Public Diplomacy Transformation and China's Practices in the Era of New Media

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One of the most significant features in diplomatic transformation is the increasing presence of digital diplomatic practices, which indicates more and more countries frequently are utilizing digital tools including cyber networks, blogs, micro-blogs, and podcasts in their public diplomatic practices. The most significant impact on diplomacy brought by digitalization and the new media might appear on the moral level, including diplomatic rules and regulations. Major countries including the United States and China are now undergoing profound public diplomatic transformations in the broad context of digitization. Since then, digital tools play a major role in not only China's public diplomacy but also national security and stability as well. Adopting to the trend of digitization also reflects the abiding goal of China's diplomacy—serving the people, which means China will demonstrate and strengthen digital diplomacy in pursuit of the national strategy of "major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics".

Keywords: diplomatic transformation, public diplomacy, digitization, China's practices

New media mainly refers to media in digital forms that use the broadband internet or cellphone wifi as the medium for communication, including digital magazines, digital newspapers, digital radio, cellphone messages, mobile television, social network, desktop windows, digital movies, touch media, etc. The development of new media and the internet are advancing at same paces. In the year 1995, less than one percent of the world population had access to the internet. In comparison, that figure has gone up to around 40% today. In 2005, the world population of netizen first reached one billion and the number has already quadrupled in 2018 (Internet Live Stats, 2016). The dramatic growth of the online population greatly facilitates the extensive application and innovation of new media. At the same time, it is gradually influencing the pattern and order of world politics.

A series of political event taking place in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 demonstrated the immense political influence of the new media. With development of new media, the hegemonic influence of Western media has drastically diminished, and so the hubristic premise of much Western public diplomacy has similarly been undermined (Seib, 2014, p. 181). The primary purpose of public diplomacy has always been to "gain popularity among the people". Against the backdrop of globalization and digitization, new media

gradually becomes an essential tool for conveying ideas to people, promoting communication among people, and gaining support from people.

In recent years, the combination of new media and diplomacy has become a major trend in diplomatic research areas (McHale, 2011; Fouts, 2009; Kabani, 2010; Wallin, 2013; Seib, 2016). From the perspective of practices, many countries have already started to formulate special foreign policies aiming at addressing challenges in diplomatic transformation in the new media age. China is no exception. In 2008, new media is classified for the first time into the National Communication System, and in 2009 the government decides to issue licenses for 3G cellphones in China. Considering the increasing influence of new media tools supported by Web2.0 techniques on China's internal affairs and foreign policies, China diplomatic practices are paying more attention to the usage of new media in order to better achieve public diplomacy purposes. This paper will summarize related Chinese diplomatic practices based on an analysis of features and contents of new media diplomacy, and major Western countries' diplomatic practice.

Digitization, New Media,and Diplomatic Transformation

Digitization has become one of the major driving forces of contemporary diplomatic transformation that cannot be neglected. In recent years, discussion about the diplomacy in the digital age has become a heated topic in global diplomatic studies (Seib, 2016; Hocking & Melissen, 2015; Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Seib, 2012). Observing such studies in a technical perspective, the academia has different ways to describe the diplomatic practices in the digital age, to name a few, cyber diplomacy, digital diplomacy, virtual diplomacy, e-diplomacy, new media diplomacy, etc. But their essences are usually vague and lack of rigorous definitions. Meanwhile, overlapping can be easily found between different definitions. Such problems well illustrate the fact that researches see the essence of diplomatic transformation in the digital age very differently.

With simple standards, some scholars define cyber diplomacy as "utilizing diplomatic methods and logic to resolve problems in cyberspaces" and define digital diplomacy as "utilizing digitized tool or techniques to serve diplomacy" (Riordan, 2016), or in other words, as "international actors(including state actors, supranational actors and sub-national actors) utilizing digital techniques to serve diplomatic purposes, and realizing foreign policies and goals in peaceful ways" (Wang, 2016). At the same time, digital diplomacy and new media diplomacy focus more on extensive usage of digitized mediums such as digital devices and new media. Virtual diplomacy is defined as various diplomatic practices that utilize virtual images to convey ideas and messages to audiences with special purposes, for the sake of influencing, shaping, and changing relations between the actor and the public (Constantinou, 2018).

