

Digital Diplomacy: Opportunities for Nigeria's Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Technology is changing the face of diplomatic practice. This change is referred to as digital diplomacy. Digital diplomacy is the use of the internet and Information Communication Technology to help a country achieve its foreign policy objectives. This paper looked into the opportunities and challenges for Nigeria's foreign policy in digital diplomacy. The identified opportunities were in consular and Diaspora relations, diplomatic networking and nation branding. The key challenges described were the lack of professionalism, the presence of bots and algorithms as well as the possibility of cyber hacking. The paper concluded that digital diplomacy would complement Nigeria's foreign policy pursuit and not a replace traditional diplomatic practice. The paper recommended the creation of a department for e – diplomacy in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to oversee Nigeria's digital diplomacy efforts.

Introduction

Technological advancements have changed the way people live their everyday lives. This change is also affecting diplomacy as we know it. The invention of the telegraph in the 1860s was seen as a threat to traditional diplomatic practice. It is popularly noted that Lord Palmerston, the British Foreign Secretary at the time exclaimed that the telegraph would lead to the end of diplomacy. Similarly Harold Nicholson in the 1960s lamented that the telephone was a threat to diplomacy owing to the speed it allowed information to travel across the globe (Adesina, 2017).

The internet revolution or Web 2.0 has caused the spread of social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Flickr, etc. It is on record that mobile users spend a minimum of 3. hours per week on social media.

Seventy percent of adults receive their news from Facebook. Facebook has about 845 million active users, while Twitter records 175 million new tweets daily. Social media increasingly makes the world a global village (Verrekia, 2017). The internet is increasingly becoming a diplomatic tool via digital diplomacy. On 4 February 1994, the first email between heads of states was sent from the Swedish Prime Minister to the US President.

Digital diplomacy can be traced back to the United States. More specifically, they acknowledge the ways in which former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, was able to shape the foreign policy strategies of the State Department to exploit new technology. During her time as Secretary of State, Clinton made social media an integral part of many of the programs run by the Department of State (DOS), seeking to utilize this popular new trend as a tool for statecraft. In her own words, Clinton wanted to run a 21st Century Statecraft Platform that would reach beyond traditional government-to-government relations and engage directly with people around the world. Her dedication to prioritizing digital diplomacy is demonstrated by the fact that the DOS currently has 25 different nodes at its headquarters that focus on digital diplomacy, with over 1,000 employees utilizing it in their work at home and abroad. On an everyday basis, the DOS also uses social media to monitor information posted online so that it can modify its messages to respond to public opinion, and monitor Twitter feeds in over 100 languages (Verrekia, 2017).

There are three main events and processes that led to the development of digital diplomacy. The first was the Arab Spring of 2010. The Arab Spring came as a surprise to many foreign ministries. The Arab Spring was facilitated by social media activism. Thus following the Arab Spring, foreign ministries set up social media presence to stay ahead of events in foreign nations. Secondly the use of social media as a recruitment channel for terrorist organizations made it necessary for countries to establish and monitor social media activities. Thirdly, the migration of journalists and news organizations online also made foreign ministries go online. This is because foreign ministries also rely of journalists for information. Another

reason is for countries to influence the way the media portrays events, state and non – state actors. (Manor, 2016)

Digital diplomacy provides opportunities that developing countries can explore in foreign policy. Nigeria's foreign policy objectives can benefit from the technological revolution in diplomacy. Foreign policy which is the objective a country seeks to attain in international relations can be promoted via digital diplomacy. Some scholars have described digital diplomacy as a product of public diplomacy (Holmes, 2013), while others have described digital diplomacy as the new phase of diplomacy. Countries like the United Kingdom, Sweden, Russia, Serbia, Montenegro, Estonia, China, Brazil, and Canada have adopted digital diplomacy in foreign policy (Obuah, 2017).

Today, there is an increasing interest in academia on the use of the internet and social media in diplomacy. However, the existing literature on digital diplomacy focuses on Europe and America, ignoring the evidence that digital diplomacy affects Africa as well. It is in light of this that this paper looks at the role of digital diplomacy in Nigeria's foreign policy. The paper conceptualizes the term 'digital diplomacy'; points out the benefits and opportunities of digital diplomacy as well as the challenges of digital diplomacy. Before delving into the subject matter, the next section explores globalism and globalization as the theoretical framework.

