

The Role of Social Media Platforms in Transforming Diplomatic Correspondence

By

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Abstract

The study focused on examining the role of social media in transforming diplomatic practices. The study used a qualitative research design whereby in-depth interviews (IDI) and secondary data were used in data collection. Simple random sampling was used to select the sample of five diplomatic missions and international organizations engaged in the study. Content analysis was used to analyse data gathered for this study. The study findings revealed that Facebook and Twitter were the most used social media platforms for communicating and interacting with the diplomatic community. Findings unveiled that there is a clear indication that the usage of social media platforms in executing diplomatic functions among institutions has brought some useful results. The study concludes that social media has become an important component that plays a significant role for diplomats to obtain relevant information on different aspects of economic, political and social development. The study recommends that despite its importance, there is a need for embassies, international organizations and honorary consulates to have an understanding of the influence of social media on enhancing interactions between states and non-state actors in international relations and diplomacy.

Keywords: diplomatic correspondence, public opinion, and social media,

1.0 Introduction

Evolution in Communication globally has transformed traditional communication. The use of ICTs has brought convenience in the communication process between communicating parties as well as easy accessibility of information. In diplomacy particularly, communication between diplomats and leaders has evolved from having to send eminent persons who would have to travel long distances to deliver a message, to an era where conversations can take place through e-mails or phone calls unless there is a need to send an envoy physically to deliver a message (Mellisen, 2011). The application of ICT in diplomacy has resulted in a paradigm shift in the international domain and affects both the content and context of international correspondence. This has led to an increase in the involvement of non-state actors, and domestic and foreign

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civilians in policy-making. It has also increased the potential use of soft power rather than hard power in pursuance of foreign policy objectives (Stanley, Mosud, Olumoye et al, 2013).

Equally, this evolution has brought about the usage of internet, e-mails, fax, and video calls, and others. The most important component is the introduction of social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and Badoo, and possibly many more to come (Fletcher, 2016). In the current fast-paced digital diplomacy era, this evolution allows the larger community to interact and share valuable information with other foreign correspondents through these social media platforms (Mellisen, 2011). Bjola and Holmes (2015) argue that digital technology has transformed how states conduct governance - which has resulted in changes in interstate interactions, i.e. adaptation of digital diplomacy through the use of social media for diplomatic purposes. Diplomacy has seen developments of virtual embassies such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom's virtual embassies in Iran (Fletcher, 2016).

Although in managing international affairs, writing letters or diplomatic notes such as first person note/note signée, press statements, aide memoire, demarche, circular notes, and invitation letters are the core means of diplomatic correspondence, communication through social media has been vital in many states, embassies or high commissions and International organizations. There is a good number of Presidents, Prime Ministers, and Monarchs in the world who use social media platforms to share a variety of information and connect with people (Fletcher 2016). A study by Costa (2017) established that 90% of United Nations Governments use social media as a means of communication. Diplomats take advantage of social media platforms to exchange and share important information and communicate with varied groups of people entailing representatives of states, international organizations, prominent individuals and other key stakeholders in diplomacy through Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.

Furthermore, the usage of social media platforms in diplomatic practices led to sharing of useful information whereby it has become customary for leaders to exchange congratulatory or condolence notes through social media platforms. Thus, diplomats all over the world have made it customary to share and exchange information through social media platforms to address matters affecting them and their countries at large.

Technological advancements have brought changes in how correspondences

occur in the diplomatic sphere. Recently, states use social media platforms such as tweeter to share information, including statements that have political significance. States' use of social media platforms to make statements that have significance in international politics is a new phenomenon that has shifted how diplomatic correspondence is done. Prior to the introduction of social media, diplomatic correspondence followed the conventional channels through official letters and calls. The use of social media platforms to share information amongst the diplomatic corps and the public is unconventional in diplomacy. The use of socio media platforms exposed diplomatic correspondence to the public which scholars such as Hockings & Mellisen (2015) suggest it's detrimental to the field of diplomacy because of the involvement of people whose knowledge in diplomacy is uncertain.