Though consensus has not been reached on terminologies, the emergence of these new concepts itself reflects extensive and profound changes of diplomacy in the digital age. Diplomacy in the digital age can be seen as a form of meta-narration in the current diplomatic transformation. And digitization is a part of diplomacy itself in the middle of revolutionary transformation and adjustment.

The importance of digitized new media regarding its influences in diplomatic transformation is second to none. The new media does not only stand for simple numbers or statistics, but also huge power it generates online. Speaking of the features of information spreading and political communication, new media tools have successfully reformed their modes of information spreading, from up-down to bottom-up and from centralized to decentralized. Therefore, the scenario that every person becomes "we-media" and "people to people information spreading" becomes a possibility. The power showcased in the digital revolution, represented by

the rapid development of new media, is so strong and revolutionary that most countries and international organizations have to act accordingly and immediately in order to adapt to such digital tools. These organizations have to do so if they still want to retain their presence on the 21st century world stage. There is no way back.

New media is changing the way traditional public diplomacy works and therefore becomes an important part of "new public diplomacy" (Melissen, 2005). More emphasis was placed on long-term relationship building (instead of largely defensive and policy-driven initiatives) and on collaborative activities with social actors. New media brings updates to communicative techniques and changes the traditional mode of public diplomacy (from the top to the bottom). Every share-holder in new media activities is the information producer, spreader, and consumer at the same time. Therefore, everyone is able to express their personal opinions and spread the information they are interested in. The contents and modes of information spreading are getting closer to "national decentralization" and "reversed government domination". Clearly, it provides an impetus for social interactions and mutual understandings among different countries, societies, and people, and enriches the contents of public diplomacy.

Meanwhile, new media also reshapes the way public opinions influence the policy-making process. Diplomacy has been brought open to the public and it is an important feature of the new diplomacy emerged after the World War I. It was also the first time that public opinions became one of the main considerations in the foreign policy-making process. With an increasingly stronger impact of various new media tools, internal and foreign policies are impossible to get rid of the influences from public opinions both from domestically and internationally. Compared with traditional media, the biggest trait of new media is that it realizes the personalized production of information and interaction of information expression. These traits greatly encourage the general public to engage in politics in different ways, such as discussing government affairs online, raising questions about government affairs on Weibo, and participating in the government affairs administration through podcasts. In this way, the public can constantly provide their opinions and feedback to the information suppliers, thereby influencing the public opinions and pushing forward the agenda of international issues concerned. Public opinions have never received that much attention like today on the internet from country leaders, and the target of public diplomacy is becoming more versatile and down to the earth.

If we follow the outstanding British scholar Harold Nicolson's classic description on diplomatic mode transformation, from Greek and Roman diplomacy, to Italian-styled and French-styled diplomacy, and to new diplomacy, we can see changes occurred in the digital age are fundamental, in all areas including diplomatic methods, ideas, or rules (Nicolson, 1954). During the transition from the Italian system to the French system, the main difference came from the ideas, changing from a deceptive style to another focusing on integrity. The diplomacy was later brought to the public during the transition from the French system to the new diplomacy. Now the world is standing at the crossroads of new diplomacy and globalizing era. The changes in the diplomacy at the new media age may be more thorough and worth attention from everyone.

Main Features of Public Diplomacy Transformation in the New Media Era

Functionalism is one of the major approaches to conduct researches on the diplomatic researches in the new media age. In detail, the diplomatic transformation can be described in three aspects: digitalization, crisis communication, and public diplomacy.

First, digitalization. Digitalization mainly refers to a systematic application of digitalized tools in professional diplomatic institutes represented by foreign ministries. The Figure 1 below provides an overview of how foreign ministries from different countries and regions use social media. The researchers also conduct a comparison about the using rate of different social media, and conclude that Twitter is the most popular social media platform together with Facebook and YouTube, and that 16% of foreign ministries worldwide have not started to use social media.

Figure 1. Social media factsheet of foreign ministries.

And who has the most followers? According to one previous statistic, Indian foreign minister has the most followers of about four million. This figure mainly showcases foreign ministries' usage of digitalized tools in the diplomatic representation, researches, and negotiations. This is the first aspect of digitalization.