Globalism and Globalization

Globalism is a philosophy that views the world as a whole with interconnected parts. These connections cut across economics, politics, and culture. Globalization is the process of increasing the integration of economics, culture and politics across national boundaries. Globalization is the reduction of the factors that divide the world (Rourke, 2008) Globalization can be defined as the emerging of an international network in an economical and social system. Thomas Larsson defines globalization as "the process of the shrinking of the world, the shortening of distances, and the closeness of things. It allowed the increased interaction of any

person on one part of the world to someone found on the other side of the world, in order to benefit". (Larsson cited in Cuterela, 2012, p. 138).

Globalist thinking is not new but can be traced to Stoicism. The Stoics of Ancient Greece and Rome saw themselves as a part of humanity and not just members of a community, class, race or state. Stoics were seen as cosmopolitan, derived from the Greek words 'cosmo' and 'polis' meaning 'world' and 'city' respectively. Globalism can be seen throughout history in the teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism to the Roman Catholic notion of 'universal temporal authority' (Rourke, 2008).

In the *The Right of Man* (1779) by Thomas Paine, he described himself as a 'citizen of the world'. Paine predicted that transnational march would lead to free trade and an international Congress. One does not need a diviner to see that he was right as economic relations cross – cross the globe and the United Nations stands as a Congress of states. Immanuel Kant in his view called for integration of states to ensure the security and rights of all people (Rourke, 2008). Fredrick Engels and Karl Marx also promoted strong globalist philosophies when they called for a united revolution by the working class of all nations in their famous *Communist Manifesto*. They suggest that class struggle is a global phenomenon (Marx and Engels, 1990). Globalization is ancient but certain factors have broadened its scope in recent times. These are technological advancements and government policies. Technological advancements have increased the speed with which people, money, information, ideas and goods move across the world. Technological advancements like computers, the internet planes, ships have increasingly promoted the interconnectedness of the world into a global village. Government policies to promote cooperation between states have also spread the wave of globalization. Policies like free trade have broken down barriers between nations (Rourke, 2008).

There are four main themes that can be seen in existing globalization literature. They are:

- i. Relocation and over-territoriality
- ii. Speed and power of technological innovation and the increase of the respective risks
- iii. Growth of multinational corporations
- iv. The forming movements of global free markets lead to instability and division (Cuterela, 2012).

Globalization would not be in its current stage without technological advancements. It is with the increasing need to interact with other states that diplomats are modifying the face of diplomacy. The growth of information communication technology has changed the face of diplomacy. Diplomats have now incorporated the internet in negotiations, public diplomacy and image branding.

Literature Review

According to Larson (2004) the wave of information revolution facilitated the growth of digital diplomacy otherwise referred to as E-diplomacy, Virtual diplomacy or Cyber diplomacy. Larson also suggested that based on the current technological and economic trends, the information revolution is bound to advance even further.

Abbasov (2007) reported that the term digital diplomacy was coined when diplomacy started subscribing to communication methods that use the newest and latest information communication technologies. The president of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) Richard H. Solomon in 1997 defined virtual diplomacy as the political, social and economic interactions that are mediated through electronic gadgets as opposed to the traditional face-to-face communication. Digital diplomacy, according to the United States Institute of Peace (2006), can be distinguished from the traditional form diplomacy by the fact that communication and coordination of information in digital diplomacy is conducted using ICTs.

Grech (2006) cited Gordon Smith's definition of virtual diplomacy that articulates it as "the conduct of what was regarded as classical diplomacy

but that is now an activity practiced in a different way because of changes in technology and because it is practiced by a broader a range of people including those that are not professional diplomats.” Digital diplomacy thus ceases to be a professional affair and draws from ideas from people of other professions with certain global interests and concerns. Nalwanga (2011) best explained this by arguing that the advances made in technology has made diplomacy to cease to be a reserve for a few as the Non State Actors (NSAs) now have an avenue to broaden the international development agenda and as such scaling down the hegemony of states in the field of diplomacy.

Nweke (2010) stipulated that the implementation of digital diplomacy is only possible in states that have the ability to send, receive and process digital information. According to Ipu (2013), the use of ICTs in diplomacy has transformed international communications among the foreign states as well as official diplomats abroad. Electronic communication can be traced to the invention of the World Wide Web in 1989. Other scholars have however traced digital diplomacy to inventions made during the industrial revolution as well as the communications revolution in the 1980s (Abbasov, 2007).

From an international relations and diplomacy perspective, the technological breakthrough led to various innovations that have advanced the discipline theoretically and in practice through enhanced service delivery. Lichtenstein (2010) described digital diplomacy in the 21st C to entail swapping of tweets for broadcast, open ended short-messages-service (S.M.S), Facebook posts, You Tube, Google to mention but the few possibilities when it comes to exploring the online communication platforms. Digital diplomacy is likened to a new marriage between state departments in this context Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the internet in international trade and relations.

