

STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES IN DIGITAL DIPLOMACY: A CASE STUDY OF U.S., UK, AND CHINA DIPLOMATS IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the strategies and challenges adopted by diplomats in the conduct of digital diplomacy. Digital diplomacy is the use of various new technologies in diplomacy communication and performance to win the hearts and minds of foreign nationals. This study interviewed diplomats and experts from the three embassies and thematically analysed the data. The findings suggest that diplomats find the influence of technology to be important in digital diplomacy, but they do not have time to engage with the digital audience, raising the question of trust in digital platforms. In addition, conventional diplomacy is not dead but is integrated into the "new" public diplomacy. Furthermore, the study revealed that digital platforms facilitate the spread of hate speech, fake news, misinformation, and disinformation campaigns, restraining the diplomats from effectively implementing digital diplomacy, and due to the large amount of information from vast projects and agencies that are implemented in Kenya, it is difficult to disseminate this information with one voice, posing a challenge and a need for new skill sets to deal with emerging issues.

Keywords: Digital Diplomacy, Social Media, Cyberattacks, China, U.S., UK

INTRODUCTION

Digital diplomacy refers to governments and international organisations using digital and social media platforms to communicate with foreign publics and conduct diplomacy. This can include using social media to engage with foreign audiences, posting updates and information on government websites and official social media accounts, and participating in online discussions and debates (Ong'ong'a, 2021). Digital diplomacy can also involve the use of technology to facilitate communication and collaboration among diplomats and data and analytics to inform diplomatic decision-making (Anzera et al., 2019; Hayden, 2018). Digital diplomacy aims to enhance traditional diplomatic efforts by leveraging the reach and convenience of digital platforms to build connections, promote understanding, and address global challenges.

When using these technologies, diplomats face several difficulties, such as limited reach, linguistic and cultural hurdles, cybersecurity problems, and privacy concerns (Bjola & Pamment, 2019). Digital diplomacy methods focus and ideals are vehicles for involving a foreign audience in conversations on foreign policies that may directly affect them or sway their view toward those States to combat these issues. As

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such, they can be considered the pillars of diverse media in a democracy: Through the use of this digital platform, they educate foreign audiences on the processes of framing, narrating, and selecting global events in ways that frequently undermine those nations, allowing people to make informed decisions about their attitudes toward those states (Adesina, 2017). As a result, this study examines the relationship between digital platforms and diplomacy reviews by comparing the digital diplomatic practice of the US, UK, and Chinese embassies, diplomats, and experts in Kenya. This study contributes to the literature on digital diplomacy and brings in a new perspective on the challenges these diplomatic actors face in the Global South.

These three nations are significant, and Kenya, which is in East Africa, acts as a regional centre for trade, diplomacy, and security in the area. The use of digital diplomacy by key international entities, including the US, UK, and China in Kenya, provides insight into their broader geopolitical goals and objectives across the African continent (Karam, 2019). In addition, these three nations have substantial diplomatic ties to Kenya, including business alliances, security coordination, and development aid. They can communicate with Kenyan government representatives, members of civil society, and the general public using digital diplomacy to further their diplomatic objectives. These states have significant economic interests in Kenya, including trade, investment, and infrastructure development. Analysing their digital diplomacy methods can show how they foster business relationships, deal with trade-related problems, and advertise their soft power initiatives through cultural events, language learning, and educational initiatives. Digital diplomacy can also impact Kenyan public opinion and policy.

THE USE OF THE INTERNET AND OTHER DIGITAL PLATFORMS IN DIPLOMATIC ACTIVITIES

Digital diplomacy scholarship is not a recent development. These scholarly works are novel in that they concentrate on digital diplomacy's broad definition and context (Luqiu & Yang, 2020). For instance, Manor and Crilley (2018) argue that the rise of digital diplomacy was founded on the advent of internet technologies, especially Web 2.0, such as social networks that ease and are dependent on the dynamic participation of the audience. However, scholars and experts have proposed other definitions, focusing on the interaction between diplomacy and the Internet, including Internet-driven changes in the environment where diplomacy takes place and incorporating new topics into diplomatic programs by utilising Internet tools for practising diplomacy.

