Internet and International Relations: The Roles of Social Media on Diplomatic Communications

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Abstract

Internet is changing the way the state relates with one another. Diplomacy as an engine of international relations, has been significantly influenced by the Internet. Diplomatic communications that were sent by human beings and later electronic telegraph is now sent via Internet networks which enable virtual diplomatic relations. The impacts of the Internet on diplomacy increased in the 21st Century as states use social media platforms for diplomatic communications. At least 97 per cent and 93 per cent of all UN member states are on Twitter and Facebook, respectively. It is also estimated that by 2021, over 3 billion people would be active on various social media platforms. Relying entirely on secondary data, this paper explores the roles of social media on diplomatic communication. It discovered that most of the UN member states use social media for public diplomacy. It shows that even China is using Twitter to communicate to foreign publics, and several embassies in China are using Weibo to speak to Chinese publics. Thus, social media become indispensable tools for public diplomacy through providing a two-way communication. While social media is regarded to be the fastest means of diplomatic communication, its increased use tends to diminish the autonomy of the diplomats because government officials communicate directly to foreign publics. This was done through conferences and workshops organized by diplomats. The paper suggests that states’ official social media accounts are today as important as other traditional means of diplomatic communications.

Keywords: Internet, International Relations, Diplomacy, Diplomatic Communication, Social Media

Introduction

Generally, the impacts of the Internet on International Relations is a cottage industry of academic study (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). This led to the lack of theories that capture the role of the former on the latter. Few theories that try to explain the role of the Internet on state powers have been polarised. One group believes that the Internet empowers state. The group opined that some of the apparatus of state power such as military, economy etc. rely heavily on the Internet. Thus, state invests a considerable amount of money in providing a reliable, fast and secured Internet. Another group considers the Internet as a tool that threatens state power and sovereignty. Open access to the Internet by non-state actors makes state vulnerable to threats from several non-state actors. The Internet, therefore, devolves state powers and allows other actors to compete for power with state and challenge state control over extraterritorial issues (Carr, 2016).

As a system of communication between polities, diplomacy has been influenced by the development of available technology, especially
in communication and transportation (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2018 and Jönsson & Hall, 2005). Communication and transportation have been particularly affected by technology because traditional methods of carrying and conveying message changed over time. Diplomatic communication began with using smoke-signals and drums, and transportation relied solely on animal and human beings in ancient time (Berridge, 2015). Medieval period witnessed the use of nuncios instead of written letters and gift-giving as methods of communication. Seas were navigated during this period. The use of the latter lingered up to modern diplomatic era when resident ambassadors began to be used as permanent diplomatic representatives. In the modern era, Latin was replaced by French as a language of diplomatic communication until the end of World War I when English became the medium of diplomatic communication (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2018). With the introduction of the optical telegraph and radiotelegraphy in the 19th Century, diplomatic communication became more comfortable. Telephone, short-wave radio, fax, electronic mail, instant messaging, mobile or cell phones etc. seemed to complete the revolution in the 20th Century. However, the Internet enables the use of email, video-conferencing and instant messaging applications which allow instant decision-making on diplomatic issues. They also allow the displays of papers, maps, body language, thereby rendering the tête-à-têtes in some diplomatic issues unnecessarily. More than ever, social media brought about faster communication which facilitated two-way diplomacy, allowing rapid answers to queries and timely solutions to sudden problems. Thus, states adopt the use of various social media platforms for diplomatic communications. It is believed that only six out of 193 UN member states are not present on social media (Twiplomacy, 2018).

This paper begins with examining the diplomatic relations without Internet from the ancient time through the medieval period to the modern era. It is argued that in each era, diplomacy had been influenced by available technological advancement. The paper then surveys the impacts of the Internet on international relations in general by discussing two major debates regarding power and new technology. Other essential areas discussed include how the Internet affects diplomatic communication and finally, the impacts of social media on diplomacy in the 21st Century.

Pre-Internet Diplomatic Communications
“Diplomacy is an engine room of international relations” (Cohen, 1998, p. 1). Diplomacy means the use of tact in dealing with people. In International Relations (as a discipline, henceforth IR), diplomacy is a communication system of the international society that involves the conduct of relations between states to enable them to secure the objectives of their foreign policies without resort to force (Berridge & Lloyd, 2012, and Berridge, 2015). This is achieved mainly by communication between professional diplomatic agents, leaders and other officials designed to secure agreements. Carrió-Invernizzi (2014) contended that diplomatic practice emerged out of the needs of humans to reach an understanding with neighbours about the limit of their hunting territories (cited in Bjola & Kornprobst, 2018, p. 13).