The online community whose knowledge and experience in diplomacy is uncertain can impact how domestic and international policies are made. Also, there is a question of whether the rules governing correspondence in social media platforms are in line with the established principles of diplomatic correspondence. Through social media platforms diplomatic corps are operating on platforms that are governed by social media rules that are not essentially diplomatic in their orientation. Hence this study seeks to assess the role social media plays in transforming the conduct of diplomatic practices and come up with recommendations that would help the diplomatic community as they are utilizing social media platforms. Since the use of social media platforms is a new practice in diplomatic correspondence, this paper focuses on understanding the role of social media in diplomatic correspondence. Furthermore, the study sought to understand the changes that social media has brought to diplomacy. The paper intends to respond to three questions: How social media is used in executing diplomatic functions, what changes social media has brought to diplomatic correspondence, and the extent to which diplomatic correspondence by social media has affected diplomatic practices in the diplomatic community.

2.0 Theoretical underpinnings

The study used the communication models developed by Shannon and Weaver in 1948 well-known as Shannon-Weaver Model of Communication of 1948. The model consists of five subsystems which are the source, transmitter, noise source, receiver, and destination. Communication passes through all these five subsystems. As far as diplomacy is concerned, social media platforms present new channels through which diplomatic communications are carried out; these include channels/transmitters such as WhatsApp, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube. Social media platforms present new channels through which communication between diplomatic corps is carried out.

The source refers to the sender of the message. However, the introduction of social media has increased the scope of the source of information/the sender because social media allows the online community to engage in a dialogue and ultimately shape international policies. Unlike before, the sender/the source was chiefly the government or other official personnel; social media has increased the scope of the source/sender to include the online community.

The Shanon-Weaver model of communication suggests that the transmitter/channel may be prone to noise which in turn may distort the message. In this context therefore the noises involve distractions caused by people who lack the basic understanding of diplomacy, fake news, cyber-crimes, and other related matters that may hinder the successful transmission of the message as intended by the source/sender. On the other hand, the receiver implies the final receiver of the message or information. With the application of social media that welcomes the online community in the communication process, the receiver involves both primary and secondary receivers whereby, the primary receiver refers to the originally intended recipient whereas the secondary receiver refers to the online community that comes across the message because social media involves open transmission that allows everyone on the online community to access the message.

Ultimately, feedback is shared when information obtained from social media affects decision-making. Information obtained from social media may be relevant in shaping foreign policy decisions since information is vital when making foreign policy decisions. Social media platforms, therefore, bring new ways through which feedback is shared between stakeholders in diplomacy.

With respect to the above theory, states' use of socio-media platforms to make diplomatic correspondence introduces a multiplicity of actors who can affect the communication process as was presented by the communication model presented by Shannon and Weaver. Prior to the use of social media, the sender and the receiver were clear, however, through social media platforms diplomatic correspondence became a complicated process. Social media as a choice of transmission may itself act as a noise or distraction when communicating a message due to its open nature that allows different stakeholders to have their say on different issues raised on online platforms.

3.0 Materials and Methods

3.1. Sampling

Since Social media platforms are vast; the study employed Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram as its case studies to establish the role of social media in diplomatic correspondence and the manner in which diplomatic correspondence

has been influenced by these novel changes. To capture the experience of various states in the use of social media, due to limitations in resources and time, the study has narrowed its scope to diplomatic corps present in Tanzania that represent their countries and respective regional and international organizations. The study focused on the wider aspect of diplomatic representation such as representatives of states, representatives of regional and international organizations, consulate generals, and honorary consulates.