Diplomacy

Diplomacy has existed for centuries even before it was conceptualized by scholars. It is a form of negotiation by actors towards a set objective. In international relations it is a relationship management tool by states seeking to achieve their national interest. Diplomacy is essential to the international system. It has been used to prevent wars and violence, address global issues, and promote trade (Vereikia, 2017). In the introduction to his work *An introduction to elements of modes of diplomacy*, Emmanuel Obuah defines diplomacy thus;

Diplomacy is an art which is about persuasion, not coercion. It is more about looking for and finding common ground, about forging agreement and achieving a balance of benefits that will allow each party go home with at least some degree of satisfaction. (Obuah, 2017, p. 1)

Traditional diplomacy is centered on person to person communication on bilateral and multilateral levels. States rely on diplomatic missions to promote their interest in the host state. Diplomats have three functions; the first is representing the interest of the home state in the host state. The second is information gathering and the third is expanding political, economic and cultural ties between both countries (Vereikia, 2017).

In terms of multilateral diplomacy, states send representatives to multilateral organizations to negotiate its position and interests. For instance, the UN is a comity of 193 states whose representatives negotiate on global issues like climate change, poverty and security. The World Trade Organization (WTO) is another example with state representatives continuously negotiating trade regimes and policies that would regulate trade among states (Vereikia, 2017).

Digital Diplomacy

The concept of digital diplomacy is relatively new and lacks an all encompassing definition. This problem is caused by the undefined scope of digital diplomacy. Some scholars include cyber security, social media and

internet governance as part of digital diplomacy. Scholars and practitioners even alter the nomenclature of the concept to be 'cyber-diplomacy', 'net-diplomacy', 'e-diplomacy', and 'Twiplomacy' (Verrekia, 2017). The former US Secretary of States, John Kerry was of the opinion that digital diplomacy is redundant. He stated that digital technologies in general and social media do help advance states' foreign policy and brings people across the globe closer, however they ultimately fulfill the same objectives as diplomacy. The objective of diplomacy is to establish dialogue and find common ground among the broadest possible audience. Thus digital diplomacy is simply diplomacy and nothing new (Kerry, 2013).

According to Adesina (2017), digital diplomacy is the use of social media platforms to promote a country's foreign policy and image abroad. It operates at the level of the foreign ministry and the embassies abroad. Through these two levels, foreign policy and nation branding can be implemented with regards to the local audience's history, culture, values and traditions. It is the use of digital communication tools by diplomats to communicate among themselves and with the wider public.

Digital diplomacy is often equated with public diplomacy but that is a limitation of the scope of the concept. Digital diplomacy includes cyber espionage, information gathering over social media, negotiations between states via video conferencing, and communication between embassies and home offices over digital platforms (Verrekia, 2017). Notwithstanding, there are three components of digital diplomacy;

- i. Public diplomacy using online platforms
- ii. Building expertise in technology to better understand international events
- iii. The use of ICT for economic growth (Adesina, 2017).

Digital diplomacy is solving foreign policy problems with the internet. It is conventional diplomacy through a different medium. Digital diplomacy should not be seen as replacement for traditional diplomacy but rather as medium to complement traditional diplomacy. One key function of

diplomacy is information gathering by lawful means. Diplomats are continuously gathering, and analyzing viable information from their host nations and sending to their home offices. The internet has made such function relatively instantaneous to the extent that information is transmitted real time. Second negotiation which is the heart beat of diplomacy is being done over the internet. The presence of the Covid – 19 pandemic in 2020 has encouraged virtual negotiations. In April 2020, OPEC and its allies held a virtual meeting to negotiate oil production cuts to improve the cost of oil (Turak, 2020).

According to Adesina there are eight main goals of digital diplomacy. They include:

- i. Knowledge management: To harness departmental and whole of government knowledge, so that it is retained, shared and its use optimized in pursuit of national interests abroad.
- ii. Public diplomacy: To maintain contact with audiences as they migrate online and to harness new communications tools to listen to and target important audiences with key messages and to influence major online influencers.
- iii. Information management: To help aggregate the overwhelming flow of information and to use this to better inform policy-making and to help anticipate and respond to emerging social and political movements.
- iv. Consular communications and response: To create direct, personal communications channels with citizens travelling overseas, with manageable communications in crisis situations.
- v. Disaster response: To harness the power of connective technologies in disaster response situations.
- vi. Internet freedom: Creation of technologies to keep the internet free and open. This has the related objectives of promoting freedom of speech and democracy as well as undermining authoritarian regimes.