The revolution of the internet, specifically digital platforms, has had a diverse effect on all aspects of individuals' lives and organisations, including international relations and politics. This insurgency has also transformed diplomacy, a foreign policy tool where engagement progressively occurs from person to person and from person to government (Strauß et al., 2015). The direct link created by these technologies has led citizens to connect with the governments directly, hence allowing diplomats to connect and convene with non-traditional audiences and sequentially allowing people to influence their governments in ways that were impossible centuries ago (Archetti, 2016). Currently, actors leverage the rapid rise of digital platforms to conduct foreign policy work. Diplomatic actors have broadly defined digital diplomacy as a component of public diplomacy that involves their use of various digital platforms (Ong'ong'a, 2020), such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, blogs, Weibo, WeChat, and websites,

among others, to communicate with a foreign digital audience cost-effectively (Potter, 2018). Digital platforms provide some benefits and challenges for diplomatic activities by actors who believe they cannot fall behind in the era of emerging digital trends. Such technologies and digital diplomacy activities aim to project state and non-state actors' foreign policy positions to foreign and domestic audiences rather than replace or supplement traditional face-to-face diplomacy (Manor & Pamment, 2019).

Socially, there are growing demands on the practice of digital diplomacy in general, which requires promoting a positive image of a state globally by endorsing vibrant and useful diplomatic tools to achieve the fundamentals and principles of contemporary foreign practices. The expectations, however, are at odds with the overall reality on the ground. Besides, Kenya is experiencing a tremendous change in all the significant sectors, characterised by cross-border expansion, globalisation, cooperation, and digital convergence. These factors have complicated how diplomacy should be practised. As a result, diplomats are often challenged by pressure from different internal and external stakeholders, such as the media, government, and political actors, during their practice (Bjola & Pamment, 2019).

EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF NEW PUBLIC OF DIPLOMACY AND DIGITAL DIPLOMACY

The idea of "new public diplomacy" represents an updated and improved method of practising diplomacy, taking into account the significant changes in communication, technology, and international relations that have taken place recently (Pamment, 2012). Traditional diplomacy was mainly focused on government-to-government relationships and negotiations, but public diplomacy expanded the scope to involve interactions with non-state actors, including civil society organisations, businesses, and individuals (Cercel & Saftescu, 2015). The recent interactions have encouraged multiple actors to participate in diplomatic conduct. It is now widely recognised that diplomatic efforts should involve government officials, civil society organisations, academia, media, and the private sector (Melissen, 2005). These non-state actors can significantly impact shaping public opinion, influencing policy, and promoting international cooperation. Sometimes, foreign States use these actors to push their agenda in other countries.

Moreover, new public diplomacy emphasises the importance of utilising information and communication technologies. The emergence of the internet and digital communication has transformed how diplomacy is carried out. New public diplomacy utilises digital tools, social media, and online platforms to disseminate information, engage with global audiences, and facilitate two-way communication between governments and the public. This aspect of information communication technologies is crucial in digital diplomacy, as it allows citizens to question foreign policies, express their opinions, and criticise decisions made by foreign governments. While these platforms offer opportunities to the broader public, they also present various challenges, including the rapid spread of misinformation and fake news (Bjola & Pamment, 2019). New public diplomacy emphasises the importance of fostering connections between people, promoting cultural exchanges, educational programs, and grassroots initiatives to create mutual understanding and cooperation between individuals from different countries. In other words, digital platforms have created these open spaces for people to engage in online space without interfering with time and space. This has created them

to engage in real-time and near-real-time. This has been particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mutua & Ong'ong'a, 2020), as governments have used these platforms to conduct foreign policy initiatives.

Public diplomacy has become more complex in the current era, requiring organisations to engage in advocacy and Issue-Based Diplomacy. Public diplomacy is increasingly used to promote issues such as human rights, climate change, and global health. Governments, NGOs, and individuals can collaborate on these issues to increase global awareness and build international consensus (McCullough, 2019). It is important to note that these governments must utilise their digital platforms to ensure that the general public knows these global values. For instance, the UK government has been advocating for climate change, which has had devastating impacts on many countries around the world. On the other hand, the US has consistently promoted the value of human rights and the fight against terrorism. China has also emerged as a global health advocate, particularly in the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic. Public diplomacy is critical in coordinating international responses and providing aid and assistance to regions affected by natural disasters or pandemics. Public diplomacy efforts can also aid in managing crisis-related communication and mitigating misinformation. These initiatives are promoted on various digital platforms, targeting specific individuals in societies to create a more significant impact.