3.2. Sampling Formula

In Tanzania, there is a total of 60 diplomatic missions from 48 countries around the world (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Tanzania, 2023). Sample size was calculated by slovin formula as follows;

$$n = N / (1 + Ne^2)$$

Where n = sample size

N = Population size

e = desired margin of error

$$n = 60 / (1 + 60 * (0.10)^2)$$

$$n = 37.5 \sim 38$$

Therefore, based on Slovin formula, sample size for this study was 38 diplomatic missions. Data were collected from thirty-eight (38) selected diplomatic missions operating in Tanzania. Simple random sampling was adopted in the study.

3.3. Research Approach

As for method, the study employed qualitative methods to analyse the role of social media usage in diplomatic correspondence. The study used secondary and primary data. Primary data were gathered through key-informant interviews and In-depth interviews to collect opinions and information from sampled respondents. In-depth interviews were conducted with respondents of all types whereas key-informant interview was used to gather data from key persons who are believed to have knowledge and experience concerning social media and diplomacy. Secondary data were collected through reading a series of reports, books, and journal articles relevant to this study. Researchers prepared a set of open-ended questions that were used to administer interviews with the heads of missions or their deputies. Further, the study focused on communications officers in these organizations for their insightfulness in providing information regarding the influence of social media in diplomatic correspondence. Content analysis method was used in data analysis. The method allows the researcher to interpret data based on the content and its relevance to the subject matter (Laws et al 2003).

4.0 Data presentation and analysis

4.1. Types of social media used in Diplomacy

The findings of this study show that there are different types of social media platforms that are used to manage diplomatic correspondence. This depends on the content of information shared, the type of users, and the technical capacity of the platform in delivering the intended information. Respondents identified that they prefer Facebook platform to other social media outlets because it can post longer sentences, several photos, and videos. Also, it allows them to share full information especially when informing about events or programs. One respondent said:

“We have the platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter but we also have YouTube for large and longer video segments; and we have sound cloud channel which is for audio files; and of course, we can't forget that most Tanzanians still get most of their news from radio. So we even have radio programs that we produce”.

It was demonstrated that social media has improved diplomatic communications and had quick dissemination of information in various institutions. Concerning the usage of traditional diplomatic communication channels, respondents reported to use both channels of communication. For example, one of the respondents stated that

“I can say it has helped to facilitate more information but we still use also the old channels like writing letters or writing emails but we have added another tool which is more effective”.

This fact was also reported by Nyakweya (2013), who performed a study on the role of social media in enhancing public diplomacy. The study revealed that new media tools have substantially changed diplomacy and therefore diplomatic practitioners should be techno-savvy.

On the question of rules and principles guiding the usage of social media platforms, respondents revealed that, there are established social media policies which were developed by their respective ministries of Foreign Affairs and shared with the embassies and consulates. Therefore, there are Rules of Procedures (RoP) on how correspondences are managed on social media. On the other hand, embassies and consulates develop annual social media strategies and implement them accordingly.

On the aspect of social media as a tool used in developing relations between states, findings indicated that social media was a useful communication tool because it enhances relations. One of the respondents stated:

“Yes we use social media to communicate in various scenarios in Tanzania. I can

give you an example. We communicate to send well wishes and congratulatory greetings during national holidays such as Independence Day, Revolutionary day and on national elections events”.

In addition, study observations of tweeter on 20th March, 2021, it was observed that the Vice President of the United States of America H.E Kamala Harris had sent congratulatory greetings to H. E. Samia Suluhu Hassan on becoming the President of the United Republic of Tanzania. She also congratulated her on being the first woman to hold the office and assuring her of her commitment to working together to strengthen relations between the two states. Furthermore, on 27th April 2021, H.E Boris Johnson shared a tweet about speaking with the President of the Republic of Kenya H. E Uhuru Muigai Kenyatta regarding the UK-Kenya Global Education Summit which the two countries prepared. Furthermore, one of the respondents demonstrated as follows:

“In this era, social media is a very powerful tool and it has proven advantageous because it is the only tool which can provide information fast to the people. So it is an important tool if it is used to collect information in general ways”.