Second, digitalization is a form of diplomatic strategy, focusing on different approaches to harnessing the digitalized methods. Two main facets are crisis communication and public diplomacy. Many scholars have already mentioned many times the usage of digital diplomacy in crisis management (Cassidy, 2018). For example, the Nepal government seeks help from Google to locate people during the earthquake rescuing mission. This can be seen as an example of digitalized tools application, and an important aspect of digital diplomacy. Another facet is public diplomacy. Given that digital diplomacy has a strong nature of public diplomacy, it is an essential ingredient of diplomatic transformation.

Third, changes on the diplomatic moral level. The biggest impact on diplomacy brought by digitalization and the new media might appear on the moral level, including diplomatic rules and regulations. This may include how we re-interpret sovereignty. Now we often talk about digital sovereignty and how digital sovereignty is defined. In current international relations, we have a rather clear understanding about sovereignty, but not in digital areas. How we define sovereignty and non-interference in each other's internal affairs under such preconditions? One important consideration in diplomatic rules and regulations is non-interference in other countries' internal affairs no matter you are the ambassador or the diplomat to that country. For instance, you cannot publicly advocate one side in the country's election or social upheavals. Against such backdrop, we may find reposting a piece of news on the new media platform or clicking likes for a certain message can carry

special meanings. Therefore such practices can have a huge impact on our traditional diplomatic rules and regulations.

So there are scholars saying that the *1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations* should be redrafted in the new media age. In other words, the changes are impossible to be neglected.

Another consideration is its impact on secret diplomatic practices. The impact faced by traditional secret diplomacy in the new media age is enormous. A series of diplomatic incidents, including "Edward Snowden Event" and 2016 South Africa diplomatic materials leakage, showcase that it is increasingly difficult to maintain secret diplomacy. To sum it up so far, diplomatic morality as well as rules and regulations are reshaped in the new media age, and this is another important aspect of digital diplomacy transformation.

For instance, one Egyptian media expresses certain views about Israeli foreign ministry on social media and Israeli ambassador responds afterwards. At the same time, the American embassy in Cairo reposts his or her Excellency's response out on Twitter. Behind such internet-based mode lie profound diplomatic implications. Another case in point is that before the defrosting of bilateral relations between the United States and Iran, both sides have already started to interact on social media and thumb up for each other. Besides, when talking about the impact on the traditional diplomatic institute, we cannot forget to mention the virtual embassy set up by the United States to provide service for the Iranian people online. There are even scholars questioning the necessity of embassies in the future. Of course, the continuation and development of diplomatic institutes is a long process, but the impact of the new media on traditional diplomatic institutes is immense.

As for the new media diplomacy, there is another essential instrument called digital containment. It is another form of containment in the digital age. In the past, we might refer to embargo, blockade, or isolation, but containment has new characters now. For instance, with the deterioration of US-Russia relations, the United States' containment measures against Russia have expanded to digital areas, including cut social media interactions (Bjola & Pamment, 2016).

Through such digital tools, it is clear for us to observe and analyze non-country actors. For example, we can find out how many followers ISIS has and analyze its composition. In addition, we can also figure out the different levels of support terrorist groups receive from different countries. Another example is DPRK. Though DPRK is rather isolated in the international community, DPRK government registered its own Twitter account in 2013 and it became comparatively active recently. It now has around 10,000 followers. At the same time, DPRK Twitter account also follows around few hundred other accounts. From this case, we can see that though DPRK is isolated for now, the changes are still undergoing through the new media interactions. The US government used to publicly condemn DPRK about its aggressive rhetoric, as DPRK shot lots of videos and claimed to blow up the Blue House. And DPRK put all of these on its new media platform. The US government insists that abandoning such aggressive behaviors is the precondition of conversations, because USA regards them as a form of virtual offense against ROK and USA.