Historically, diplomatic practice was invented without shared tradition among all people as its development around the world has been characterised by a lack of uniformity. Since the first stage of its development, diplomatic practice has been geographically and historically situated. This made it prone to several changes. Acknowledging the changes, diplomatic scholars divide development in diplomatic practice into three epochs viz. ancient diplomacy, medieval diplomacy and
modern diplomacy (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2018). This paper focuses attention on the communication methods of each period. This is not to render other areas such as representation procedures and conflict management irrelevant, but to examine how diplomatic messages were sent in the pre-internet era. It also aims to show how diplomatic communications changed over time so as to link the development to the era of the Internet and present-day when Social Media play an important role in diplomatic communications.

Diplomacy may be resistant to theory (Der Derian 2009), but it cannot resist technological advancement. The development of available technology has always influenced diplomacy. In the ancient period, diplomatic communications were based on signals sent via drums and smoke (Berridge, 2015) and access to a common language – Latin. People were trained to record and translate Latin for their respective leaders. The level of acceptance/rejection of diplomatic agents was also communicated through gifts and ceremonial events (Cohen, 1996, p. 14). The ancient Greek diplomatic system for example, had several characteristics that presented a high level of sophistication. Greek envoys, which could be as many as ten in one embassy, concluded treaties only after reference to, and approval of, public assemblies. The Spartans eventually introduced the institution of conference diplomacy to address some of the diplomatic problems. The significant contribution of Roman Empire in diplomatic communication was particularly in the area of declaring war. Before declaring any war, Romans had to follow proper procedure by informing the enemy of the grievances of Rome. If nothing happened, then a declaration of war would be made at the border of the enemy’s territory after a fixed period. The Empire also had to offer a legal justification for the war by capitalising on the following: violation of a treaty, truce, or armistice; an offence committed against an ally; violation of neutrality; violation of the sanctity of ambassadors; refusal to surrender an ambassador who had violated his neutrality; unjustifiable rejection of an embassy; violation of territorial rights; the refusal of a peaceful passage of troops; and refusal to surrender an individual who committed a crime (Ballis, 1973; cited in Bjola & Kornprobst, 2018, p. 17). The Chinese Empire diplomatic communication in the ancient period was also done through the tribute system to and from subordinate powers. It is important to emphasise that in the ancient time, diplomatic missions could take months and often years to complete. Some of the obstacles were associated with the detention of envoys and dependent on the physical capacity of animals and humans to carry diplomatic messages and messengers (Jönsson & Hall, 2015).

In the early medieval period, nuncio – a messenger or a living letter – was an agent whose main function was to provide a channel of communication between rulers and to explore opportunities for concluding treaties and alliances (Berridge & Lloyd, 2012). He was described as the living letter chiefly because he delivered the messages the way he received it. During this period, it is believed that person could convey more meaning than a letter. Nuncios were given a letter of instructions containing specific guidelines and exact words they had to use. Gift-giving also played an important role as one of the communication methods in medieval time. Diplomatic gifts were chosen from objects characterised by costly materials, skilful manufacture, aesthetic value, rarity and high monetary value. Arms, trappings, vessels, goblets, luxurious textiles, silver boxes, jewellery, Indian spices and ‘exotic’ pieces of art, were usually given (Siebenhüner, 2013; cited in Bjola & Kornprobst, 2018, p.22). Carefully crafted furniture with exceptional artistic design and
made with precious materials, robes of honour, animals and gem-studded daggers were further examples of diplomatic gifts presented to diplomats to show the level of acceptance in the medieval period. Gifts were such an important part of a diplomatic exchange that bringing an inappropriate gift, or no gift at all, could have serious implications. It could, for example, jeopardise the reputation of the gift-giver and even disgrace nations (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2018).