- vii. External resources: Creating digital mechanisms to draw on and harness external expertise to advance national goals.
- viii. Policy planning: To allow for effective oversight, coordination and planning of international policy across government, in response to the internationalization of the bureaucracy (Adesina, 2017, p. 3).

Digital diplomacy has come to stay and it is pertinent for states to utilize the opportunity to better promote their foreign policy. Nigeria should not be left out as the next section explores the various opportunities to be exploited from digital diplomacy.

Digital Diplomacy Opportunities for Nigeria's Foreign Policy

Foreign policy consists of two elements; national objectives and the means for achieving them. Digital diplomacy is one of such means. The modern revolution in Information Communication Technology (ICT) provides a lot of opportunities for less developed countries to exploit in foreign policy. The internet, defined as a means of communication that enables the publication, exchange and storage of information has become an essential part of private and public communication as well as foreign policy. Christodoulides states the importance of the internet thus;

The internet can be considered by governments as a unique diplomatic instrument; through its proper use they can advertise not only their position on different issues, but also promote their ideas worldwide. Such a function, if used in the right way, helps the embassy, and as a result the state that it represents, to create a positive image in the host state. (Christodoulides cited in Adesina, 2017, p.5)

In the same vein, also, according to Grant goes further to state that, The Internet has its effects in foreign policy as it does in every other area of government policy. The technology now controls the way in which information flows around the globe. This has enabled the "news", which is the base material

of foreign policy and the way governments interact with each other, to become faster, more readily available, and able to reach almost every part of the world. The interactions of governments, which are the purpose of diplomacy, are being affected by these developments in significant ways. The prospect for even faster, and potentially more far-reaching, changes in the future will require foreign ministries to be nimble and informed in their responses. (Grant, 2004, p.6)

However, Nigeria's foreign policy has three key opportunities to exploit from digital diplomacy. These areas are in;

- i. Consular and Diaspora relations
- ii. Nation branding
- iii. Networking

Nigeria through its social media can keep in touch with its large population in the Diaspora for economic and cultural benefits. Nigerian embassies may use Facebook, and Twitter to Keep nationals abreast with embassy events, consular assistance, political issues and investment opportunities. During emergencies and disasters, digital platforms serve as a key avenue to reach nationals in different states. The use of Twitter to influence public opinion against the discriminations of Nigerians in China is one example of how Nigeria has explored the digital diplomacy option. On 14 April 2020, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Geoffrey Onyeama expressed his displeasure on Twitter regarding human right discrimination against Nigerians in China. Nigerians were forcefully evacuated from their homes and forced into quarantine because of the Covid-19 pandemic. He stated that "The (Nigerian government) takes very seriously the issue of human rights and well being of Nigerians everywhere in the world. Any issue in this regards the Nigerian government considers it absolute obligation to intervene to assure the rights and dignities of Nigerians are protected." (Onyeama, 2020) Digital diplomacy creates an opportunity for Nigeria to manage her global image. Social media visibility would tackle stereotypes and change the

narrative about Nigeria in the international comity. There are over two billion people on social media (Adesina, 2017). According to ZImako (2009) government is responsible for Nigeria's image at home and abroad. The view the world has about Nigeria is generally bad. The lack of faith by Nigerians in Nigeria, bad economy and human rights abuses gives Nigeria a poor image. Between 1999 and 2015, the United States and Britain at different times designated Nigeria an unsafe place for their nationals to visit. This is because of issues of militancy in the Niger Delta, terrorist activities, and general insecurity. Nigerians are considered corrupt, drug dealers, prostitutes, child traffickers, and fraudsters (Zimako, 2009). Digital diplomacy provides a platform for the MFA to promote Nigeria's image directly with foreign publics.

Social media gives Nigeria the opportunity to network with other African countries. The speed with which information is disseminated across the globe provides a form of mobility on global issues. Nigeria can use social media to extend her diplomatic network with other non state actors and direct public opinion towards its own interest (Adesina, 2017). Obuah puts it thus,

The social media can be useful to digital diplomacy by leveraging the opportunity to engage diverse niche communities to market key economic exports, culture, political behavior etc., of a country especially in the era where states have made a significant shift from hard power to soft power in the conduct of interstate relations. (Obuah, 2017, p. 147)

Challenges with Digital Diplomacy for Nigeria

Technological advancements have brought about positive realities to diplomatic practice but there are also certain challenges in the practice of digital diplomacy. Some challenges Nigeria faces include;

