Digital external cultural policy

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1.   Introduction

The projection of influence and spread of culture worldwide has always been dependent on the technological context, and the 21st century proves to be no exception. In the same way that previous diplomats feared that the telegraph, radio, or airplane would make traditional diplomacy obsolete, in recent decades foreign ministries have been preoccupied with the impact of digital tools on the practice of foreign policy and in particular, external cultural policy (ECP).

How can we conceive of digital diplomacy? As Natalia Tsvetkova defines it, "digital diplomacy (or Internet diplomacy) is a key part of public diplomacy and is defined as the instrument for promoting the political interests of a state through the cyberworld" (2020, p. 103). Rusakova et al. add that digital diplomacy "implies flexible forms of interaction between actors in international relations using new forms of mass communication and network technologies with the aim of influencing the world discourse on pressing issues, promoting national interests and producing an operational response to the latest information challenges." (2020, p. 777). Applied to ECP, this means the use of digital tools to enhance, supplement, and replace traditional forms of language, educational, and cultural promotion.

On the whole, though, digital tools have acted as a way to add to, rather that wholly alter, traditional ECP efforts. Indeed, digital diplomacy "complements traditional foreign policy tools with newly innovated and adapted instruments that fully leverage the networks, technologies, and demographics of our networked world" (Ross, 2011). Digital diplomacy is closely related to public diplomacy and "soft power" efforts. As Rusakova finds:

"Digital diplomacy, like public diplomacy, seeks to show the general public a value system and cultural characteristics of a particular actor of international relations by means of cultural, humanitarian and educational projects. Despite the distinction between digital and public diplomacy in academic discourse, a number of researchers view digital diplomacy as a form of public diplomacy adapted to digital society and politics." (2020, p. 781)

Overall, there are three primary discernable impacts of digital tools on ECP. First, the number of voices and types of institutions that are involved in foreign cultural and educational policy are more diffuse, with states losing their edge in some ways. Second, it increases the delivery time of messages and services. Finally, it allows smaller states or less well-funded institutions to compete (at least in theory) with larger powers: the number of brick-and-mortar institutions that organization has is tied to its budget in a way that its Twitter following or web traffic is not.

Still, many of the traditional ECP hierarchies persist in the digital space. Some "great powers" of traditional ECP were slow to adopt digital tools, but today they still lead the pack in many ways. As the *New York Times* pointed out in 2010, just as digital diplomacy was establishing itself as a true force in the world, "traditional forms of diplomacy still dominate, but 21st-century statecraft [...] represents a shift in form and in strategy—a way to amplify traditional diplomatic efforts, develop tech-based policy solutions and encourage cyberactivism" (Lichtenstein, 2010).

2.   Digital ECP in action

Digital tools were initially met with apprehension by parts of the diplomatic community, with fears that they would completely transform the practice of diplomacy, including ECP. In others "leading global actors adopted digital diplomacy as a quick and cost-efficient means of reaching global target audiences" (Tsvetkova, 2019, p. 106). However, the actual picture is more complex that either of these binaries. As Ross (2011) argues:

"Traditionally, diplomatic engagement consisted largely of government-to-government interactions. In some instances, it was from government to people, such as with international broadcasting in the twentieth century. With the advent of social media and the rapid increase in mobile [technology] penetration, however, this engagement now increasingly takes place from people to government and from people to people. This direct link from citizens to government allows diplomats to convene and connect with nontraditional audiences, and in turn allows citizens to influence their governments in ways that were not possible ten years ago."

How has this affected diplomats and other cultural policy actors? First, practitioners must contest with a much more crowded environment, as "the access costs to the public space have been dramatically decreased by the arrival of digital platforms to the extent that MFAs need now to compete for the public's attention with a wide range of state and non-state actors, not all of them friendly" (Bjola et al. 2020, p. 405). This means that a diversity and wide range of skill is needed in new media, including more technical and language skills (Weigel, 2019, p. 29).

Overall it is clear that digital tools complement, rather than completely alter, the traditional landscape. As Hallams (2010) argues, "the art of soft power in the twenty-first century is fusing the traditional tools of diplomacy and negotiation and the ability to harness the power and potential inherent in the new and emerging technologies that globalization has wrought." Thus, the internet has shifted the audience, delivery, and other specifics of ECP without wholly altering the nature of the practice.

Still, a substantial change if that ECP practitioners must now pay more attention to individual, rather than institutional, audiences. This naturally comes more easily to the practice of ECP than traditional diplomacy, as there has always been more of a focus on citizen engagement with cultural and education projects than those of traditional diplomacy. However, the rise of digital tools also means that in addition to the rise of populations outside the immediate target area of their actions, as a social media or online campaign directed in a specific country is also visible beyond its borders (Adesia, 2017).