The current study aims to explore the concept of New Public Diplomacy and its application in digital diplomacy practices in Kenya. The New Public Diplomacy concept is used because it requires diplomatic actors to engage with a wider network of actors, including both State and non-state actors, to achieve common goals. These networks are often informal and flexible, allowing for more agile and adaptable diplomatic efforts. From the literature review, some fundamental gaps exist, including limited studies on digital diplomacy of the US, the UK, and China in Kenya. To close this research gap, conceptualising digital diplomacy practice is therefore necessary. Doing so will benefit those who practice digital diplomacy and advance academic research in this area. Hence, the purpose of this study was to examine how diplomats are utilising these potentials for digital diplomacy by posing the following questions:

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- i. How has technology affected Kenya's US, UK, and Chinese digital diplomacy?
- ii. What challenges do the US, UK, and China have when implementing digital diplomacy in Kenya, and why?

METHODOLOGY

To answer the two critical questions, this study adopted the qualitative approach, which involves studying subjects in their natural social setting and seeking to answer questions that stress how social experience is constructed and given meaning (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative approach focuses on solving the research problem from an insider's action perspective. Besides, data in qualitative research is generated in the field or on platforms where the researcher experiences the issues and interacts with them to learn

more about the situation conclusively from the subject or topic being investigated. The investigators in qualitative research are the key instruments of data collection while paying attention to gathering multiple forms of data, for instance, by observing social media posts, websites, and tweets and examining the documents or interviewing participants. The qualitative slant was relevant in this study simply because the study aimed to understand digital diplomacy from the perspective of diplomats and experts. The guiding principle of qualitative research is that it is subjective, context-based, and instrumental in finding answers to problems (Creswell 2014). In contrast to quantitative studies, which seek causal determination, prediction, and generalisation of findings, this study aimed to illuminate, comprehend, and make meaning. This study's emphasis was on examining practice and meaning by not intensively measuring them in terms of their quantities and the number of their frequencies but by getting in-depth details through a thick, detailed description and observation of the trends in the communication and the situations that elicited interactions on the digital platforms.

Purposive sampling was used to select three embassies, six diplomats, and experts/think tanks in digital diplomacy and international relations between September 2020 and January 2021 in Kenya. However, the situation regarding digital diplomacy may have changed due to the pandemic, necessitating further research on how diplomatic actors view digital diplomacy. Since most of the diplomatic practice moved online during COVID-19, this was to stop the spread of the disease, and normalcy returned afterwards. This was done because these embassies have a significant online presence and engage in digital diplomacy. In addition, the US, the UK, and China are considered global powers competitors. Kenya is one of the few developing countries in Africa with high internet penetration and significant heads of international organisations and agencies like the United Nations.

To gain access to diplomats and think tanks, the study sent a letter of intent requesting permission to conduct the study in their embassies and institutions, which was granted. Some diplomats were initially hesitant but eventually agreed to participate anonymously after further consultation. The embassies also required study guide questions to prepare comprehensive responses. Due to limited time for face-to-face or online interviews, other diplomats and international relations experts agreed to respond to the study guide questions in detail. The interview questions focused on the impact of technology on diplomacy, strategies for utilising digital platforms, and challenges faced in implementing digital diplomacy. Through online interviews that lasted for about forty-five minutes and filled-in questions guides with the diplomats in charge of digital platforms, the study used six phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2016).

This approach involves familiarising itself with the data, which includes the initial phase, where researchers immerse themselves in the dataset they're working with. The main aim is to understand the nature of the data, its sources, and any pre-processing steps that might be necessary, as well as explore the dataset to get a sense of what information is available, what variables exist, and what potential insights might be hidden within it. Then, the following step was to generate initial codes in terms of labelling or categorising segments of data based on specific criteria or themes. The initial codes were created during this step to help organise and make sense of the data. These codes were short phrases or keywords representing concepts or patterns observed in the data. As the analysis progressed, the study identified specific patterns and trends. These patterns were related to behaviours, correlations, trends, or other significant

findings. Recognising these emerging patterns was crucial for drawing insights from the data—the third step involved revising and refining the identified patterns.

The study reviewed and refined the initial codes and patterns, gaining a deeper understanding of the data. Similar codes were merged, and broader codes were adjusted based on coding criteria that evolved throughout the analysis. The second last step was to define and name identified themes or categories. This involved creating clear definitions for each theme and providing a name or label that succinctly captured the essence of that theme, and this helped to ensure consistency and clarity in the analysis process. Lastly, the study synthesised the findings into a coherent report. This also involved writing up the analysis results, explaining the identified patterns, providing evidence from the data, and discussing the implications of the findings. As described in the analysis, significant themes emerged and will be addressed in the following section.