Great number of changes occur in the diplomacy at the new media age. The new media diplomacy is also a reflection of the soft power. A Western research institute ran a research in 2015, selecting out 15 most typical articles in the field of digital diplomacy. The first one is about the analysis of digital diplomacy. The author provides a general introduction about how many leaders have Twitter accounts and which country as well as institute leaders have the most followers. The winner of 2015 is President Obama and his social media account is the most active one (see Figure 2). The number of followers is an indicator, and the response ratio is another. Using this standard, President Obama is not the most outstanding one. Other indicators may include popularity

and conversations (see Figure 3) (Twiplomacy Study, 2015). Therefore, digital diplomacy is an important reflection of national soft power, and can be associated with head-of-state diplomacy, which is another major advancement in the development of new media diplomacy.

Figure 2. Most followed world leaders 2015.

Figure 3. Most conversational world leaders 2015.

Public Diplomatic Practices of Western Countries in the New Media Era

From the historical point of view, along with scientific and technological changes, there are always profound social, economic, and political changes, thereby reshaping the diplomacy. The emergence of new media is one of the key changes. In order to avoid possible chaos as a result of digital tools' overthrowing values, rules, and regulations of diplomatic institutes, many foreign ministries around the world have started to draft and put in to practice operational codes of conduct for social media and digital practices. The codes include both strictly supervised online and offline communication and other much more flexible modes.

Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (SFDFA) clearly defines 10 situations that its embassies to other countries can use social media platform as an effective supplement to traditional communication methods (SFDFA, 2013, p. 7). It can improve information quality and make statistics collection more convenient. British Foreign and Commonwealth Office seems to encourage the usage of social media, but it mentions that the

usage of social media cannot "contradict HMG policy or be politically partial, bring the office into disrepute, divulge classified information, take part in illegal or inappropriate behavior, or breach the Civil Service Code or the terms of your employment in any other way" (UK FCO, 2015).

The United States has long been the forerunner and firm advocate for the new media diplomacy. In 1996, U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy published the *New Diplomacy for the Information Age* Report, and had already regarded "Information revolution and growing power of overseas public" as "the foundation for the new diplomacy". However, the Department of State did not attach great importance to the development of science and technology as well as the application of electronic devices. In the 1998 *Strategic Plan for International Affairs*, the file just mentioned digital influence on international affairs in a hackneyed and stereotyped manner (Dizard, 2001, p. 36).

During the administration of GeorgeW.Bush, new media and diplomatic practices become increasingly closer. After the "911" event, Secretary of the State Mr. Powell started to push forward the establishment of digital diplomacy working unit.[1] Afterwards, this unit was renamed as the digital diplomacy office, under the leadership of Knowledge Management officer. However, the size of the office was limited and in 2009 there were around six people. Secretary of State Ms. Condoleezza Rice started to push forward the transformation of diplomacy from 2006, and worked toward the goal to "have American diplomats possess the most advanced technology and encourage innovation" (Rice, 2006).

Compared with Ms.Rice, Hillary Clinton was an even firmer supporter of new media diplomacy. She spoke of new media diplomacy as the "21st century's statecraft" (Clinton, 2010; United States Department of State, n.d.), to adapt to the changes emerged in the Internet, science and technology, and population. Hillary Clinton encouraged staff in the Department of State to communicate with citizens through Facebook and Twitter, and meanwhile promoted US foreign policies. The new media diplomacy that she facilitated directly changed the way diplomats communicated with each other (Collins & Bekenova, 2018). She also improved US image by visiting 112 countries in person and strengthened the people-to-people exchanges. "As the Secretary of State known for her soft power and charisma, she will be remembered by the efforts made in promoting the new media diplomacy" (Hirsh, 2013, p. 91).

Hillary's successor John Forbes Kerry also made his due contribution to promoting new media development of US Department of State. In his DipNote, he concisely pointed out:

> Everybody sees change now. With social media, when you say something to one person, a thousand people hear it. So of course, there's no such thing any more as effective diplomacy that doesn't put a sophisticated use of technology at the center of all we're doing to help advance our foreign policy objectives, bridge gaps between people across the globe, and engage with people around the world and right here at home. The term digital diplomacy is almost redundant—it's just diplomacy, period (Kerry, 2013).