Naturally, the number of users in a country has a huge bearing on the effectiveness of digital ECP tools. In the US, for example, roughly 90% of the population has internet access, with similar figures in other developed nations. Many developing nations lag behind in usership (Tsvetkova, 2019, p. 105). Thus, while digital diplomacy has been hailed as more egalitarian and more likely to reach a diverse audience, many of the old inequalities are baked into both the dissemination and reception of digital information.

Another important change has been the internet's addition to the quantification and measurement of ECP. As Bjola et al. find "online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter now

enable diplomats to use quantitative measurements in order to assess and demonstrate their impact" and the "reach of a tweet is, for instance, a short-term output, while the annual growth in social media followers is a long-term measurement" (2020, p. 409). This contributes to a longstanding trend in ECP, as governments have sought to quantify and specify its impact (an inherently difficult task), but internet metrics serve as a convenient heuristic.

Perhaps most significantly, the techno-optimism of the early 2010s has largely been replaced by a much greater skepticism of the role of technology in world affairs. In recent years, "the rise of 'fake news' and 'post-truth' politics that digital technologies have been accused of fostering seems to suggest that hope for the new public sphere to gradually induce a positive environment for dialogue, sharing meaning, and understanding might have been too optimistic" (Bjola et al. 2020, p. 406). This has become a defining characteristic of the digital ECP landscape in the 2020s.

3.   Key players in digital diplomacy

Many of the traditional Western "powerhouses" of ECP were early leaders in using digital tools to project cultural power. In France, for example, foreign cultural and educational policy is closely accompanied by an online strategy. Within the framework of "diplomatie numérique", or digital diplomacy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been continuously expanding its online presence since 1995. French diplomats have been receiving social media training as part of their training since 2011 (MAEDI, 2016). President Macron has shown enthusiasm for using digital tools in French ECP and France published a new digital strategy in December 2017 that advocates the "promotion of human rights, democratic values and the French language in the digital world" and "strengthening the influence and attractiveness of French digital players" (France Diplomatie, 2020).

As the Norwegian Atlantic Committee finds, French "digital diplomacy has been developed too, with a multilingual and pretty successful website for the French ministry of Foreign Affairs, or the growing digitalization of France's cultural diplomacy (including francophonie)" (Charillion, 2018). The social media presence of the language and cultural institutes is also substantial. Combined, Institut français and Alliance française have nearly 5 million social media followers and 5 million unique monthly viewers on their website, according to their social media pages and most recent annual reports. Despite some improvements, experts have criticized the relatively slow rollout of digital techniques and outreach.

Broadcasters' websites and interactive platforms are playing an increasingly important role in their programming and distribution. In 2015, around 1.5 billion views were recorded across France Médias Monde's (FMM) various social media channels. French broadcasters' Facebook and Twitter following now exceeds 75 million (France Médias Monde, 2020). France and Germany also act jointly on digital projects. InfoMigrants, which is a cooperation between FMM and Deutsche Welle to provide a "news and information site for migrants to counter misinformation at every point of their journey," is one x. Since 2017, Infomigrants gathered 5 million monthly contacts across all digital environments (InfoMigrants, n.d.).

German institutions are also working to incorporate digital tools into worldwide in cultural and educational exchanges. Recently, the Goethe-Institut has emphasized "digital sovereignty" and teaching the skills to achieve it (Goethe-Institut, 2020). DW's digital offering is avai-

lable worldwide in 30 languages via its own websites, the DW News app, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and online partners such as Flipboard and MSN (DW, 2019). The balance between promoting the German language and reaching as broad an audience as possible is always a challenge in online communication.

Especially in the area of migration, the German intermediary organizations are making use of the opportunities offered by the new media—not least because they can reach many refugees directly via smartphones and tablets. For example, the Goethe-Institut offers various self-learning programs in German for mobile devices. In addition, the Institute, together with the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, the Federal Employment Agency and Bayerischer Rundfunk, has developed an app for asylum seekers. The app can be used in Arabic, English, Farsi, French and German (Lehmann, 2016, p. 24).

The US began to embrace digital tools in the early 2000s, with the US State Department ramping up its online offerings in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001. The focus on countering extremism has remained a focus. The wholesale embrace of digital tools only began under the techno-optimist Obama administration, however. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was an enthusiastic supporter of digitalization, with the report on "21ˢᵗ Century Statecraft" largely during her tenure. Using language typical of the time, the document explains that:

"The twenty-first century statecraft agenda addresses new forces propelling change in international relations that are pervasive, disruptive and difficult to predict. The distinctive features of twenty-first century statecraft point the way toward deeper changes that will gradually permeate all of foreign policy: expanding its scope, substituting new tools, and changing its values. We are adapting our statecraft by reshaping our development and diplomatic agendas to meet old challenges in new ways and by deploying one of America's great assets—innovation. This is twenty-first century statecraft—complementing traditional foreign policy tools with newly innovated and adapted instruments of statecraft that fully leverage the technologies of our interconnected world" (US Department of State, 2014).