FINDINGS

Information dissemination, perception, and public engagement

Diplomatic actors have found the influence of technology to be significant in digital diplomacy practice. Most diplomacy-related media and tools have migrated and integrated into digital platforms, so diplomatic actors view this as an opportunity to directly share or reshare information published by traditional media into their digital space. For instance, a participant perceived that Chinese media outlets like Xinhua primarily share news about Chinese development and Sino-African relations on social media platforms like Twitter. The participant argues that this isn't just propaganda but serves as a means to inform the public about recent developments:

We share news from Chinese sources, primarily about Chinese development and developments in China-Africa relations. It's not propaganda; it's a convenient way to keep you informed without creating new content. (Chinese Diplomat,2021)

This means the convenience and ease of using social media platforms like Twitter to share news and updates are emphasised. Instead of reproducing news, they prefer to retweet content, simplifying sharing information with a broader audience. In addition, the role of ambassadors in digital diplomacy keeps changing. For instance, one of the participants in this study suggested that ambassadors may not always have the time to engage directly with the digital audience but can still contribute by retweeting information. This highlights the role of diplomats as information conduits.

Ambassadors may not have time to engage with the digital audience but may just retweet information from the embassy or even from a peer diplomat or a media briefing. (Expert UK-Kenya,2021)

Furthermore, digital diplomacy as a real-time and inclusive practice is witnessed in one of the participants' sentiments in this study. The participant argues that digital diplomacy is a real-time, dynamic, and situational practice extending beyond

formal boundaries. The participant notes that when diplomats engage in digital diplomacy, they do so in the public sphere, making it inclusive. This indicates that digital diplomacy contrasts with traditional diplomacy.

Digital diplomacy, in contrast to traditional formal diplomacy, is a dynamic and inclusive practice that responds in real time to events and involves the public. Diplomats engage with citizens and respond to events, making diplomacy more open and accessible to various actors. For example, when a Chinese diplomat addresses an issue, it reaches both Chinese citizens and the general public, allowing for public engagement and input through comments. This presents a challenge but also creates a channel for diverse voices to participate. (Experts China-Kenya,2021)

In addition, the sentiments expressed by the participants underscore the idea that digital diplomacy allows diplomats to engage with the public directly. For example, when a Chinese diplomat posts about an issue, it is not only Chinese citizens but also ordinary individuals who can express support or provide input through comments. This engagement with the public is seen as both an opportunity and a challenge. Furthermore, participants highlight that digital diplomacy has opened channels for various actors, including the public, to participate in diplomatic discussions and express their opinions. This suggests that diplomacy is no longer solely the domain of diplomats but involves a broader spectrum of voices.

WINNING HEARTS AND MINDS

Similarly, diplomatic actors leverage affiliated, established media to propagate their foreign policy in Kenya and countries that have deployed their missions. For example, the participants in this study argued that diplomatic actors primarily use international media to structure information and foreign policies to win the hearts and minds of foreign citizens. The reference to "winning hearts and minds" suggests a strategic objective often associated with public diplomacy. This phrase implies building positive perceptions, support, and goodwill among the local population or target audience. In addition, a participant indicates that these foreign broadcasters, including VOA, CGTN, and BBC, play a significant role in shaping public opinion and influencing perceptions in Kenya. These media outlets are seen as strategic players in terms of communication and messaging.

The winning hearts and minds idea that is strategic in terms of what you see in Kenya, the growth of these foreign broadcasters, VOA, CGTN, and BBC, and how they amplify the message of the Embassy, is where these unique visits by any visiting dignitary take place. (Expert US-Kenya,2021)

Furthermore, these foreign broadcasters amplify the message of the Embassy, underscoring their role in disseminating and amplifying the official diplomatic messages of their respective countries. This could involve coverage of events, interviews with diplomats, or broadcasting official statements. In addition, the unique visits by visiting dignitaries provide opportune moments for foreign broadcasters to play a pivotal role in conveying diplomatic messages. Such visits can attract significant media attention and serve as diplomatic engagement and communication platforms.

DIRECT COMMUNICATION USING MULTIPLE MULTIMEDIA APPROACHES AND VERNACULAR LANGUAGE

In addition, a participant in this study indicated that, despite technology, they focus on using radio. This means that conventional diplomacy has not died but is integrated into the new public diplomacy. This shows the commitment of the Embassy to establishing direct communication with American citizens who are either travelling to Kenya or are residents of the country. This reflects the Embassy's duty to provide consular services, information, and support to U.S. citizens abroad. Additionally, while acknowledging the significant online presence of Kenyans, the participant recognises that many Kenyans still rely on traditional media, such as radio, for news and information. As a result, they emphasise the importance of using a diverse range of communication channels to disseminate their messages effectively. In addition, the U.S. Embassy employs a multimedia approach by utilising various media outlets, including radio stations, television, and newspapers, to ensure their messages reach a wide audience in Kenya. This approach reflects the Embassy's commitment to engaging with the local population through multiple platforms.

