# PROMOTING DIGITAL DIPLOMACY THROUGH EDUCATION

**Victor Adrian VEVERA***

The implementation of information and communication technologies in the field of international relations has generated important changes, including the emergence of digital diplomacy, which is accompanied by all the challenges of a new beginning. In this article we aim to analyze the extent to which diplomacy is prepared to deal with the contemporary world. In the same we will argue for the need to reconstruct the diplomats' training model so that it can become competitive regardless of the unexpected direction society could follow. From our point of view, the Romanian research organizations (INCD and universities with related specifics) are the ones that must give the directions to follow in conceptualizing the training programs for digital diplomats (including those formed before the emergence of the new platforms and tools dedicated to communication with the public).

**Keywords:** digital diplomacy; international relations; communication technology.

A country's foreign policy can be: "reduced to its fundamental ingredients (...): the national objectives to be achieved and the means to achieve them. The interaction between national goals and the resources to achieve them is the perennial subject of the state itself. The ingredients of the foreign policy of all nations, large and small, are the same"[1], and diplomacy is recognized as an important tool among the other.

Probably the most significant impact on diplomacy has been driven by innovations in ICT (information and communication technologies). It was somewhat natural for a domain, which operated mainly in the field of communication, to be impacted by the changes in the way people communicate and exchange information. The emergence of the possibility to exchange information at trans-national level has become an unmissable opportunity for all actors involved in international relations. That's why states have started using websites, blogs and social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, You Tube, Weibo, Flickr, Google+.

Increasingly, such tools are becoming a favorite in interstate communication, and digital diplomacy has become an essential tool of state foreign policy. Non-state entities also benefit from digitalization,

so that the number of actors fighting for influence and power over the 3 billion people who use the Internet has multiplied in the online space.

Due to its consequences, digital diplomacy is distancing itself from the adjuvant status of classical diplomacy and is becoming an important tool in how states can defend their national interests. In order to achieve its objectives, it is necessary to benefit from a human resource trained in the spirit of the 21st century, with solid data science skills. In this article we will refer to the context that requires changing the training pattern of digital diplomats and we will highlight the issues that education should focus on so that diplomats' competencies are in line with current patterns of international relations.

### Digitalization of diplomacy – a priority in the 21st century

The structural change in global communications driven by the Internet necessarily implies a fundamental reorientation of foreign policy instruments. Today's technological revolution has brought about many changes that affect domestic and international politics and, implicitly, diplomacy as a whole.

As a result, digitalization has led to changes in diplomatic practices and to an increase in the number of domestic and international actors involved in diplomatic exchanges. Much of the diplomatic activity has become accessible to the general public, an objective in itself being to influence it through all available channels.

***National Institute for Research and Development in Informatics – ICI Bucharest**
e-mail: *victor.vevera@ici.ro*

Currently, diplomacy can only achieve its goals if it manifests itself in accordance with the requirements of the time. Therefore, the digitization of the field must become a state priority, and diplomats must learn to reconcile sometimes opposing forces determined by the needs of individuals and states. In turn, states should encourage the initiation of public activities that facilitate the participation of individuals and communities in governance. In order to carry out activities that did not exist until recently, additional training of diplomats for specific skills is needed.

The implementation of an innovation generates emerging forces which support it, as well as some reactionary forces, which reflect the resistance of the system to change. But the success of this approach will always depend on the ability of decision makers to manage tensions and identify the windows of opportunity generated by change. To cope with these new realities, diplomats need to develop new thinking algorithms, generate and use new practices that determine the long-term success and resilience. On the contrary, the ignorance of such technologies by diplomats will have effects on an individual level, isolating them from the community of professionals. Worse, when the entire diplomatic corps is not interested in adapting to technology even national interest may be affected as the advantages of technological diplomacy are more than obvious. Some countries have understood this more quickly than others, but unfortunately there are still international actors who are not yet convinced of the advantages that these technologies offer.

Among the most serious arguments in support of the implementation of new technologies in diplomacy field are:

- *The emergence of the phenomenon of emotional commodification and its preponderance in relation to fact-based reasoning in the online environment*

Diplomatic activity involves understanding both the issue under negotiation and the dialogue partner, coupled with the willingness of diplomats to cooperate. The manifestation of too intense emotions can block the speech and can change the trajectory of the negotiation, moving the discussion away from the important topics. The online environment is a very good field for influencing the public through posts related to high-intensity emotions, whether they are positive or negative, which have a higher viral potential than those that contain low-intensity emotions[2]. Most often, the phenomenon of emotional commodification occurs, i.e. deliberate amplification of emotional content, which overlaps with emotional valence (as the degree of positivity or negativity of an emotion) can trigger the desired reactions from the public[3].

In this context, digital diplomacy will evaluate and manage the phenomenon of emotional commodification that can otherwise turn into a threat to achieving its objectives. An undesirable effect for the messages proposed by diplomacy would be to end up in the so-called echo chambers, where they can gain only the attention of too limited a number of supporters. Also, commodification of emotional messages may generate a post-truth audience, difficult for digital diplomats to access[4].