Despite its lofty ideals, the US has been criticized for encouraging the use of digital tools to promote regime change, especially following the so-called "Twitter revolutions" of the early 2010s. Alex Ross, formerly of the State Department stresses that rather than regime change, the US focuses on "helping people to exercise rights for their own social, political and economic purposes" (Ross, 2011, p. 220).

For its part, the UK Foreign Office is trying to act as a "global authority in the theory and practice" of digital diplomacy. In recent years, the Foreign Office has developed the "digital by default" strategy, which aims to provide as much information and services as possible online. In 2010, Foreign Secretary William Hague urged Britain to "make the most of the abundant opportunities of the 21st century" and two years later, the FCO published an entire digital strategy (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2012). The British Council has an extensive online reach, with nearly 3 million followers spread across the main social media platforms and 180 million monthly visitors to its website.

Russia has made swift moves to catch up, and in some ways, surpass its western counterparts. As with some other large nations, until the early 2010, Russia's digital ECP was relatively limited. However, it has improved substantially in the past decade. As Natalia Tsvetkova finds, "Russia has unexpectedly emerged as a new digital power, revisiting traditional and forgotten

propagandistic approaches that were not seen since the end of the Cold War" (2020, p. 102). She adds that "unsurprisingly, digital diplomacy—or rather, the unexpected digital offensive or neorevanchism of Russia—has caused concern in governments and experts in Germany, Great Britain, France, and the United States" (Ibid, p. 115). It has taken a particularly innovative approach, including promoting marginalized and anti-establishment groups in target areas.

Overall, Russia has become a leader in the use of social media in foreign affairs. The use of "trolls" abroad is viewed as particularly influential and threatening from the Western perspective. According to reports, up to 400 Russians work in the Internet Research Agency (IRA), a so-called "troll factory" in St. Petersburg (Chen, 2015). The IRA achieved worldwide notoriety for its efforts to swing the 2016 US Presidential election in favor of Donald Trump, and was widely discussed in the so-called 'Mueller Report' detailing Russian attempts to alter public opinion (Mueller, 2019).

Like other countries, its foreign broadcasters use social media and the internet extensively. RT.com had over 123 million visits in September 2020, with 16 million YouTube subscribers and 3 million Twitter followers. Russkiy Mir has over 1.5 million monthly visitors, while Rossotrudnichestvo has just under a million. RUPTLY, a subsidiary of RT that produces video content, has over 32 million YouTube views. As a whole, it is clear that Russia has aptly used new technologies to make up for other lagging ECP capacities, even finding inventive ways to leverage the internet to pursue broader foreign policy goals.

In China, all local authorities have been required to use social media since 2011. However, international platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are mainly used by Chinese foreign media such as China Daily and CCTV. The Twitter presence of China Daily (4.3 million) and Xinhua (12.5 million) show China's efforts to reach an international audience. Since Western social media are consistently blocked in China, the Foreign Ministry has no official Twitter or Facebook account, although specific missions and individuals do (Ohlberg, 2014, pp. 435-436). Additionally, many Chinese organizations abroad, such as Confucius Institutes and Chinese Cultural Centres, are present on the platforms.

In particular, China has ramped up its use of Twitter as a foreign policy tool in the wake of COVID-19. As researchers from the LSE find, "data gleamed from the official Twitter accounts of various Chinese embassies and spokespersons reveal that official Chinese Twitter activity has gone into overdrive as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating China's desire to influence and shape the debate via its new diplomatic strategy" (Alden & Chan, 2021, p. 5). The PRC has made this a core of its "soft power" strategy. This all forms part of Xi's desire to "tell China's story" and correct perceived misunderstandings about the country (Schlibs et al., 2021, p. 1). While these accounts have earned the title of a "propaganda campaign" in some circles, they are relatively limited in scope. A reported 350 accounts used in the campaign (Carmichael, 2021) pales in comparison to the billions on social media around the world.

4.　Additional actors in digital diplomacy

A wide range of other countries have been employing digital tools in innovative ways, only a small subset of which are discussed here. Like many countries, Brazil uses digital tools in an ancillary way to its larger ECP efforts. The Brazilian Tourist Board Embratur, an independent agency of the Ministry of Tourism, is primarily responsible for the area of digital public diplomacy. Embratur developed a marketing strategy in the context of the major sporting events FIFA World Cup 2014 and Olympic Games 2016. The focus here is less on political messages than on the positive portrayal of Brazil. A special feature of Brazilian engagement online is the focus on multimedia offerings and audiovisual offerings in particular. This focus goes back to the importance of oral tradition in Brazilian culture (Bernadett-Shapiro, 2014, p. 8).