Modern diplomacy witnessed the establishment of the institution of the resident ambassador at the end of the 15th Century. Ambassadors in the contemporary diplomatic era are required to build close relations with the individuals with whom the power rested, form good channels of communication between the two states and to advise the sending state on the best course of action. The reports envoys sent in the modern diplomatic era are very detailed, containing endless verbatim accounts of conversations that they had with receiving states. The use of Latin among diplomats became infrequent in modern era as many nations began to use their languages. However, French later became the dominant language used in diplomatic communications until the end of World War I when it gradually became replaced by English (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2018).

The optical telegraph and semaphore systems introduced in Europe in the late eighteenth century were major developments in diplomatic communications in the modern era. The era also witnessed the advent of steamships and railways which significantly increased the mobility of diplomats and permitted fast and direct communications between governments as well as between foreign ministries and embassies (Jónsson & Hall, 2015). These technological developments began to make a major impact on diplomacy, especially when the electric telegraph was introduced towards the middle of the 19th Century (Berridge, 2015). The invention of radiotelegraphy in the 1890s further improved communication in the Century. In the early 20th Century, it became possible to deliver the spoken word over vast distances through telephone and short-wave radio. Since World War II, diplomatic communications became much easier with the introduction of fax, electronic mail, instant messaging, mobile or cell phones etc.

Despite its dangers such as vulnerability to eavesdropping and marked limitations, telephone diplomacy is still relevant in the 21st Century. Berridge (2015) identified some of the advantages of telephone diplomacy over other products of telecommunications. The telephone is easier, quicker to use, it is more personal, and it is more flattering to the recipient. It provides considerable certainty that a message has got through and might be deniable if this should prove to be expedient. It also makes possible the immediate correction of a misunderstanding or immediate adjustment of a statement that has given unintended offence. Finally, the telephone provides the opportunity to “extract an immediate response from the party at the other end of the line – and many people find it more difficult to say ‘no’ over the telephone than in a written response” (Berridge, 2015, p. 104).

The Internet and International Relations

Impacts of technology on international relations cannot be overemphasised. As oceans enabled the expansion of Europe in the 16th and 18th centuries through exploration, telegraph transformed communication in the 19th Century. The aeroplane, radio, TV etc. had changed international relations in the 20th Century, and the Internet has a drastic influence on the way nations interact with one another in the 21st Century (Westcott, n.d.). The Internet has brought unprecedented changes in international relations. It is crucial
to note that the changes brought by the Internet have proven to be faster, much more efficient compared to developments in the previous centuries. Although it may seem too early to make conclusive remarks on the roles of the Internet on international relations for the former experiences dramatic transformation every day, one can outline some of the critical areas as the Century enters into the second decade. The Internet has three fundamental roles in international relations:

a. it multiplies and amplifies the number of voices and interests involved in global policy-making, complicating international decision-making and reducing the exclusive control of states in the process;
b. it accelerates and frees the dissemination of information, accurate or not, about any issue or event which can impact on its consequences and handling;
c. it enables traditional diplomatic services to be delivered faster and more cost-effectively, both to ones’ citizens and government, and to those of other countries (Westcott n.d., p. 1).

In the same vein, Carr (2016) pointed out that in the 21st Century much of the world depends on the Internet for most of their activities and states, in particular, develop much dependence on the internet for military weapons systems, critical infrastructure, commerce and diplomacy. The Internet has, therefore, minimised the previous limitation imposed by space and time, thus accelerating globalisation. Wenger (2001) argued that the information technology revolution is restructuring the international system, and the distribution of power has become volatile and complex. The Internet has taken the lead in crumbling traditional and cultural boundaries, thereby making them less significant. It has significantly impacted war and peace as it blurred the boundaries between political and military spaces. Power in the age of Internet depends not only on the territory, military power and natural resources but on reliable and secured Internet which to a more considerable extent influences the economy and security of the state. In a nutshell, the impact of the Internet in the 21st Century is forcing experts to re-examine the major actors in international relations. Traditionally dominated by state actors, international relations have experienced the presence of new and diverse actors. Not only new actors that have emerged, “the speed, capacity and flexibility in the collection, production and dissemination of information have also increased” (Wenger, 2001, p. 6). This revolution has also entered into the security structure of states. Today, the security of a nation is beyond its simple ‘physical’ territorial integrity, for the Internet brought about new challenges on security. Former US President Obama expressed that “those states which have most successfully adopted and exploited the opportunities afforded by the Internet are also the most vulnerable to the range of threats which accompany it” (Obama, 2009; cited in Carr, 2016, p.7). Threats to crucial infrastructure such as military arsenals, financial system, electricity, telecommunications transport and water supply heavily come through the Internet. Similarly, threats to these infrastructures that hitherto come from ‘rogue state’ now come from even non-state actors such as cybercriminals that according to Wenger operates from a “relatively opaque cyberspace (Wenger, 2001, p. 7).