Under these circumstances, the following question arises: how can digital diplomats react to an emotionally charged form of social communication, especially given that the increasingly complex relation between emotions and social media?

Peter Salovey and David J. Sluyter developed the concept of Digital Emotional Intelligence (DEI)[5] which can offer a solution. DEI refers to the accurate perception of emotions, the correct use of emotional information, understanding the meaning of perceived emotions, the ability to manage their own emotions and those of partners in the online environment[6].

The existence of a high coefficient of online emotional intelligence of users will not lead to the disappearance of misinformation, but will differentiate between fake and real news, help to identify sources and adjust the level of answering to an emotional trigger in a given situation. DEI will allow someone to identify the right path online and lead the conversation to informed and well-founded reasoning. The importance of education in the spirit of DEI should lead states to invest in education programs for diplomats, giving them the ability to navigate correctly in the digital environment.

- *More and more frequent replacement of authentic robo-trolling relationships in the online environment*

Diplomacy is changing from a closed field dedicated to a small elite whose work was

fundamentally secret, into a domain where public has for the first time access to the internal mechanisms of diplomacy[7]. Accessing a very wide audience requires foreign ministries to undertake a significant repositioning, in accordance with the specifics of our time. With the opportunity to reach millions of people, directly and in real time, they need to redefine themselves in the digital age. This possibility could be greatly improved by more intensive use of algorithms, such as tools for monitoring the conversation, setting the agenda and disseminating messages. Of course, the perverse effects of using these tools appeared soon, with studies already showing that about 15% of Twitter accounts are actually robots rather than humans and that this number will increase in the future[8].

The dark side of the effects of digital technologies materialized in misinformation, propaganda or *info war tactics*, leads to increasing citizens' distrust of these technologies. According to the *NATO Strategic Center of Excellence* in Latvia, discussions regarding NATO on Twitter are led by robots, who already have the ability to develop content, starting from a series of initial ideas[9].

Another risk of using artificial intelligence is undermining trust between international partners or even discrediting the work of intelligence services that are based on data from both official and public sources, but also on secret information, so that their work is not always subject to machine learning[10]. Of course, no exception can be made to the military and intelligence nature of such activities, but diplomacy cannot remain indifferent when the goal is to discredit political institutions.

The digital information landscape is flooded with robot-trolls that distort the quality and / or quantity of content, the phenomenon being possible primarily due to the anonymization of information sources. It is important to identify this activity in a timely manner to take the necessary steps to limit the effects it may have. The good news is that any technology can be used both destructively and constructively. Thus, the technology also allowed the identification of solutions to combat the activity of robots, such as type 3A (activity-anonymity-amplification) techniques that allow the identification of boot and bootnet[11] or various other AI tools, such as Google Perspective, reaching even the blocking of digital content.

The huge changes of the diplomatic field require a new type of literacy for experienced diplomats and a different way of getting started in the field, which includes digital and media literacy, critical thinking, the skills of issuing and promoting clear strategic messages[12].

- *Strategic disorientation in the context of accelerating change*

Digital diplomacy should not be an objective in itself, but rather a tool to serve foreign policy objectives. The technology implemented in the absence of a strategy can become more toxic than no implementation at all. In order to achieve an efficient coordination of complex situations, a well-thought-out strategy is needed. The existence of clear plans has the role of ensuring an easier and syncope-free transition from the traditional approach to digitization.

The outcome of the confrontation between technology enthusiasts and digital skeptics strongly influences the success of digitalization. There are also approaches according to which there is no digital diplomacy, but only public diplomacy with a digital component[13].

Any analysis of the costs and benefits of digitization must be carried out in relation to the historical reference stage by a separate analysis of the means (tools of digital diplomacy) and of the results (what digital diplomacy achieves)[14].

**Facilitating the achievement of the objectives of international political actors through digitalizing diplomacy**

In other words, digital activities have reverberations beyond the online space, influencing foreign policy objectives. A coherent, balanced and constant approach to digital activities is leading to favorable changes for the results of states' foreign policy.

The innovation capacity and flexibility of states and foreign ministries is reflected in how they are able to exploit the opportunities offered by technology, while avoiding the negative effects that could arise. Thus, there may be either a chain reaction in which successes increase the appetite for technology and digitization, or one in which failures slow down the pace of innovation and the implementation of new technologies.

Although there is a general interest in digitalization in the diplomatic field, the positioning towards technology has been achieved mainly from the perspective of the political significance of the use of digital technologies, instead of simple application of digital tools in diplomatic practice.

Time can no longer be lost because history has already recorded the first electoral battles whose outcome was strongly influenced by the deeply unethical use of technology. Democratic elections and referendums in the United States and Europe through entities such as Cambridge Analytica have achieved their goals, but have undermined the confidence of people, institutions and states in digitalization. Following the media campaign on how to use personal data, most international actors have begun to review their views in favor of the implementation of new technologies and to look critically at previous approaches considered today too lax and confident.