We can directly communicate with American citizens traveling to or residing in Kenya. While many Kenyans rely on radio for news, we complement our digital outreach with radio, TV, and print efforts, ensuring our messages reach people throughout the country, including in local languages. (US Diplomat, 2021)

It is also interesting to note that diplomatic actors use local vernacular language to communicate with the Kenyan public as a result of winning the hearts and minds of foreigners. To enhance their reach and effectiveness, the Embassy aims to communicate as much as possible in vernacular languages. This strategy recognises the linguistic diversity within Kenya and the importance of reaching people in their preferred languages for better understanding and engagement. Similarly, this reflects the principles of public diplomacy, as it highlights the Embassy's efforts to engage with both American and Kenyan audiences. The Embassy aims to build positive relationships and promote mutual understanding by disseminating information and engaging with the local media landscape.

MENTAL HEALTH, POLITICAL IMPACTS, AND THE URGENT CHALLENGE OF MISINFORMATION

As diplomatic actors engage on the digital platform of digital diplomacy, they encounter several issues. These issues are not limited to technology but go deep into their personalities and abilities to deal with emerging problems effectively. Most of the study participants seemed to realise the influence of technology on their work. For instance, a participant indicated that overuse of these technologies can harm the individual's health. Health issues include depression and isolation, while technology amplifies voices, which contain misleading information that creates a new form of information known as misinformation. The participant acknowledges the well-documented mental health impacts of misinformation on individuals, including feelings

of isolation and depression. It suggests that the emotional toll of exposure to false or misleading information is widely recognised.

Going beyond the well-documented mental health impacts on individuals, such as isolation and depression, the political impacts of misinformation pose an urgent challenge to public diplomacy practitioners. These divisive aspects of social media have created a new urgency for "misinformation inoculation." (Expert US-Kenya,2021)

In addition, beyond individual mental health effects, the participant emphasises that misinformation has broader political implications. It can contribute to polarisation, social division, and political instability concerning public diplomacy practitioners. Furthermore, the divisive nature of misinformation and its role in shaping public opinion have created an urgent challenge for public diplomacy professionals. They must navigate an information landscape where false narratives can significantly affect international relations and diplomacy. The term "misinformation inoculation" suggests a proactive approach to addressing the challenge of misinformation. This may involve strategies to educate and equip the public with critical thinking skills to recognise and resist false information, similar to how a vaccine provides immunity to a disease. This means that there is a need to ensure the safe use of these technologies in diplomacy and a program to ensure an opportunity to identify and stop the spread of misinformation in the digital space. All the participants contend that the digital platforms have created divergent voices in their work.

CULTURAL BLENDING, LANGUAGE BARRIERS, AND READABILITY FOR LOCAL AUDIENCES

In addition, the study revealed that some digital Kenyans use abusive language towards diplomatic actors in the digital space. Some of the comments posted by these individuals do not make sense. The comments are offensive and sometimes go further to cause misunderstandings between the public and foreign representatives. While Chinese diplomats may be proficient in English, it is not their native language. The diversity of languages and cultures presents difficulties in effectively integrating both cultures and conveying easily understandable and relatable messages to local audiences.

But some comments on Twitter and Facebook are complete *nonsense*. It's *unreasonable*. The biggest challenge is the language barrier. Even though Chinese diplomats can speak English, it is not their mother tongue. There are some different languages, especially in our culture, and it takes some hard words to integrate both cultures. Most Chinese people speak the Chinese language, so it might be a little bit difficult to understand or communicate effectively. (Chinese Diplomat, 2021)

Furthermore, some diplomats find it challenging to use digital tools for a couple of reasons effectively. First, they are forced to communicate in a foreign language, not their mother tongue, to pass their message across correctly. Direct translation from one language to another may create some semantic barriers. Second, there is a cultural barrier that prevents effective online interaction. To circumnavigate these barriers, they

tend to oversimplify their messaging, which can again lead to a loss of meaning in their communications—emphasising the language barrier suggests that cultural differences, especially in Chinese culture, can make communication challenging. Bridging these cultural gaps and ensuring that messages resonate with local audiences can be complex. In addition, this participant indicates the importance of making communication more readable and accessible for local readers. This emphasises the need for precise, culturally sensitive, and easily understandable communication strategies in digital diplomacy practice.

