actions (such as the issuance of documents), namely by digitizing the process, from the submission of applications, to the reimbursement of payment for services rendered.

At the same time, consular services are the ones that operate the most with data, and in this case a series of algorithms can be used in order to analyze existing databases and generate new data that would allow improving service provision. Such data could be: an overview of the number of tasks undertaken by the consular service and their time - personnel intensity; an overview of the kinds of requests and demands consular officers are faced with; a map of previous crisis situations and the response provided by consular affairs in terms of timing and time -

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<sup>1</sup> Burson Cohn&Wolfe (BCW), *Twiplomacy 2020*, July 2020, pp. 33-34, <https://twiplomacy.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Twiplomacy-Study-2020.pdf>, (13.10.2021)

<sup>2</sup> *Kofod: Danish volunteers around the world mobilize to help stranded Danes*, <https://um.dk/en/news/newsdisplaypage.aspx?newsID=D48E39B0-7534-4FFD-9649-124A6350B396>, (20.10.2021)

<sup>3</sup> James Glassman, *Public Diplomacy 2.0: A New Approach to Global Engagement*, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/us/2008/112605.htm>, (25.10.2021)

<sup>4</sup> Bureau of Global Public Affairs, *Functional Bureau Strategy*, approved on May 05, 2020, [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FBS\\_GPA\\_UNCLASS\\_508.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FBS_GPA_UNCLASS_508.pdf), (15.10.2021)

personnel intensity; based on previous crises experiences it can generate data for the timely and effective deployment of personnel<sup>1</sup>.

Even though diplomacy can be truly considered as being an art, which relies on protocol and etiquette and operate mainly with qualitative information, it could be helped in achieving its goals by a quantitative tool - namely *big data*. An example of big data usage in foreign policy is Open Source Unit of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which was set up to analyze open data to make foreign policy better informed<sup>2</sup>. Another application could be in the field of multilateral diplomacy, in order to collect quantitative information that reflects the voting options of states in different international organizations. Subsequently, these data can be correlated in order to generate information that reflects the behavior of different state actors (or maybe even non-state actors) depending on nature of the discussed issues. The United States has been using such tools since 1984, and the results can be consulted in the annual report *Voting Practices in the United Nation*<sup>3</sup>. In this way, based on the voting behavior within UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly, behavioral patterns of member states are created.

Big data analysis can also be useful in the case of public diplomacy conducted on social networks, which provides sufficient material to consider. Social media analysis could include opinion mining, sentiment analysis, hashtag tracking, can be used to create the image of the audience and connect with the target audience. For instance, in the context of the debates on Britain's exit from the EU, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom, through its Open Source Unit used social media analysis to better understand the British public debate regarding this matter<sup>4</sup>.

Besides the fact that digitalization offers diplomacy new working tools, technological revolution has the capacity to shape the *diplomatic agenda*. The invention and popularity of the telegraph brought the need to regulate its use on international level, effort reflected in the first treaty signed in 1849 between Prussia and Austria-Hungary, referring to “installation and use of electromagnetic telegraphs for the exchange of international dispatches”<sup>5</sup>. In the same way, the development of new information technologies has generated the emergence of new topics to be discussed and regulated between state actors, and even non-state

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Rosen Jacobson, Katharina E Höne, Jovan Kurbalija, *Data Diplomacy. Updating diplomacy to the big data era*, February 2018, p. 29, [https://www.diplomacy.edu/sites/default/files/Data\\_Diplomacy\\_Report\\_2018.pdf](https://www.diplomacy.edu/sites/default/files/Data_Diplomacy_Report_2018.pdf), (28.10.2021)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 22

<sup>3</sup> *Voting Practices in the United Nations*, <https://www.state.gov/voting-practices-in-the-united-nations/>, (28.10.2021)

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Rosen Jacobson, Katharina E Höne and Jovan Kurbalija, *Op. cit.*, p. 23

<sup>5</sup> *The earliest International Telegraph Agreements*, <https://www.itu.int/en/history/Pages/Pre1865Agreements.aspx>, (29.10.2021)

actors. These new concerns aim at regulating the use of technologies, the activity of big tech companies, but also the protection of users' personal data.

In the UN Secretary-General's 2020 report, we can find the main proposed actions aiming at improving digital cooperation between governments and other non-state actors: achieving universal connectivity by 2030, promoting digital public goods to create a more equitable world, digital inclusion, strengthening digital capacity-building, ensuring the protection of human rights in the digital era, support global cooperation on artificial intelligence, promoting trust and security in the digital environment, building a more effective architecture for digital cooperation<sup>1</sup>.

### **Risks and vulnerabilities**

As we have seen through the examples presented in the previous section, the digitalization of diplomacy is a natural phenomenon in the context of technological evolution and globalization. The digitization process offers a range of benefits and opportunities for diplomacy. However, in an interconnected world with a fast rhythm of development, it is important to highlight the risks and vulnerabilities that come along with new opportunities, as information technologies are susceptible to various forms of cyber attacks.

According to the *Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations*, official correspondence, archives and documents of the diplomatic mission are inviolable<sup>2</sup>. However, these articles can be more easily violated in the conditions of the new digital reality, which does not necessarily respect the provisions of international law. Thus, the risk that the information intended for internal use, with various degrees of secrecy can be made public is high. Probably one of the most prominent example of this risk is the WikiLeaks scandal of 2010, when more than 250,000 secret diplomatic cables that were exchanged between US missions and Washington were made public<sup>3</sup>.