During Kerry's term as Secretary of State, US Department of State realized the increasingly important role of data and its analysis in diplomatic activities. In September 2014, the United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy published an evaluation report named *Data-Driven Public Diplomacy: Progress Towards Measuring the Impact of Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting Activities* (2014). From digital diplomacy to data diplomacy, it is not only about the participation of two technological reforms in contemporary diplomacy, but also the transition from traditional empirical modes to data-perceptive modes

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[1] U.S. Department of State prefers using "eDiplomacy" to "digital diplomacy".

driven by innovation. The transition will lead the contemporary diplomatic ideology to a harmonious and mutually complementary co-existence between the two modes.

Social media is an important carrier of US diplomatic transformation. In Hillary Clinton's speech talking about "21st century's statecraft", she stated her support for "Department of State to use social media to communicate with the public around the world". According to statistics, US Department of State registered over 2,000 official accounts on social media, mainly on Twitter and Facebook. And many US embassies, consulates, and other diplomatic institutes have positions as digital diplomacy consultants. All accounts' followers have topped 89 million in 2018 (Belbey, 2018). These digital tools are mainly used in consular protection, especially crisis communication. US Department of State would also organize workshops and training on an irregular basis about the maintenance and operation of the digital platforms. Meanwhile, Social Media Hub is established internally as to better share experience among embassies and other institutes. Though imperfections still exist, US Department of State's usage of social media has played a major role in realizing US foreign policies (Office of Inspections, 2011).

According to the rankings of the website "Digital Diplomacy Review", US Department of State, British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development are the Top 3 most active institutes regarding digital diplomacy in 2017. As for US Department of State, it ranked third in 2016 and became the first due to its effectiveness of digital tools (Diplomacy Live, 2017). A sharp contrast can be seen when compared with other countries' diplomatic institutes, and obviously, such achievements are closely related to their innovative digital culture.

China's Public Diplomacy Transformation and Practices in New Media Era

As discussed in the above paragraphs, it is no longer sufficient for foreign ministries and diplomats to merely engage with the digital tools as a public diplomacy exercise. Both must be more attuned to the politics of the digital world where culture, information, and relationships are systematized through software and where political discourse is tailored and channeled through the clever interplay between code and algorithm. Digital diplomacy has changed the traditional three basic functions of diplomacy: representation, communication and negotiation, and the excessively hierarchical nature of diplomacy which most constraint to the effectiveness of diplomacy. Tools like facebook, twitter, Weibo, WeChat, and other social media tools have played an important role in complementing traditional diplomacy and making it more inclusive, and more participatory, certainly changed the way we see the world, the way governments talk to each other, to their citizens and foreign audience. They have become an integral part of public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy, to improve the image and enhance power of discourse on the global stage for developing countries like China. In this context, we may witness big changes of attitudes and approaches of Chinese MFA towards digital instruments and digital diplomacy.

How Chinese MFA adapt to digitalization? In the past, in regards to digital diplomacy, Chinese MFA only learned to use digital tools to release pieces of news. Website designing and management is very important and might be the only job done in public diplomacy through digital means. You could get access to the website of MFA in 24 languages, and everyday click rate could reach seven million, a big and impressive improvement in the past few years. Website development has become a key criterion to evaluate the work of embassies around the globe. Most of the Chinese embassies and consulates have established their own website in local languages, together with Facebook or Twitter accounts, Weibo and WeChat platforms.

Now the function of digital diplomacy is becoming more diversified and multi-dimensional. For example, Chinese MFA, foreign embassies and consulates interact with netizens on daily basis, answer their questions and help them solve problems. Crisis communication is another innovative contribution by digital diplomacy. For example, the Chinese consulate in LA made full use of big data to handle the Asiana airlines plane crash, which is impressive, productive, and well received by the internal and external public. In addition, Chinese overseas government agencies also assist companies who want to invest overseas to learn more about the investment environment, local laws and regulations. Of course, it is essential for diplomats to conduct researches on their resident countries and submit reports to the MFA through big data collection and analysis. Here the author quotes a senior official in the MFA, "digital diplomacy has changed our working habits and way of thinking, and digitalization has become an integral part of China's MFA transformation".