CHALLENGES OF WESTERN-OWNED PLATFORMS AND PERCEPTION ISSUES

It is important to note that some diplomats perceive Western-owned platforms differently. For instance, one of the participants in this study indicated that most of the digital platforms are Western-owned, posing challenges associated with the dominance of Western-owned digital platforms in digital diplomacy. This, therefore, points out that these platforms can influence the perception of content, especially regarding certain ideological positions. Labelling Chinese-affiliated content as "Chinese media and propaganda" on social media can limit the impact and reach of Chinese digital diplomacy efforts. The response from the participant underscores the perception issue that Chinese diplomats and digital diplomacy practitioners face. The branding of their content as propaganda can influence how global audiences receive and interpret their messages.

For the Chinese, a significant challenge in digital diplomacy is the dominance of Western-owned and Western-influenced digital platforms. This hinders their ability to promote certain ideological positions, as many of their accounts are labelled as Chinese media and propaganda, even on platforms like Twitter. This labelling limits their digital diplomacy's perception and impact, creating a perception issue in how they communicate (Experts China-Kenya, 2021).

CHALLENGES IN PERSONAL ENGAGEMENT, ANONYMITY AND SPONSORED HOSTILITY

Correspondingly, diplomatic actors face challenges that they judge as minor issues being instigated by the digital public. In this case, a forest fire incident involving a British soldier in Kenya triggered strong reactions and criticism directed at the UK. Social media platforms allow individuals to express themselves more openly, sometimes with a level of anonymity. This anonymity can encourage users to voice their opinions and frustrations on topics they consider necessary or emotionally charged. These digital publics are varied and sometimes include sponsored bots and other governments directed at a particular diplomatic actor to destroy or injure their reputation in the country or encourage hostility on social media platforms. Additionally, using bots is mentioned to counter-narratives or manipulate discussions. This reflects the broader concern about external interference in shaping online narratives. As an example, the participant in this study underscores the prevalence of various forms of misinformation on social media, including fake news, mal-information (information that is based on reality but used to harm), and disinformation (intentionally false

information). These forms of misinformation can increase rapidly in the social media space, potentially influencing public opinion and diplomatic relations.

The audience on social media tends to be personal on minor issues. For example, there was a forest fire here that happened, and it was started by a British soldier in Nanyuki, and everyone was ranting on the social media of the UK, saying that [you are colonialists; what are you doing in our country?] There is a level of sponsored hostility by other governments, and bots are coming into the picture to counter the narrative. There are issues with fake news, misinformation, mal-information, and disinformation that are amplified in the social media space (Expert UK-Kenya, 2021).

LEVERAGING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Another thing is that diplomatic actors face a digital public that is constantly reacting to the digital space. These individuals are ready to lament and force their government to take action against foreigners who may breach the country's laws. They, therefore, leverage technology to monitor what foreigners and their government representatives are doing in the country. For example, social media, particularly Twitter, can catalyse public discourse and reactions to various events or incidents. In this example, when a Chinese citizen misbehaves or acts unethically in Kenya, Kenyan Twitter users often raise their voices and express their concerns before any official response from the Chinese Embassy. Additionally, the participant indicated that there can be a time gap between public reactions on social media and official statements issued by diplomatic missions, such as the Chinese Embassy. This time lag highlights social media's rapid and real-time nature, where discussions and debates can unfold swiftly.

For example, you would find situations where a Chinese citizen misbehaves or does something unethical. Kenyans on Twitter will make noise before the Chinese Embassy issues a statement in the media that says that they have alerted the police and that we are collaborating. Kenyan ambassadors and institutions fail to research Kenyan anthropology, media, and social media. Countries that are thinking about posturing need not fail to address issues of accountability for their local companies (Experts China-Kenya, 2021).

Furthermore, the study revealed from the interview with the participant that some of the diplomatic actors have failed to study the country's history in terms of how people react to emerging issues in both the media and social media spaces in a situation where a diplomatic mission fails to address the accountability of their agencies in the country. There is a need for ambassadors and institutions to conduct research on local anthropology, the media landscape, and social media dynamics. Understanding the cultural context, media environment, and how social media operates in a specific country is crucial for effective diplomacy and communication. Therefore, this calls for countries engaging in diplomacy and international business to prioritise addressing accountability issues for their local companies operating in foreign countries. This means adopting corporate responsibility and how it can impact diplomatic relations.