Another risk is related to messenger apps that are used by diplomats, including for communication in the interest of service. The way these applications handle personal data still remains a sensitive and even non-transparent subject. Some tech companies have already been fined for failing to be transparent about how they handle personal information<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, some of these apps offer

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<sup>1</sup> Report of the Secretary-General, *Road map for digital cooperation: implementation of the recommendations of the High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation*, May 2020, <https://undocs.org/A/74/821>, (25.10.2021)

<sup>2</sup> *Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations*, done on 18 April 1961, entered into force on 24 April 1964, Art. 24 and Art. 27 (2)

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Lehren, Scott Shane, *Leaked Cables Offer Raw Look at U.S. Diplomacy*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/29/world/29cables.html>, (29.10.2021)

<sup>4</sup> Stephanie Bodoni, Katharine Gemmell, *WhatsApp Fined \$266 Million Over Data Transparency Breaches*, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-09-02/whatsapp-fined-266-million-over-data-transparency-violations>, (30.10.2021)

the possibility to recover deleted messages<sup>1</sup>, which can again raise concerns about the way in which the information distributed through these types of networks is stored and secured.

As we could see in the previous section of this paper, social networks represent a useful tool for public diplomacy. However, we should also be aware of the risks and vulnerabilities associated with them. Being open platforms, easy to use and popular, they are exploited by various extremist groups, bots that operate on the basis of artificial intelligence, troll farms or fake accounts that pursue malicious goals. In an attempt to provide a digital environment as secure as possible, the social network Twitter suspended more than 70 million fake accounts in May and June 2018<sup>2</sup>. An impressive number that raises some questions: How many fake accounts are still active on the social networking platform? How many of these accounts were really fake? What are the criteria and procedures for accounts verification?

In this context we understand that in the new digital era, social media companies definitely have a say, as well as decision-making power. This decision-making power is reflected not only on the accounts that are considered fake, but also on those that incite hatred, big tech companies deciding what are the criteria according to which an account or a post is considered to be harmful. A prominent example in this regard is the suspension of the Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Snapchat accounts of the former American president - Donald Trump<sup>3</sup>.

Last but not least, an increased dependence on digital tools makes states vulnerable to any disruption of data flows. Internet cables are becoming the critical infrastructure that must be protected and remain essential in order to ensure the continuity of activities, both economic and political. In this context, it is important to note that approximately 95% of intercontinental internet traffic is based on submarine cables that run across the ocean floor. Thus, the security and resilience of internet cables that ensure fast interconnection between continents, remains of major importance<sup>4</sup>.

## Conclusions

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<sup>1</sup> Devon Delfino, *How to recover deleted WhatsApp messages by restoring from a backup*, <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-to-recover-deleted-whatsapp-messages>, (30.10.2021)

<sup>2</sup> Craig Timberg, Elizabeth Dwoskin, *Twitter is sweeping out fake accounts like never before, putting user growth at risk*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2018/07/06/twitter-is-sweeping-out-fake-accounts-like-never-before-putting-user-growth-risk/>, (30.10.2021)

<sup>3</sup> Julia Carrie Wong, *Facebook to suspend Trump's account for two years*, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jun/04/facebook-donald-trump-oversight-board-instagram>, (30.11.2021)

<sup>4</sup> Justin Sherman, *Cyber defense across the ocean floor: The geopolitics of submarine cable security*, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/cyber-defense-across-the-ocean-floor-the-geopolitics-of-submarine-cable-security/>, (28.10.2021)



Digitization is an irreversible process that continuously changes all areas of activity, including diplomacy. This continuous process of innovation and transformation entails the need to adapt quickly to new requirements of the digital world and to develop proper skills in this regard. In this context, both the investments for the acquisition of new technologies and the strengthening of the digital and cyber security capabilities of the diplomatic services are important.

The Digital Revolution offers a series of effective tools for public diplomacy; one of the most prominent being social networks. In creating content for these platforms it is important to keep in mind that they are susceptible to change and highly volatile. At the same time, in the context of social networks, it is important for employees to be aware of the fact that the type of content they distribute on their own pages can become sensitive. A single tweet, post or comment can cause misunderstandings, tensions or even diplomatic conflicts.

Consular services are those that can be considerably streamlined with the help of digital tools, so that citizens can benefit from qualitative and fast services. In this context, we understand once again the importance of the security of personal data storage systems.

The quantitative big data tool could be useful for adopting better informed foreign policies. However, their use requires new skills, software and also the willingness of diplomats to use such tools.

Digitization comes with new challenges, vulnerabilities and risks, so any new technology must be adopted based on a well-documented analysis, which reflects both the strengths and weaknesses of the innovation.

The way in which digitalization shapes the diplomatic agenda, but also changes the type of actors present at the negotiations is a topic that demands increased attention. In these new circumstances, diplomats' portfolio is becoming more complex, requiring new knowledge and skills.

In the end, even though the Third Industrial Revolution has a major impact on all aspects of life, at the moment we cannot say that the digitalization process has revolutionized the diplomatic service, or that it will do so in the near future. Indeed, it provides a range of tools that help streamline diplomacy, shape it, and in some cases help it in coping with crisis situations. However, diplomacy remains an art that relies heavily on protocol and etiquette, interpersonal relationship and interaction, which cannot be replaced by technology, and the example of virtual embassies certainly supports this assertion.

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