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# THE INTERACTION BETWEEN DIGITAL DIPLOMACY AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY OF THE UNITED STATES

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## Abstract

This article examines the interaction between U.S. digital diplomacy and public diplomacy, highlighting their parallel evolution in the context of ICT expansion and Web 2.0 technologies. It analyzes how online platforms enhance soft power, public engagement, and policy advocacy, while also generating challenges such as disinformation and domestic backlash. The study argues that effective foreign policy communication increasingly depends on integrating both diplomatic approaches in an evolving global information environment.

**Keywords:** Digital diplomacy; Public diplomacy; United States foreign policy; ICT; Web 2.0; Soft power; Policy advocacy; Online communication; International relations; Information diplomacy.

## Introduction

At present, despite the absence of a universally accepted definition of digital diplomacy, virtually all actors in the international system are attempting to institutionalize electronic diplomacy within their governmental structures. Foreign policy agencies and diplomatic missions increasingly define and



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experiment with it in their own ways. Internet diplomacy generally refers to the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) and online platforms by actors in international relations to articulate and clarify foreign policy intentions and priorities, as well as to facilitate the effective execution of diplomatic missions by representatives of national interests. Electronic diplomacy has become one of the more productive methods of foreign policy practice because it interacts closely with public diplomacy, which also relies on ICT. The latter enables the use of online platforms, while the active participation of platform users increases opportunities for public engagement; their perspectives have gained significance both domestically and internationally [1]. As is well known, internet diplomacy emerged in the United States, where Washington as a form or instrument of public diplomacy initially viewed it. Public diplomacy refers to direct, often-informal communication by governments either directly or through their diplomats with foreign publics in order to inform, influence, and sometimes persuade them, occasionally in ways that may not align with the preferences of the respective foreign governments. It is important to note that, unlike traditional public diplomacy, internet diplomacy tends to emphasize dialogue rather than monologue.

The emergence of public diplomacy was facilitated by three major developments in the twentieth century. The first was the large-scale dissemination and foreign policy use of radio broadcasting. The second involves two key political events: the October Revolution of 1917 and the rise of the Nazi regime in 1933. The third factor was the use of radio by both Nazi and Bolshevik authorities to promote revolutionary propaganda in neighboring countries [2]. Thus, the deployment of radio broadcasting by the German Reich and the RSFSR contributed to the institutional formation of public diplomacy.

Some scholars interpret electronic diplomacy primarily as the use of online platforms and ICT by foreign policy institutions, considering it a new form of public diplomacy. In a broader sense, however, the concept refers to the overall digitalization of diplomacy, much like the digital transformation occurring in other spheres of everyday life. Under this interpretation, digital diplomacy encompasses a wide range of elements from evolving professional standards and competencies required of diplomatic personnel representing national interests to



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the use of ICT in interstate dialogue on cooperation in the digital environment and participation in international-level decision-making.

With the further development of ICT in the early twenty-first century particularly the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies around 2004 users gained the ability to express personal opinions about online information through mechanisms such as “likes,” recommendations, and comments. These technologies increasingly became integrated into U.S. public diplomacy. Their adoption contributed to a gradual convergence between digital diplomacy and public diplomacy, despite differences in their objectives, functions, and conceptual foundations. In an effort to expand the toolkit of public diplomacy while distinguishing it from electronic diplomacy, the United States introduced the concept of “Public Diplomacy Web 2.0.” U.S. first articulated this term in 2008. Under Secretary of State James Glassman, who defined this new diplomacy as the use of online platforms, ICT, blogs, and entertainment applications designed for mobile devices to advance U.S. foreign policy objectives [3].

Analysis of suggests that the renewed U.S. public diplomacy framework incorporated certain tools and functions traditionally associated with digital diplomacy. It should be recalled digital diplomacy as a practice emerged earlier than Public Diplomacy Web 2.0. However, when the United States introduced the notion of “network diplomacy” in 2001, the government did not provide a precise definition of digital diplomacy. Only later, in the State Department’s Information Technology Strategic Plan 2011–2013: Digital Diplomacy [4], was internet diplomacy defined as the application of modern ICT, approaches, systems, and information products in carrying out the mission and tasks of U.S. diplomacy.

Numerous definitions of digital diplomacy exist, often extending beyond the scope of the new public diplomacy. The latter generally refers to the conduct of foreign policy through Web 2.0 technologies and encompasses the use of the full potential of the internet and ICT for diplomatic purposes. Consequently, any state activity pursued online with foreign policy objectives may be described as electronic diplomacy; however, not every such activity constitutes the new



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public diplomacy. Only those actions specifically employing Web 2.0 technologies fall within that narrower conceptual category.

Consequently, contemporary U.S. public diplomacy and digital diplomacy are closely interconnected and have evolved in parallel, beginning with their initial conceptual convergence. The development of digital diplomacy instruments in the United States has significantly contributed to the digitalization of public diplomacy. Initiatives undertaken within the framework of digital diplomacy have frequently extended into the sphere of public diplomacy.