Above examples are not the only areas where the Internet plays prominent roles in international relations, yet they suffice experts to conclude that states dependence on this ‘unsecured’ network for relationship needs to be studied. The impacts of the Internet on international relations are so complex thus, “difficult to analyse with any clarity in a generalisable way” (Carr, 2016, p. 1). Scholars of IR try to look at these impacts through the existing theories by regarding the Internet as a

new chapter in understanding international affairs. This new chapter has to be examined to understand the relationship between Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the Internet in particular and international relations.

Existing theories of IR only view the revolution in ICT that brought the Internet within the context of the relationship between power and technology. This is usually done out of the conviction that technology has a significant impact on state power in the international system. This realist approach views a state as a self-interested, power-maximising (or security maximising) unit in an anarchical system. However, even the existing literature on the relationship between power and new technology in IR has been polarised. One of the reasons is that “while the discipline of IR has a range of theories about power, it does not have an equivalent framework for understanding technology and this is proving to be a limitation for developing a deeper understanding of the relationship between power and new technology” (Carr, 2016, p. 16). The polarisation led to the creation of two groups.

The first group tends to view the emergence of the Internet as an extension or enhancement of existing technology and therefore to reinforce existing power structures. ICT in general, thus “becomes another ‘artefact’ of power to be understood in the same way we have previously regarded new missile technology or energy sources (Rothkopf, 1998; cited in Carr, 2016, p. 3). Succinctly, scholars in this category consider the Internet as a tool that enhances state power considering how apparatus of power heavily depends on it. The Internet must therefore, be viewed as a mechanism for empowering’ state power in the 21st Century. A state with a secured Internet network is considered secured. This explains why states invest a huge amount of resources not only in the provision of Internet service but in cybersecurity. The Internet service is becoming cheaper while cybersecurity is becoming complicated, as millions of people online have varied intentions. Provision of a viable, fast and secured Internet network is now one of the attributes of a powerful state.

The second group view the Internet as a mechanism that devolves power from the state. Many studies have concentrated on how technology like the Internet has impacted on state power by eroding the institution of statehood. Scholars who tend to be in this group pay attention to the ‘democratising’ nature of the Internet which gives almost everybody access to the Internet and how that affects the sovereignty of state (Berman and Weitzner, 1997; Katzenelson, 1997). It is argued that the Internet is undermining state power in many ways. Salient among these, as identified above, are the emergence and proliferation of the activities of non-state actors such as international terrorists and cybercriminals in the 21st Century. These and other similar organisations compete for power with states and challenge state control over extraterritorial issues. All these are becoming easier with the Internet, which can be accessed and manipulated by a lot of individuals.

To sum it up, the polarisation of literature vis-à-vis the impact of the Internet on international relations has added more salt to the wound. Both groups have captured the reality of the Internet in relations to state power and sovereignty. Nevertheless, this paper takes middle ground by arguing that the Internet can be used to either enhance or undermine state power. A study conducted in 2016 supported this assertion by proposing an alternative approach to examining the relationship between the Internet and state power. It observed that:

Internet technology is not discriminating – it can be used to enhance or undermine state power, in a multitude of ways and
simultaneously. The Internet then is neither empowering nor disempowering. The Internet does not have a set of values or a purpose – those emanate from our interaction with the technology. In this view, the Internet is an expression of the interests and values of those who engage with it (Carr, 2016, p. 5).