Although everybody agrees on the usefulness of digital technologies, the negative effects that may occur have given rise to many moments of reflection on the appropriateness of their use to achieve the foreign policy objectives of states. On the other hand, any analysis must include the premise that the new generations are inextricably linked to technology and that its non-use in foreign policy in the way young people are accustomed will have the effect of narrowing the audience to which the technology could address.

On the other hand, in the extremely dense information context of contemporary society, new technologies offer a solution for information management and knowledge production with a major impact on international relations. Increasingly, international relations are expanding by incorporating socio-cultural elements.

Such a careful analysis of the need to implement technology in the field of international relations may seem unreasonable, since, over time, most inventions important to mankind have come to be naturally taken over by this field as well – telegraph, telephone, typewriter, computer are just some examples. And yet this time, the introduction of the use of social networks has a special specificity, as their impact is not found only in the interpersonal relationship level as in previous cases, but at the mass level. For this reason, digital diplomacy cannot be seen as an extension of public diplomacy, as it fundamentally changes the type of communication relationship – mass communication takes the place of interpersonal communication. The anonymity of the sources and the insecurity of the data circulated on the Internet induce low confidence in social media between diplomats, and in the absence of their digital literacy, the vision of diplomats could remain narrow and their activities insignificant.

## Digital literacy – a condition of modern diplomacy

Especially after the Arab Spring, more and more entities responsible for foreign policy use the potential of social media to achieve their goals, using platforms as Twitter, Youtube, Facebook, but also algorithms such as PageRank from Google.

Therefore, diplomats can no longer limit themselves to the classical tools of diplomacy. They need to understand and be able to operate with the tools of today, but also of tomorrow, digital diplomacy. The simple use of today technical tools is no longer enough, because it is assumed that they will soon be replaced by more efficient ones. Digital diplomats must be able to encode, to imagine customized algorithms for data processing, so that they could be adaptable regardless of how diplomacy evolves in the future.

The correct and efficient use of new technologies is an essential condition for achieving the objectives of digital diplomacy, primarily because it provides diplomats with tools for collecting, organizing and interpreting various aspects of the socio-political space. Digital literacy in diplomacy refers to the individual's ability to use digital technologies, but also to understand how they are designed, the goals they can pursue, how they can be used by diplomacy or how it can limit their effects if necessary. Of course, the relationship should not be unambiguous: diplomacy must adapt to technology, but technology must also offer customized variants to the needs of diplomacy and provide increasingly efficient and appropriate tools.

Currently, most efforts of the foreign ministries of European states focus on the introduction of big data algorithms in foreign policy design, and the reason is easy to guess – in this way most variables will be taken into account in developing possible scenarios and choosing the directions to follow. Without technology this process was impossible, because no team of analysts can manage the vastness of existing data and information.

**The role of research in the conceptualization of digital literacy programs in diplomacy**

We have previously shown that digital diplomacy is a nascent field, in full transformation determined by technological developments, but also by the pace of change. Designing a training program for specialists in a field in the emergency phase is an extremely difficult and challenging task. Experts will need to be able not only to perform their duties today, but to manage future activities with a high degree of novelty, because the society will face such situations. Therefore, taking tools and practicing them to mastery is not enough anymore.

The field of foreign policy has a huge impact on the community – it can bring peace or conflict and even intervene in the well-being of the community. At the same time, there are increasing overlaps between diplomacy and intelligence. Sometimes constructive goals of protecting national interests can be perverted by engaging in acts that induce chaos and political and social disorder. Therefore, the foreign ministries have the task of thinking of strategies that capitalize on digital diplomacy, by highlighting culture, information and international partnerships.

Awareness of these stakes by states and the allocation of resources for the training of skills needed by specialists is a step that belongs to decision makers, but which needs to be done with greater care.

The absolute novelty of the field, the complexity of the environment in which the digital diplomacy activities take place, the factors that can intervene, the extremely diverse effects generated in various fields are just as many reasons to convince us that such an approach is necessary to start with research. Therefore, research entities in the field of information and communication technology, in the field of international relations, together with the universities with related specifics should cooperate to generate research programs in the field, in order to concretely identify trends, variables and, finally, those elements that can equip the diplomat with the skills that will allow him to manifest fully and with maximum effects.

**Conclusions**

With the absorption of communications technologies by diplomacy, we witnessed the birth of digital diplomacy. And, as in any other emerging field, the inherent challenges are not few. For Romania, the challenge is even greater as its status is somewhat curious – in a country with an impressive community of IT specialists, the field of international relations is still looking for its identity, brand and direction to follow. All these should be found in a digitalization strategy of the field, as coherent as possible and with clear implementation documents.

The implementation of a coherent strategy for digitization of the field, with clear milestones and implementation documents will create the necessary framework for the development of the field and will facilitate the achievement of national objectives through digital diplomacy. Beyond the need for infrastructures dedicated to digital connectivity, the training of diplomats' competence to use these new technologies (including those formed before the emergence of these new platforms and tools dedicated to communication with the public) is of overwhelming importance. In the context of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, they are no longer just platforms, but have the potential to become real tools for promoting political interests, digital literacy of diplomats becomes a mandatory dimension of their training, in parallel with their preparation for new ways of public involvement and control of public opinion policy.

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