THREAT TO DEMOCRACY AND DIGITAL DIPLOMACY

Whereas digital platforms have, at the same time, facilitated the spread of misinformation and disinformation campaigns just as effectively, all the participants acknowledged that disinformation and misinformation are substantial threats to democracy. In a democratic society, the free flow of accurate and reliable information is essential for informed decision-making and citizen participation. The participant emphasised that countering disinformation is not solely the responsibility of government agencies or diplomats. It is a collective effort that requires active involvement from all individuals and organisations. This reflects the idea that everyone has a role in promoting accurate information.

Dealing with disinformation and misinformation on digital platforms, especially social media, is a serious challenge to democracy. As the largest U.S. mission in sub-Saharan Africa, we must communicate a wide range of information to diverse audiences through various platforms while countering misinformation. Fake news is a threat to timely and accurate information dissemination, making the role of digital platforms in fighting it crucial (US Diplomat, 2021).

Additionally, a participant argued that they could not effectively implement digital diplomacy practices due to the large amount of information from vast projects and agencies being implemented in Kenya. Given the diverse audiences, multiple platforms, and sheer volume of information, disseminating accurate and timely information is a complex challenge for the U.S. mission, encompassing various government agencies and sections. Maintaining a consistent and unified message is essential. The participants contend that it is difficult to disseminate this information with one voice, posing the challenge of a need for new skill sets to deal with emerging issues. Digital diplomacy has evolved significantly in the digital age. Diplomats need to ensure their messages are clear and understandable and be prepared to counteract misinformation and disinformation campaigns that can undermine their efforts. Digital platforms have a critical role in addressing fake news. These platforms have a responsibility to combat the spread of false information and ensure the dissemination of accurate content.

COUNTERING DISINFORMATION SPONSORED BY DIFFERENT ACTORS

As noted, digital platforms have facilitated what other diplomatic actors call a threat to democracy in situations where their information is either interrupted or used by discerning voices. On the other hand, these diplomatic actors encounter challenges related to countering information on online platforms. Some individuals, including politicians and those with differing ideologies, may attempt to counter or challenge the information being disseminated by diplomats, reflecting the contested nature of online discourse. A participant indicated the issue of disinformation sponsored by various actors, especially in the context of topics like democracy and human rights. Such disinformation campaigns can distort facts and influence public opinion. Furthermore,

diplomats face the problem of trolling and abusive remarks on social media platforms. Trolls may engage in activities such as posting fake job listings or abusive comments about diplomats. This can create a hostile online environment. In addition, diplomats recognise that security challenges extend beyond terrorism. Piracy, threats to maritime security, organised crime, drug trafficking, and the movement of people across African countries are significant concerns. These challenges have implications for diplomatic efforts related to security and stability. In the UK, diplomats face issues related to illicit finance and cybercrime. The advancement of technology has expanded the range of cybercrimes that can target both African and British citizens, posing additional challenges to diplomacy and security.

Challenges include countering disinformation through paid online countermeasures and dealing with trolls. We also face threats like piracy, organised crime, drug trafficking, and cybersecurity issues, along with new risks tied to illicit finance and technological advancements in the UK (UK Diplomat, 2021).

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the challenges in utilising digital diplomacy strategies by the US, the UK, and China in Kenya. As the interviews revealed, there is a spectrum of perceptions surrounding digital diplomacy. Some experts contend that it presents unique challenges due to its multifaceted nature (Al-Rawi, 2020). However, these challenges vary among diplomatic actors, reflecting the evolving landscape of modern diplomacy (Helmets, 2016). One of the most pressing challenges highlighted in the interviews is the spread of disinformation and misinformation on digital platforms. False narratives can impact public opinion, distort facts, and undermine democratic processes. As the U.S. diplomat rightly pointed out, ensuring clear and accurate messaging is paramount to countering these campaigns. However, this requires more than just information dissemination; it demands the ability to effectively counter misinformation in real time (Bjola & Pamment, 2020).

Digital diplomacy also extends beyond traditional diplomatic matters. Diplomats are now confronted with security challenges in cyberspace. Cybercrime, illicit finance, and the evolving tactics of cybercriminals have become significant concerns (Balzacq & Cavelt, 2016; Barrinha & Renard, 2017). As noted by the UK diplomat, this multifaceted landscape requires constant adaptation and vigilance. Diplomats must address traditional security issues and stay ahead of emerging threats in the digital sphere. The interviews also underscored the importance of understanding local culture and media dynamics. Diplomats must consider linguistic nuances, cultural sensitivities, and the unique social media culture of the region they are engaging with. This understanding is crucial for effective communication and engagement. As the expert from the U.S.-Kenya interview emphasised, navigating local anthropology, media, and social media dynamics is a strategic advantage in digital diplomacy.

