Twiplomacy

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Abstract

Twiplomacy, or Twitter diplomacy, refers to the use of the social network Twitter by those with diplomatic mandates in the purpose of achieving nation-state or international organisation's foreign policy goals. The concept has gained traction during the tenure of the US President Donald Trump who extensively used this social network to communicate about foreign leaders and countries. Scholarship, on the other hand, has historically been more concerned with the use of Twitter in public diplomacy, with debates ongoing about the impact that Twitter's logic and affordances have on the transformations in diplomacy, and in particular, digital diplomacy. Early hypotheses that (public) diplomacy on Twitter might be more open, transparent, collaborative, interactive and networked, have mostly been disputed, as the majority of diplomatic entities are found to be using Twitter mostly as another dissemination channel. The effects of Twiplomacy are yet to be fully understood.

Keywords: Twitter, diplomacy, digital diplomacy, international relations, strategic communication, Donald Trump

Twiplomacy, also known as Twitter diplomacy, refers to diplomatic entities' use of the social network Twitter to manage international relations. As such, it can be viewed as a form of social media diplomacy, which is itself an aspect of digital diplomacy, i.e., a form of

diplomacy in which diplomatic objectives are achieved via digital technologies (Holmes, 2019). Hence, Twiplomacy represents an aspect of diplomacy, and as such, can be practiced by actors traditionally seen as conducting diplomatic duties, including collectives, such as foreign ministries and embassies, and individual actors, for example heads of state or government, foreign ministers, ambassadors etc. in order to achieve their foreign policy goals.

The significance of Twitter in diplomacy stems from the importance attributed to it as a communication tool by diplomatic actors, and the perceived influence it has on international relations. With regards to the former, Twitter is the most used social network among diplomatic entities, reportedly used by 98% of all governments, as well as leaders of 163 countries and 132 foreign ministers (Lüfkens, 2020). The second most used social network is Facebook, followed by Instagram. Regarding influence, diplomatic exchanges on Twitter have been found to impact international relations, although the evidence remains largely anecdotal and effects perceivably short-term. In particular, tweets by actors with diplomatic mandates are considered official statements and as such they are often seen as having a range of influences, from setting agendas to initiating international incidents. For example, it often sufficed for the then US President Donald Trump to mention a foreign leader or a country in a tweet for it to make headlines and set the daily agenda for political communication actors. And while President Trump's attacks on foreign leaders and countries on Twitter have become a norm, rather than exception, during his tenure, other actors across the world seem to have been joining this new reality as well. For example, Canada's Saudi Arabia embassy triggered a conflict having asked on Twitter for their host country to release civil society activists, Chinese diplomat Zhao Lijian criticised the US and the UK government, Russia's UK embassy accused UK of inciting conflict between their host and home countries, and so on. These developments are perhaps not surprising as Twitter is a

social network that inherently fosters negative, direct, and unambiguous communication (Ott, 2017), but the discourses of direct public criticism are in clear conflict with expectations of diplomatic communication and can disrupt international relations (Šimunjak & Caliandro, 2019; Surowiec & Miles, 2021).

Given that the use of Twitter in diplomacy became a norm in the 2010s, the past decade also saw an increase in the scholarly interest in diplomatic communication on social media. Important progress towards unpacking and analysing these communication practices has been made, yet many unknowns remain so this area of research continues to be seen as fairly new and underdeveloped (Park, Chung, & Park, 2019; Vanc & Fitzpatrick, 2016). The next sections outline existing scholarship on the use of Twitter in diplomacy, as well as an agenda for future research.

Affordances and strategy

The early attempts at examining Twitter diplomacy often approached the topic from the viewpoint of digital media and so these studies focused on exploring the ways in which diplomatic entities are adapting to social media logic. This entailed, but was not limited to, establishing the presence and visibility of diplomatic entities on Twitter and networks they belong to and/or engage, the ways in which they used Twitter, and the extent to which they make use of Twitter's mechanisms and affordances (Ittefaq, 2019; Sobel, Riffe, & Hester, 2016; Strauß, Kruikemeier, Meulen, & Noort, 2015). In its essence, it was suggested that diplomacy on Twitter, due to network's affordances, might transform somewhat and put forward a more collaborative, interactive and personalised discourses. However, the debate about the extent of influence that Twitter, and other social media, are having on transformations of diplomatic practice are ongoing, as said studies most frequently found that Twitter is being used as a public relations tool for broadcasting information, i.e., for one-way

communication with 'followers.' In other words, it would appear that there is little evidence to suggest diplomatic communication on Twitter is significantly different from other diplomatic discourses as many diplomatic entities seem to be using Twitter simply to substitute or supplement press releases and advertising campaigns aimed at getting their message through to the public, media and other stakeholders.

Another strand of research focuses more on the international relations side of Twitter diplomacy and examines the strategy elements in diplomats' Twitter use, trying to position and evaluate the role of Twitter in wider diplomatic efforts. On the one hand, there is a corpus of research that studies diplomatic entities' framing strategies, including thematic framing, i.e., which topics are being put on the agenda, and the interpretation of these topics. Several studies have found that diplomatic entities' use of Twitter is coordinated and strategic, part of a wider communication strategy to achieve a country or international organisation's foreign policy aims (Collins, DeWitt, & LeFebvre, 2019; Manor & Crilley, 2018; Šimunjak & Caliandro, 2020). However, other studies suggest that Twitter may be used to promote some key topics, but not others (e.g. Wright & Guerrina, 2020), and there is also scholarship pointing to a lack of strategy, such as the study by Sobel et al. (2016) which established that the US embassies across the world lack consistency in how they use Twitter and hence, perceivably, do not seem to strategically and coherently further objectives of their State Department. These kinds of findings call into question the position and the role of Twitter diplomacy within wider diplomatic efforts and point to the fact that there is currently little international consensus on how and in what purpose Twitter can and should be used in diplomacy.