The Roles of the Internet on Diplomatic Communications

“Communication is to diplomacy as blood is to the human body. Whenever communication ceases, the body of international politics, the process of diplomacy, is dead, and the result is violent conflict or atrophy” (Tran, 1987 cited in Jönsson & Hall, 2005 p. 67). With the advent of the Internet and its new communication tools, it is believed that tête-à-têtes in some diplomatic issues are no longer necessary. While obviously not replacing a core aspect of traditional diplomacy – the personal meeting – the Internet has affected how foreign ministries and departments of state do business. A survey of some countries’ foreign ministries, suggests that e-diplomacy is a strategy that states take seriously, often at considerable cost and attention. “The United States, for instance, as of September 2012, had over 150 full-time staff members working in twenty-five different e-diplomacy nodes at Headquarters” (Bjola & Holmes, 2015, p. 14).

It is becoming obvious that the Internet is providing access to instant information and interactive online communication which diplomats and government officials have begun to use to their advantages. The major impact of the Internet on diplomacy lies in the fact that it ushered in the use of internet-aided-communication tools to deliver and receive both written and voice messages instantly. In describing the use of the Internet for diplomacy, scholars have been using different terms such as “cyber-diplomacy,” “net-diplomacy,” “e-diplomacy,” and “Twiplomacy” (Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Verrekia, 2017). However, the use of Digital Diplomacy became a popular term that has been used by scholars to describe the use of the Internet in diplomatic communications (Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Verrekia, 2017; Adesina, 2016; Manor, 2018; Bjola & Pamment, 2019). According to Manor (2018), the use of digital diplomacy began in 2007 as an experiment by a selected number of foreign ministries and diplomatic pioneers. It has now become standard practice for diplomatic institutions around the world. Twiplomacy is also used to describe the use of social media, especially Twitter, on diplomatic communication (Dumčiuvičienė, 2018).

Westcott (n.d) was of the view that diplomacy cannot be carried out in the same old way as technological developments always have impacts on it in several key areas. In service delivery, email provides a universal, instant means of communication and remains a valuable supplement to negotiating between states. Email is fast, cheap, and reaches intended recipient; it has features for the exchange of documents, copying messages to interested parties, and keeping an accurate record of a negotiation. It allows the use of ‘emoticons’ – symbols expressing emotions. The use of email in diplomatic communications began in the US with Bill Clinton as the first American president to use email. Perhaps because of the reports that Israeli intelligence had tapped into Clinton’s messages, George W. Bush never used it at all. With the inauguration in January 2009 of Barack Obama, the use of email became popular as Obama, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton were already addicted to their BlackBerry phones (Berridge, 2015). The Internet also make possible the use of video-conferencing which allows any number of persons at remote locations, provided they have compatible facilities, to see and hear each other in real-time and, as a result, conduct a virtual meeting without having to go to the
trouble and expense of travelling to a distant venue for a personal encounter. Through video-conferencing, the Internet facilitates virtual diplomacy, which allows the display of documents and maps as well as the expression of body language. As at real conferences, “smiles – forced or genuine – and nods of agreement can be witnessed, as can frowns, glares, yawns, bored expressions, rolling eyes, slumped shoulders, fingers drumming on tabletops, shaking heads, and lips curling with contempt” (Berridge, 2015, p. 108). As the Internet becomes cheaper and sophisticated, video-conferencing is also becoming more affordable and increasingly sophisticated. There is now a broad range of screen sizes; high-definition images are available; ‘mobile collaboration’ – in addition to point-to-point and multipoint conferencing – can currently be employed using hand-held devices. West African leaders, for instance met on Thursday, 20 August through video-conferencing to discuss issues affecting Mali. It was a Virtual Extraordinary Session of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Authority of Heads of State and Government on the socio-political situation in Mali following a military coup d’état on Tuesday, 18 August 2020 (Adebayo, 2020). Service provided by foreign ministries, embassies and consulates are also being made available online. Travel advice, passport and visa applications, can all now be provided online on the websites of foreign ministries, embassies/high commissions and consulates.

Social Media and Diplomatic Communications in the 21st Century

The mushroom of social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, instant messaging services such as WhatsApp and Snapchat and video viewing sites like YouTube has furthered the digital age. Individuals of all ages across the globe are being affected in one way or the other by the proliferation of social media platforms. Studies have found that in 2019 Internet users spend at least 2 hours 22 minutes per day on social networking sites, feeling the need to stay updated on the latest news. 16-24-year-old people spend an average of 3 hours on social media. The average time spent daily on social media has dramatically increased from 90 minutes in 2012 to 153 minutes in 2020 (Average time spent daily on social media, n.d.). By 2021, more than 3 billion people are expected to be on Social Media. Facebook has 2.2 billion active users in 2019, spending at least 58 minutes per day. The heads of government and foreign ministers of 179 countries were active on Facebook in 2018. This represents 93 per cent of all UN member states. Twitter has a median of 330 million monthly active users, with almost 140 million tweets per day. The current data of registered Twitter users reach 1.3 billion. An average of 1 minute is spent on Twitter every day. However, government officials spend much time on Twitter than on Facebook and other social media networking sites (Metev, 2020). Almost 97 per cent of all 193 UN member states have official Twitter accounts.