- i. The lack of professionalism in digital diplomacy
- ii. The presence of bots and algorithms on the internet

iii. The possibility of cyber hacking



Fig. 1: The official Twitter account of the Nigeria Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Source: Twitter (2020)

According to Enuka and Ojukwu (2016), Nigerian diplomats and foreign policy practitioners have not received the required training and orientation to meet up with the realities and changes of contemporary diplomacy. Nigerian diplomats are yet to fully incorporate the digital aspect of their

practice. Nigeria records a poor social media activity. A look at Nigeria Ministry of Foreign affairs Twitter handle (see fig. 1) shows that not only is it not verified, it has only 6,549 followers. This is low when compared to their peers at the Somalian Ministry of Foreign Affairs with 142,000 followers. The Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is compromised on Facebook as there are a number of unverified accounts using the ministry's name (see fig 2).

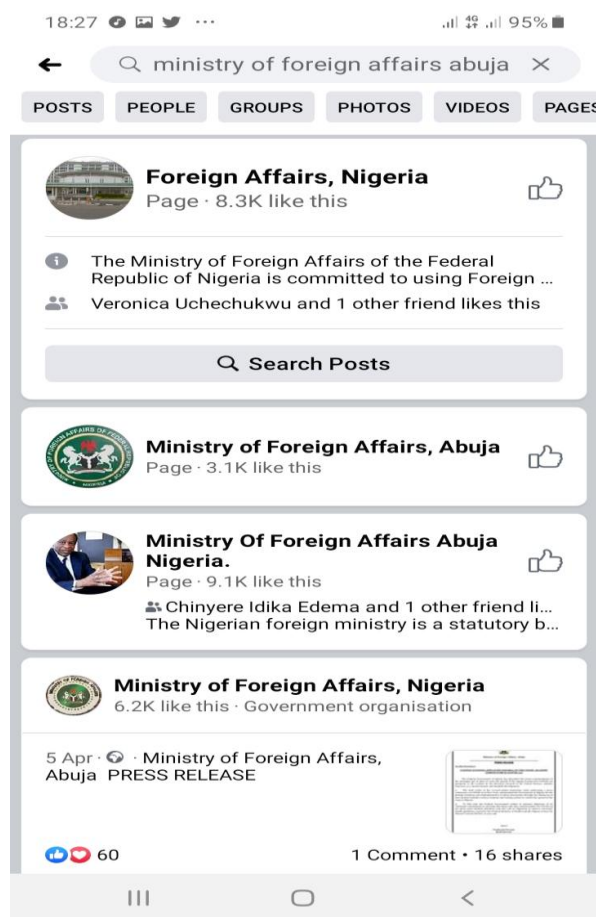


Fig. 2: Multiple Facebook accounts attributed to the Nigeria Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Source: Facebook (2020)

Digital diplomacy is challenged by the presence of Bots and Algorithms. These are technical difficulties in the diplomatic practice. Bots are computer programs that act like an internet user to post certain comments and opinions on social media and websites. Algorithms tailor an online user's experience. For instance, an algorithm may detect a user's political affiliation, world view and even sexual orientation. The algorithm then opens the user primarily to contents that confers with his/her opinion or belief. This actually limits the world view of the internet user (Manor, 2016). Nigerian contents on social media may end up being sabotaged by a computer program or not even seen at all because of algorithms.

Cyber hacking and leakage of classified information is another challenge to digital diplomacy. On 28 November 2010, foreign ministries all over the world were thrown into confusion when WikiLeaks began publishing some 250,000 diplomatic cables sent by US missions around the world and the Department of State in Washington. This leaked information contained the US's true opinion certain events, countries and heads of state (Adesina, 2017). Nigeria is also open to such risks in digital diplomacy.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to describe the opportunities and challenges of digital diplomacy on Nigeria's foreign policy. Digital diplomacy is the use of Information Communication technology and social media to promote a countries foreign policy. Digital diplomacy is not a replacement for traditional diplomatic practice. Technological advancements are used to complement rather than replace traditional person to person diplomacy. Nigeria thus is in a position to benefit from digital diplomacy in her foreign policy if she can manage the different risks involved.

The different opportunities in digital diplomacy are in consular and Diaspora relations, nation branding and diplomatic networking. The existing challenges of digital diplomacy are lack of professionalism in its practice, the presence of bots and algorithms, and the possibility of cyber hacking.

This paper recommends that the Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs should establish an e diplomacy department that would oversee the country's digital diplomacy efforts. This department should actively engage all social media channels with the aim of image protection, and promotion. This department would ensure that the ministry takes charge of information dissemination to the Diaspora community and foreign nationals.

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