Related field of research focuses on examining how diplomatic entities use Twitter to try to achieve some of the main foreign policy goals, such as agenda-setting, advocacy and relationship-building. While the scholarship is limited, early studies suggest that *information*

sharing may be among the key objectives Twitter is used for, which is in line with studies claiming that this network is primarily used by diplomatic entities for dissemination of information. For example, Dodd and Collins (2017) analysed tweets posted on accounts of 41 embassies from Western and Central Eastern Europe, revealing that embassies most frequently used Twitter to share information, but also to advocate for respective nation-state's interests. Information sharing was also found to be the key objective of London-based diplomatic actors of European Union Member States who tweeted about Brexit, the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, but in this case diplomats were found to have strategically refrained from using Twitter to advocate their nation-state's positions on the topic, aware of its controversial and inflammatory nature (Šimunjak & Caliandro, 2020). While these studies suggest that Twitter is being used as a tool for achieving some public diplomacy goals, primarily it seems the dissemination of neutral or positive information, we are yet to develop a more thorough understanding of how and why Twitter is being used to further specific foreign policy goals.

G-2-P and G-2-G tweeting

Studies on the use of Twitter in diplomacy have mostly focused on how the network is used for *public diplomacy*, i.e., government to public communication focused on managing relationships between nation-states and foreign publics (Cassidy & Manor, 2016; Collins et al., 2019; Strauß et al., 2015; Surowiec & Miles, 2021). Here, alongside the expectation that diplomatic entities will engage in a more interactive way with publics, it is also suggested that Twitter, and social media in general, may allow for the development of a more open and transparent model of diplomacy. Existing research frequently shows that diplomatic entities on social media rarely meet expectations of social media diplomacy, i.e., they tend not to

focus on interaction, networking, and openness (Cassidy & Manor, 2016; Ittefaq, 2019; Strauß et al., 2015; Uysal & Schroeder, 2019).

Consequently, existing studies provide a glimpse into the ways in which diplomatic entities use Twitter in conducting public diplomacy and some insight into their objectives, but there is little known about the high-level diplomacy, e.g. government-to-government Twitter diplomacy and/or how world leaders use social media to engage with their diplomatic counterparts. According to Lüfkens (2020), world leaders extensively use social media for various purposes, including fostering relationships with other world leaders and foreign publics. A rare study examining these practices studied diplomatic tweets of then US President Donald Trump and other world leaders who did and did not engage with him on Twitter after being mentioned in his tweets (Šimunjak & Caliandro, 2019). It found that Trump extensively used Twitter to communicate about foreign countries and individual leaders, but in doing so, rarely met the expectations of diplomatic communication. Importantly, the majority of world leaders who Trump can be seen as attacking on Twitter decided not to engage via social networks and remained within the confines of expected diplomatic conduct.

Given how many international incidents Trump initiated over Twitter, which were often by political communication actors commenting on them considered to be inappropriate and unwise, the scholarship can be seen as yet to more fully catch up with these new developments in Twitter diplomacy. We have seen nation-state reactions, such as China showing 'frustration' with Trump's Twitter diplomacy (Huang, 2017) and Russia dismissing it as an immature way to conduct diplomacy (Troianovski, 2018), and many media commentaries and analyses of Trump's Twiplomacy and its effects (e.g. Pelcastre, 2020; Klaas & Cassidy, 2017), so it is to be expected that academic scholarship on the topic will also shortly develop further, even with Trump banned from Twitter as of January 2021.

Agenda for future research

Given the novelty of the field, many of the debates about the interplay of Twitter (and social media in general) and diplomacy are ongoing. Three areas might be of particular concern to social scientists in future research. One, from the perspective of international relations and diplomacy, given that existing research indicates there is no real consensus on whether Twitter should be used in diplomatic purposes beyond information sharing, and if so, in what ways, future research could focus more on the role that Twitter diplomacy plays in wider diplomatic efforts, i.e., how and in what purposes is it used in relation to other forms of diplomatic communication, including the 'closed-doors' diplomacy.

Two, drawing on social and digital media disciplines, future studies could pay more attention to discussing and analysing the friction between the norms of diplomacy and types of discourses Twitter fosters as a network with its specific affordances. In particular, diplomatic communication has traditionally been seen as positive, polite, constructive, ambiguous etc. (Šimunjak & Caliandro, 2019), while Twitter is seen as fostering informal, impulsive and emotional discourses (Ott, 2017). The question, then, arises about how to negotiate the demands of diplomacy on the one side, and those of Twitter on the other, which seem quite distinct, and also how to deal with wide-spread uncivility and attacks which are common on Twitter. The topics of online abuse and dealing with negativity on social media are receiving increasing attention in recent years and while some nation-states are organising social media training for their diplomats to ensure they are prepared and can manage these kinds of discourses, the training practice is not universal nor there seem to be formalised strategies in place for how diplomats should deal with abuse and negativity on Twitter (Šimunjak, forthcoming). Hence, this topic warrants more attention.

Finally, what we know least about regarding Twiplomacy are its effects. Impact of communication is notoriously difficult to measure and evaluate, perhaps even more so when it comes to Twiplomacy. Diplomatic communication on Twitter is usually just one mode of communication employed in any given situation; it is to be expected that many of the other forms of communication and related diplomatic actions are not public (hence, difficult to control for and measure); and longer-term impact may be inexpedient to tie to a specific cause, to name just a few challenges. Nonetheless, the scholarship needs to start confronting the issues of effects of Twitter diplomacy – its influence on management of international relations, achievement of short and long-term foreign policy goals etc. - if nothing else, then to support or deny Twiplomacy's perceived relevance.

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