Only six countries namely, Laos, Mauritania, Nicaragua, North Korea, Swaziland and Turkmenistan, do not have official Twitter accounts. Chinese scepticism on using ‘conventional’ social media did not prevent the State Council Information Office, one Chinese ambassador and seven Chinese embassies to maintain a presence on Twitter (Twiplomacy, 2018). Similarly, the Chinese government and at least 165 foreign governmental organisations in China use Weibo on diplomatic communications. Commonly referred to Sina Weibo, Weibo is a Chinese microblogging website being used by at least 30% of the world’s Internet users, with a similar market penetration that Twitter has established in the USA. Weibo can be considered as “a hybrid of Facebook and Twitter in China” (Jiang, 2017, p. xi). It has over 445 million active users in
2018. Certainly, the increased use of social media sites has caused the world to feel like a much smaller place, with people all over the globe having similar access to information instantly. This comes alongside citizens involvement in the external affairs of the state via their social media pages (Jiang, 2017).

Generally speaking, social media began to be taken more seriously in academia after the Arab Springs in the Middle East in 2011 (Bjola & Jiang, 2015). The success of the Arab uprisings in 2011 was partly due to the ability to connect via social media. Partakers got and shared information not only from conventional information sources but also from people connected to various kinds of social media (Seib, 2012). In diplomacy, social media are used for diplomatic communication to deliver and respond to messages, to develop and promote certain country image, to express foreign policy priorities and to communicate with foreign publics. Therefore, social media create new opportunities for states leaders and governments by creating fora where important diplomatic issues could be discussed, and the position of various countries could be known (Dumčiuvienė, 2016).

It is noteworthy that despite the salient roles of social media in diplomatic communications in the 21st Century, states maintain traditional methods of conveying essential messages through various heads of mission. ICT has, however affected these methods significantly since the beginning of the modern diplomatic era. Obviously, the number of citizens, heads of government, foreign affairs ministers and embassies/high commissions using social media increased dramatically in the second decades of the 21st Century (Twiplomacy, 2018; Twiplomacy, 2020). Even with its widespread, social media are used, not entirely though, to communicate to foreign publics. Scholars commonly refer to this as (new) public diplomacy (Martin & Jagla, 2013; Bjola & Jiang, 2015; Dumčiuvienė, 2016). Public diplomacy is defined as the process by which direct relations with people in the receiving state are pursued to advance the interests and extend the values of the people of the sending state (Melissen, 2005). The main purpose of public diplomacy is to advance foreign policy goals by influencing public opinion in the host country. It thus comprises the efforts of the sending state to influence, inform and engage with foreign publics through its diplomatic agents.

With over 153 minutes spent online daily, social media can be used to “create contacts and develop a dialogue with foreign audiences, as well as introduce state’s foreign policy goals and priorities” (Dumčiuvienė, 2016, p. 98). The number of people online and number of posts/responses per hour suggest the effectiveness of social media in public diplomatic communication which according to Bjola and Jiang (2015) depends on the capacity of any media to move beyond information dissemination and to create conditions for an interactive conversation between diplomats and the foreign publics. Thus, social media have been proven to be the most effective, user-friendly and suitable media for public diplomacy used by heads of government, foreign affairs ministries and embassies/high commissions.