In retrospect, the organizational development of the Chinese MFA on digitalization started from 1999, when the "Division of Internet management" was established. In 2004, it was merged into the division of public diplomacy. In 2009, the section was updated to the "office of public diplomacy". After that, MFA established the consulting committee on public diplomacy in 2010, which invited government officials, distinguished scholars, and influential public opinion leaders to join the cross-department mechanism. On August 2012, the office was updated to the ministerial level to coordinate and collaborate different apparatus on public diplomacy within the MFA. Now, the office has nine divisions, in which one section is in charge of the internet and multi-media information. An increasing importance is attached to public diplomacy with digital means.

Why Chinese MFA pays so much attention to digital diplomacy? What is the driver behind it? It is a necessity and request of informatization and digitalization. It serves to China's national strategy of "major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics". In recent years, China often emphasizes the abiding goal of China's diplomacy—serving the people. New media is regarded as a very important instrument to achieve this goal. As Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi said during the press conference on March 8, 2017,

> As soon as new media was gaining momentum, we began to make use of it. Diplo-Chat, our new media account, has attracted 12 million followers. Various Foreign Ministry departments and overseas missions have opened over 130 new media accounts, including the very popular China Consular Affairs account on WeChat. Through these new media platforms, we are able to deliver useful information concerning world affairs, consular protection, external cooperation and so on to the smart devices of our followers; almost immediately, we can get their comments, suggestions or complaints. So new media has built a direct, two-way bridge between the Foreign Ministry and the general public. It has made China's diplomacy more down-to-earth and better understood by our people.(Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Indonesia, 2017)

In the Chinese official narratives, the function of new media could be described as "set up more 'antennas' to pick up public opinion, operate more 'through-trains' to provide direct services for the people and offer more 'lifelines' of consular protection" (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Indonesia, 2017).

Three dimensions could be summarized from China's diplomatic transformation and practices in the digital era. Firstly, it is becoming increasingly important for China to guide public opinions and shape the public understanding on foreign policy; secondly, MFA can no longer rely on traditional ways of diplomatic survey and investigation. How to use the e-diplomacy, digital diplomacy, and big data to study the situation and make decision become extremely critical; thirdly, as more and more Chinese citizens and companies go abroad, conducting a security survey with digital means has become very urgent. Around 140 million Chinese went

overseas last year. Digital diplomacy contributes a lot to crisis evaluation and improves image of China overseas. In order to improve consular assistance and protection, Chinese MFA has launched the 12308 Consular Hotline. According to statistics, it handled 170,000 calls in 2017, 100,000 more than that in 2016 (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Indonesia, 2018). In addition to a dedicated website, the WeChat version of 12308 and the "China Consular Affairs" account on Weibo, China has also launched the 12308 smartphone app to make consular services more accessible to the people.

Recently, practices of digital diplomacy in China also represent a clear trend of power diffusion. Non-governmental actors are emerging quite rapidly, reshaping the domestic and international landscape and forcing foreign policy practitioners to rebalance their focus so as to accommodate new priorities, engage with civil society, and increase transparency in the process. A collaborative and innovative network is critical. Public diplomacy in China has transformed from "old" to "new" (Melissen, 2005). Non-governmental shareholders include actors of all sizes, from large transnational corporations to individuals have all engaged in the process of China's digital diplomacy.

Conclusion

In recent years, the adoption of digitalized tools in various diplomatic institutions and organizations leads to heated discussions about diplomatic transformation. Are digitalized tools a supplement to traditional diplomacy or it is fundamentally challenging the DNA of diplomacy? From the example of USA, we can conclude that digitalization leads a new round of transformation in U.S. diplomacy. The U.S. Department of State is gradually undergoing profound changes in structure, procedures, and values in response to the challenges brought by digitalization. Though transformation in Chinese diplomatic institutions may not be equally profound at this stage, adjustments and changes are already in place in order to keep abreast of the trend of digitalization. With the rapid development in science and technology, how to better use technology in diplomatic practices and further discover the potentials of digital diplomacy will be the focus of future diplomatic studies and practices. Digitalization is a double-edged sword, bringing opportunities and challenges at the same time. Facing the competitions of digitalization, in what ways can our country take the initiative, prevent possible risks, and overcome existing barriers still require further studies.

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