Foreign media outlets, including government-funded ones, significantly shape perceptions in the digital age (Yanqiu & Ong'ong'a, 2021). However, it's crucial to recognise that they may face challenges when operating on foreign digital platforms. As noted by the Chinese diplomat, cultural differences and linguistic barriers can affect

the reception of their content. Bridging these gaps and conveying messages that resonate with local audiences are diplomatic priorities. Social media platforms offer both opportunities and challenges for diplomacy. On the one hand, they provide a direct channel for diplomats to engage with diverse audiences, share information, and build relationships (Bjola & Manor, 2022). Real-time engagement and transparency are hallmarks of this digital age, as highlighted by the U.S. diplomat. On the other hand, these platforms can be volatile, as seen in the passionate reactions of Kenyans on social media in response to specific incidents. Diplomats must navigate this space carefully, ensuring their messages align with local sentiments. Digital diplomacy offers an opportunity for transparency and accountability.

This study has also revealed that several challenges impede diplomatic institutions' efforts to practice digital diplomacy effectively. These include mental health issues such as depression and isolation, as well as hostile online audiences whose offensive comments can impact diplomatic actors. Additionally, the proliferation of fake news, misinformation, disinformation, and malformation sponsored by various actors, including competing governments and politicians, poses a significant challenge (Oloo, 2021, 2022). Language and cultural barriers further complicate interactions with the digital public. For instance, the U.S. Embassy faces challenges in countering disinformation, managing the vast amount of information, and maintaining a unified voice across various government agencies and sections. The lack of a comprehensive digital diplomacy strategy and overreliance on international media sources are also noted challenges. To address these challenges, the U.S. Embassy can consider developing a comprehensive digital diplomacy strategy that outlines clear objectives, messaging, and engagement plans. Collaboration and coordination among different government agencies can help ensure a unified voice.

On the other hand, the UK Embassy faces cybersecurity challenges, spreading misinformation and navigating cultural and linguistic barriers. As mentioned in the interviews, the emergence of new cyber threats and the need to protect against them are prominent challenges. To address these challenges, the UK Embassy can enhance its cybersecurity measures and invest in cybersecurity training for diplomatic staff. Collaboration with local experts and institutions to understand and navigate cultural and linguistic nuances can also be beneficial. Additionally, proactive efforts to counter misinformation campaigns can help mitigate their impact. In addition, the Chinese Embassy encounters challenges in dealing with language barriers, cultural differences, and the perception that Western-owned digital platforms influence content perception. There is also a mention of difficulties in pushing certain ideological positions due to these perceptions. Therefore, the Chinese Embassy can improve cross-cultural communication skills among diplomats and digital communication teams to address these trajectories. They can also work on crafting messages that resonate with local audiences and counteract negative perceptions.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that it is essential to note that the challenges faced by each Embassy may vary based on their unique diplomatic goals and priorities and the specific context of their engagement with Kenya. Addressing these challenges would require strategy development, training, collaboration, and continuous adaptation to the evolving digital diplomacy landscape. Investing in cybersecurity and countering disinformation campaigns are crucial aspects of addressing common challenges in

digital diplomacy. Also, it can be noted that privacy is an issue of concern in digital diplomacy since it can raise concerns about the protection of personal data and the privacy of citizens, which calls for diplomatic actors to ensure that they comply with local laws and regulations regarding data protection. Furthermore, digital diplomacy relies on digital platforms and social media, which can be easily manipulated. Governments and diplomatic missions should ensure their digital communications are credible and trustworthy. The study's implication in Kenya means that digital diplomacy allows these diplomats to engage more effectively with Kenyans and a global audience. Through social media platforms, websites (Oloo, 2023), and online campaigns, the US, UK, and Chinese governments promote their policies, cultures, and national interests to a global audience. This research has several limitations. One of its drawbacks is that it has solely utilised Kenya as an example. Future research on digital diplomacy may also use South Africa and Nigeria as suitable case studies to comprehend how these actors operate in those nations. Future research should also concentrate on the messages these actors convey on their websites, X (formerly Twitter) accounts, and Facebook pages by performing content and textual analysis to determine what they prioritise in those countries. In addition, future research might also examine the perspectives of the target audience, the Kenyan public, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the success and impact of US, UK, and Chinese digital diplomacy activities in Kenya.

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