Moreover, another respondent said:

“Social media is one of the very useful tools to spread information easily especially to the civil society, that is why we use social media as a tool to spread our ideas and information”.

On the aspect of managing diplomatic correspondence and smoothen diplomatic tensions among states, the study found that social media was useful in settling misunderstandings between states. This fact is also supported by Duncombe (2017) on his study titled *Twitter and Transformative Diplomacy* where the study unveiled that the relevance of social media in the Iran-US relation was depicted in 2016 when the United States vessels and crews that entered Iranian sovereign territory were released by the Iranian authority “swiftly and peacefully”, a day after their seizure. After the vessels and crews were released foreign ministers of the United States and Iran took to Twitter to comment on the incident. John Kerry, the then State Secretary of the United States tweeted:

“Peaceful and efficient resolution of this issue is a testament to the critical role diplomacy plays in keeping our country secure and strong”.

Half an hour later, Zarif shared a tweet as well regarding the same incident, saying:

“Happy to see dialog and respect, not threats and impetuosity, swiftly resolved the sailors’ episode. Let’s learn from this latest example”.

On execution of diplomatic functions, the study found that social media platforms

have been very important for institutions involved in executing diplomacy practices in international relations. One of the respondents stated:

“Social media gives opportunity for the community to know what we do. Previously people didn’t know what our country is doing in Tanzania but since we have started using social media many people have learned about projects that we support in Tanzania”.

Another respondent said:

“Absolutely, I believe it has helped diplomacy because the information is disseminated quickly. Also, I believe that diplomats can access each other through Twitter, email or WhatsApp much easier. I believe it may enhance diplomacy because people don’t have to rush to meet someone in person after a meeting or seminar or session. You can search from Google for a Twitter account or WhatsApp number and be able to have dialogue. These are the obvious benefits of social media”.

Another respondent identified the biggest strength of social media as being the ease of reaching out to internet users. In that sense, it has become a very effective tool for sharing information rather than limiting that information to government officials. Respondents were asked to clarify the influence of social media in current diplomacy practices between states and non-state actors in international relations. It was unveiled that diplomacy engages a large community of practitioners who through social media platforms have access to give opinions on international relations and diplomacy. One of the respondents stated as follows:

“Of course, social media has opened up diplomacy. The area of diplomacy is no longer reserved for states as the only players but it is now more inclusive of communities through extension of diplomatic information. That is a good thing”.

The study by Bjola and Zaiotti, (2020) indicated that International Organizations use social media platforms to maintain internal and external communications. Furthermore, their study indicated that Social media platforms enable international organizations to share information, and conduct dialogue with the assertive public hence engaging people in formulating public policies. Also, the same has been supported by Archetti (2011) who argued that digitalization and social media usage in diplomacy was “democratization of diplomacy” whereby common people are finally given platforms to engage in diplomacy. But contrary to these findings, a study by Hockings and Mellisen (2015) suggests that on the execution of diplomatic functions, social media is detrimental to the field of diplomacy because these online platforms give people with uncertain knowledge of diplomacy power to shape public opinion, which can later be used to formulate domestic or international policy.

Concerning making decisions based on information obtained from social media

platforms it was revealed that it was rare for embassies and organizations to make fruitful decisions by just relying on the information from social media. This is because of fear of fake news which might cause diplomatic chaos. Regarding this issue one of the respondents said:

“Yes we do follow other organizations and other missions in social media platforms. This included Tanzanian government’s official pages. We also share and use information from other missions but we never use the information casually. Information from social media is communicative only but not for crucial decision making”.

Social media platforms provide users with access to the online community where they can have their opinions heard and ultimately formulate public opinion which essentially serves as input for the policy-making process. This is indicated in the following words of a respondent:

“Yes, I have because recently, for example, I obtained information through social media and it was not directly from our headquarters, but it came from social media. There was an award that was reported to have been given to West Africa instead of East Africa. I got that information through social media because it was posted on a website in Rwanda and because I am working as an honorary consular then I had to communicate with our Embassy in South Africa so that they can do a follow-up with the government of Rwanda”.