Social media allows diplomats to set an agenda with their target audience. For example, Twitter, Facebook and many other social media platforms enable their subscribers to set agendas and easily target their audience. The targeted audience can be reached easily via tagging in a post. Although the posts in social media are for public consumption, there is a provision of tagging the accounts of the main targets of a particular post. This is normally done to express the position of the former vis-à-vis the latter without denying public access to the information contained in the post. “If a government aims to develop a good relationship with a foreign audience, it first needs to be “out there in the relevant public.
sphere” (Bjola & Jiang 2015, p. 75). A diplomat in this information age must, therefore be present and be public. Traditionally, being present and public were done through organising lectures, workshops, conferences for the foreign publics in embassies/high commissions. Some participants of the conferences and workshops were usually sent for a training or exchange programmes to the sending state (Berras, 2014). The emergence of social media increases the scope of diplomatic presence over space and time. A single post by a diplomat about his sending state can be seen by tens of thousands of foreign publics. This post can also be accompanied with pictures and short videos which can be viewed by thousands within a very short period of time. YouTube, with its millions of subscribers, can be used to upload long videos by an embassy/high commission channels for the consumption of foreign publics. Social media also generate two-way conversation between diplomats and targeted audience. When a diplomat set agenda and presence has been established, social media, with its interactive feature, can generate a quasi-continuous dialogue between diplomats and foreign publics. The traditional diplomatic way of arguing a case and getting ideas into circulation has been to deliver a speech or publish a pamphlet, and pass the key messages to the radio, TV and print media. These traditional ways take a long time to get a response from foreign publics. With social media, response are done instantly, and the message is circulated to large audience within the shortest period.

While there is no record of using social media in diplomatic communications by only six UN members states, differences exist across countries with verified social media accounts. Similarly, some countries adopt public diplomacy while others still lag behind. Each country that establish presence on social media also carefully select fit-for-purpose social media platform to communicate to foreign publics. China allows its citizens to legally use only Weibo due to its suspicion on conventional social media, especially Twitter and Facebook. This compels embassies in China to use Weibo for public diplomatic communication. Empirical evidences suggest that the EU, the US and Japanese diplomats have creatively used Weibo to alleviate the suspicion of Chinese authorities and establish open communication channels with Chinese citizens (Bjola & Jiang, 2015).

Conclusion

Diplomatic communications whether between envoys and their sending states or between envoys and receiving states, have always been impacted by advancement in technology. Technology in general, has always increased the speed at which diplomatic messages were sent. Drums and smoke-signals sent ‘obscure’ messages to the nearest community only. Messages delivered my nuncios took a long time to reach the sending state and important messages could be forgotten. The electric telegraph was the fastest technological tool that enhanced diplomatic communication in the 19th Century. Since its emergence, however, telegraph began to pose threats to the autonomy of the diplomats. The major threat electric telegraph posed to diplomats lies in its ability to allow “foreign ministries to oversee and direct the activities of diplomats more easily” (Nickles, 2003, p. 31). When the first telegram arrived on the desk of British foreign minister Lord Palmerston in the 1840s for example, he exclaimed: “My God, this is the end of diplomacy.” (Catto, Jr, 2001, cited in Jönsson & Hall, 2005, p. 91).

Subsequent technological tools were faster than their predecessors. This means that today the Internet and especially social media diminish further the autonomy of the diplomats and create more chances for foreign ministries and even heads of government to
respond to issues that where hitherto handled by diplomats. The dramatic increases in the use of social media in diplomatic communication often forces decision-makers to react instantaneously to international events, bypassing traditional diplomatic channels. In this age of social media, the moderate tempo of traditional diplomatic communication, which allowed for careful deliberations of signalling strategy and interpretation, seems irrevocably lost. The presence of foreign ministries/ministers and embassies/ambassadors on social media shows the level of influence of public diplomacy. The only six countries without verified social media accounts are left behind in public diplomacy. Nonetheless, they can hardly stop their citizens from visiting other countries’ social media accounts. Diplomats, from code clerks to ambassadors, complained that technology reduced their authority, lessened their control over their work environment, and seemingly degraded their working conditions (Nickles, 2003).

All in all, the Internet in general and social media in particular will continue to have impacts on diplomatic communications. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, diplomatic communications have not suffered a serious setback compared to other activities that involve various countries such as education, pilgrimage, trade and investment, social activities, medical trips to mention but few. This is largely because diplomatic communications became truly digital. World leaders have been using social media to express their decisions to work from home. For example, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau tweeted that “I’ll continue to work from home and conduct meetings via video and teleconference. It is recommended thus, countries must take their official social media accounts seriously as they are as important as other traditional means of diplomatic communications.

References