For example, the establishment of the Digital Outreach Team constituted one of the most significant milestones in the evolution of electronic diplomacy. Operating within the U.S. Department of State, the team addressed issues directly related to public diplomacy. It began as an effort to engage directly with users on online platforms in Persian, Urdu, and Arabic: languages widely used in discussions of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. The team's objective was to prevent the spread of fake news and disinformation disseminated by terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and the Taliban through online channels, and to provide accurate explanations of Washington's policies to online audiences. This initiative illustrates the dual nature of U.S. engagement: on the one hand, digital diplomacy was employed to safeguard national interests through monitoring, analysis, and counterterrorism efforts; on the other, public diplomacy sought to project a positive image of the United States by demonstrating its commitment to protecting vulnerable populations and countering extremist narratives.

From the perspective of public diplomacy, the manner in which societies interact with the world has become increasingly significant. Public diplomacy functions through informing, engaging, and influencing foreign audiences in order to advance state interests. As global interconnectivity intensifies, public diplomacy has grown in relevance as a tool of governance, even as other traditional instruments of statecraft face limitations. Nevertheless, it remains underutilized and insufficiently understood in both policy and academic discourse.

The U.S. experience demonstrates the strategic utility of public diplomacy. Harnessing its potential should remain among the central objectives of American



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foreign policy. Contemporary U.S. public diplomacy may be oriented toward five strategic goals:

Informing, engaging, and persuading foreign publics to support a particular political regime or policy orientation.

Accurately conveying American culture, traditions, and civilization in order to contextualize information about the United States and enhance its attractiveness thus reinforcing elements of soft power.

Creating a climate of mutual understanding, respect, and trust in which cooperation becomes more feasible.

Encouraging support for shared values such as environmental protection, the rule of law, free markets, and the rejection of terrorism that align with American interests.

Strengthening enduring connections between present and future opinion leaders by opening communication networks that minimize conflict and promote partnership.

In this context, ICT can either facilitate or complicate the “two-level game” of diplomacy, wherein governments must simultaneously negotiate at the international and domestic levels. Foreign policy institutions can employ digital platforms to communicate with domestic audiences, thereby generating public support for international agreements. A prominent example is President Barack Obama’s use of Twitter to engage the American public and mobilize support for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) concerning Iran’s nuclear program, which ultimately contributed to Congressional approval of the agreement [5].

However, digitalization has also significantly enhanced the capacity of online users to challenge governmental narratives. As a result, the issue of “domestic digital diplomacy” is likely to become increasingly prominent. Ministries of foreign affairs may face growing pressure to monitor the activities of foreign actors within domestic public spheres, respond to competing narratives, and refute misinformation in near real time. Conversely, domestic public diplomacy initiatives may produce external ripple effects [6].

A notable example occurred in 2014, when former First Lady Michelle Obama posted a selfie holding a sign with the hashtag “Bring Back Our Girls,” referring



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to the kidnapping of over 270 Nigerian pupils by Boko Haram. While intended to raise awareness among the American public, the post triggered a counter-campaign in which users shared selfies with the hashtag “Bring Back Your Drones,” criticizing the Obama administration’s drone strike policies. This case illustrates how online audiences may appropriate, reinterpret, or reject diplomatic messages, generating cascading effects across domestic and international arenas. Addressing such challenges requires diplomats not merely to disseminate information, but to cultivate relationships through meaningful dialogue. The power of digital tools lies less in broadcasting messages than in enabling interactive communication [7].

In summary, advances in digital technologies have created new platforms and instruments for communication and engagement, fundamentally transforming traditional public diplomacy practices. The U.S. experience demonstrates that successful contemporary public diplomacy necessitates deeper integration with digital diplomacy and its communicative principles in an increasingly dynamic information environment [8]. Across both developed and developing countries, large segments of the population now rely on social media platforms for news and information, forming a platform-based media ecosystem that is simultaneously fragmented and interconnected.

Navigating this rapidly evolving, complex, and transnational political arena requires unprecedented levels of international cooperation. If public diplomacy is understood as a state’s effort to establish and sustain relationships with foreign publics in order to advance policies and actions including elements of policy advocacy—then the critical question becomes how public diplomacy can promote the benefits of digital diplomacy while mitigating the disruptive consequences of digital transformation.

Based on the foregoing analysis, contemporary U.S. public diplomacy may be defined as an instrument for managing foreign audience interest in specific issues through the creation and promotion of networks, specialized websites, SMS campaigns, online conferences, and blogging activities. Although public diplomacy remains a governmental function, it is frequently implemented through the activities of non-governmental organizations engaging foreign audiences. In U.S. foreign policy discourse, the term “digital diplomacy” is often



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preferred to “public diplomacy [9].” According to Nicholas J. Cull, the concept of “Public Diplomacy Web 2.0” accurately describes tools based specifically on Web 2.0 technologies, whose interactive feedback functions clearly align with the communicative essence of public diplomacy.

As technological innovation and globalization continue to accelerate, the interaction between digital diplomacy and public diplomacy will intensify. These shifts introduce greater uncertainty into policy priorities and diplomatic practice—not only for the United States, but for other states as well [10]. On the one hand, both digital diplomacy and public diplomacy must continuously adapt to transformative technologies in order to remain effective and relevant. On the other hand, robust and innovative public–private partnerships are increasingly essential for maintaining market stability and international peace. Diplomatic competencies and tools within contemporary governance structures are indispensable for designing effective frameworks of engagement in a dynamic and complex global environment. In this sense, U.S. public diplomacy and digital diplomacy are becoming progressively inseparable components of modern statecraft.

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