This argument is against the findings from Bjola & Zaiotti (2020) that social media as channels used by diplomats to send and receive messages, can only negatively impact the kinds of decisions made in diplomacy.

5.0 Discussion of the Findings

The first objective of this study was to examine the usage of social media in executing diplomatic functions of international institutions. It was demonstrated that there is a clear indication that the usage of social media platforms in executing diplomatic functions among institutions has brought some useful results as it has been revealed by respondents in this study. This includes instant communication, gathering information as well as visibility in the public. The study’s findings are consistent with Costa (2017) who narrated that the rise of digital diplomacy has been a useful component in executing diplomatic functions as it allowed Polish diplomacy to be communicated with other foreign audiences.

Moreover, in examining changes in diplomatic correspondence due to the evolution of social media, the results revealed that previously diplomacy was belonging to a certain group of people and so only a few people had access to it but the evolution of social media platforms led to engaging a larger community of practitioners which have access to diplomacy and can give opinions on

international relations and diplomacy and thus improving communication and increasing interactions between states. The findings support Muaka (2021) who found that proper usage of social media makes a state visible and brings good interaction with other states globally. Furthermore, social media has improved citizens' awareness hence public involvement in diplomatic practices. The author added that the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to ushering in a paradigm shift from traditional forms of communication to the new era of digital diplomacy that allows for online interaction urging every state to promote digital communication. In the same vein, Jowett and O'Donnell (2012) assert that social media surpasses traditional diplomacy in cultivating public opinions from other countries, easing interactions between diplomats and foreign correspondents in international relations and diplomacy.

In assessing the impact of diplomatic correspondence by social media on the conduct of diplomatic practices in the diplomatic community, findings revealed that embassies and organizations were observed to use both channels of communication taking advantage of the development in technology which have led these organizations to adopt digital diplomacy. Also, it was revealed that social media had a positive influence on improving diplomacy and relationship between states as it facilitated good and timely communication hence a good way of resolving conflicts. Nevertheless, social media not only has positive impact. Some impacts are all together negative. This is supported by Maor (2016) revealing that there is a negative ideology against Romanian embassies in Europe which are communicating in the Romanian language on social media hence bringing negative feelings to other states. People from other states think that the Romanians have a hidden agenda.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Recently, social media has become an important component of diplomatic correspondence. It plays a significant role in helping diplomats obtain relevant information on different issues. The evolution from traditional communication diplomacy to digital communication diplomacy is an inescapable international relations communication tool because for now, diplomats can transact information through social media without having to meet physically. This is an important contribution to improving effective communication in diplomatic practices between and within states. Due to the significance of digital diplomacy, there are some embassies and organizations that successfully established departments responsible for managing social media platforms in communicating with other governments and accelerating information to the public at large, as well as improving communication with foreign audiences. Social media has become vital in providing instant information to the public.

This study recommends that official diplomatic practices (traditional diplomacy) are still important in making negotiations, signing trade agreements, and interacting on social and political affairs. Yet, there is a need for embassies, international organizations, and honorary consulates to have a deeper understanding of the influence of social media on enhancing interactions and diplomatic practices between states and non-state actors in international relations.

Moreover, with the spurring of technology on influencing diplomacy there is a need for diplomats and communication officers in the embassies and organizations to be well-trained concerning the usage of social media platforms on sharing information and interacting with others to avoid controversies, conflicts and improve trust.

Furthermore, to avoid conflicts arising from diplomatic correspondence through socio-media, the study recommends the establishment of rules and regulations to govern diplomatic communication through social media. Since relations between actors in the international community are governed by rules and regulations, including how they communicate, there are yet to be established rules that govern the communication between diplomatic corps when using social media platforms. Hence, the diplomatic community needs to use this opportunity before it is transformed to a challenge.

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