Brazilian Trade and Investment Promotion Agency (Apex-Brasil) also conducts activities in digital diplomacy, engaging in "selected activities designed to strengthen the country's branding abroad." (Pestana, 2020). In 2016, it launched the "Be Brasil," campaign, loosely based on the British "GREAT" campaign. As with the general model that it is based on, advertising and marketing are the focus, with a great deal of attention devoted to major events. Despite these efforts, many challenges remain in digital diplomacy. As Pestana continues, "intercultural and algorithm-savvy personnel need to be trained, pooling the creative information and communications technology (ICT) talents of Brazil's younger generations" (p. 348). Without this, digital efforts will lag.

Many other countries employ digital tools, but may not have a comprehensive digital strategy for ECP. In Turkey, the use of digital diplomacy has taken new significance since the failed coup d'état. To coordinate digital diplomatic efforts after the coup attempt on July 15th, 2016, various diplomatic missions used the hashtag #1507mfa to tweet about their outreach activities in their host countries (Sevin, 2018).

It is also clear that digital tools are not only a way to expand a country's ECP reach, they can also serve as a fallback when traditional tools are cut. For example, the Netherlands used to have a foreign radio station, Radio Netherlands Worldwide (RNW) that was active since 1947 and at its height broadcasted in 6 languages. However, this time-honored institution was discontinued in 2012-13 due to budget cuts of over 70% (Wardany, 2012; RNW, 2011). Now, RNW is an online-only platform which seeks to support social movements, particularly for "young people aged 15 to 30 who live in fragile or socio-politically repressive countries" (RNW, 2020).

Many states use the internet to complement language promotion. In India, digital tools complement language promotion. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) has launched the "Propagation of Hindi Overseas" scheme, also implemented in cooperation with Kendriya Hindi Sansthan. The council has also identified particular interest in learning Hindi and Sanskrit in both Europe and the Indian neighborhood (ICCR, 2020). Indonesia also invests in an online learning platform called Rumah Belajar, which can be utilized by students in the country and abroad alike (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kembudayaan, n.d.). Additionally, in 2013, the Qatar Foundation International founded the World Organization for the Renaissance of Arabic Language and has supported initiatives to promote Arabic in domestic instruction and worldwide promotion, especially through digital media (Saleem, 2019).

Estonia represents an interesting case in the use of digital tools for ECP. Rather than employing them to complement foreign policy efforts, Estonia's reputation for technological success breeds its own form of attraction. Indeed, the tiny Baltic state that gave the world Skype and e-residency is best known under its E-Estonia Brand. Its influence and participation in international cooperation depend greatly on this reputation. Therefore, it is building on its technological strengths, including e-governance, digital identity, e-services, and cybersecurity. E-Estonia is often referred to as the Europe's answer to Silicon Valley. In 2017, for example, it ranked as third in Europe regarding the highest number of start-ups per capita largely thanks to an accommodating business environment (Funderbeam, 2017).

Aside from the traditional range of state and state-backed ECP actors, digital tools have also allowed for a dissemination of the ability to influence the projection and practice of cultural diplomacy. Indeed, even in the early 21ˢᵗ Century, "NGOs have been swift to adapt to the potential of the Internet to increase their influence in international affairs" with "Amnesty, Oxfam, Greenpeace, Human Rights Watch—all [having] a powerful web presence for years" (Westcott, 2008, p. 9).

5.   Conclusion

As the internet becomes a more influential intermediary, old cultural and diplomatic relations can be altered or eroded, with "the technologies in question and their relationships to the wider issues of political economy, regulation and policy also play[ing] a crucial role in understanding these complex dynamics" (Valtysson, 2020, p. 1). Overall, this means an acceleration of the feedback cycles between ECP actors and the public.

On one hand, digital tools represent a huge opportunity for ECP but allowing culture to be spread around the world and for new actors to join the global conversation. However, "like any process, digitalization of 'soft power' can lead to negative consequences, namely: the spread of fake news, the formation of falsified ideas about current events, the manipulation of the global agenda, etc." (Rusakova et al, 2021, p. 782).

In spite of these difficulties, advancing digitalization also provides numerous new opportunities for cultural and educational work abroad. New communication platforms can be used for direct exchange with people all over the world. At the same time, these digital technologies raise new questions. How should the fragmented public sphere in social media be dealt with? What can be done to counter targeted misinformation? How can offerings reach a certain target group and not only inform, but also be used for real communication (Keppler, 2015, p. 2)? And, without denying the great potential of new media forms, online initiatives must not be developed at the expense of local projects. This are the key questions and tensions facing digital ECP practitioners today.

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