



THEMATIC DOSSIER: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN THE DIGITAL ERA: NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND TRADITIONAL CHALLENGES

ТЕМАТИЧЕСКОЕ ДОСЬЕ: МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЕ ОТНОШЕНИЯ В ЦИФРОВУЮ ЭПОХУ: НОВЫЕ ВОЗМОЖНОСТИ И ТРАДИЦИОННЫЕ ВЫЗОВЫ

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Algorithmic Asymmetry: Space, Power and Time in the History of Digital Diplomacy

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Abstract. The article provides a historical and analytical study of the development of digital diplomacy as a distinct domain of diplomatic practice, examining it first at the moment of its emergence and then as it evolved within the digital environment in which diplomatic activity takes place. The paper examines the dynamics of terminology: from the earliest conceptualizations to later debates about the substance and scope of digital diplomacy as an independent phenomenon. Particular attention is given to the processes of differentiation and conceptual displacement between “public diplomacy” and “digital diplomacy,” which makes it possible to trace how their hierarchy, semantic contours, and spheres of application have changed over time. The article also proposes an original periodization of the history of digital diplomacy based on a chronological analysis of key events, institutional reforms, and technological shifts from the 1990s to the mid-2020s. This periodization reveals a gradual progression from the experimental stage of MFA-led digital communication to the phase of institutionalization, and subsequently to the stage of algorithmization of diplomatic practices. The concept of algorithmic asymmetry is central to the study. The analysis demonstrates that algorithms not only project influence across time and space with different speeds and densities but also create asymmetric conditions for states with varying levels of adaptability, technological capacity, and digital creativity. Algorithmic asymmetry manifests itself in three dimensions: spatial, temporal, and power-related. In conclusion, the article emphasizes that digital diplomacy evolves within a constantly reconfiguring digital environment, while algorithms increasingly shape the dynamics of international engagement. The resulting ranking of states reflects only a temporary configuration of the field, since under conditions of algorithmic asymmetry, a state’s position is determined by its receptivity to innovation, its capacity for adaptation, its strategic mastery of digital regimes of power, and its ability to translate the properties of digital platforms into a resource of foreign-policy influence.

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Key words: digital diplomacy, power and communication, digitalization, information security, technological mediation

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Алгоритмическая асимметрия: пространство, власть и время в истории цифровой дипломатии

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Аннотация. Статья представляет собой историко-аналитическое исследование развития цифровой дипломатии как отдельного направления дипломатических практик на заре его формирования и затем — как цифровой среды осуществления дипломатической деятельности. Раскрыта терминологическая динамика — от ранних попыток осмысления до более поздних дебатов о содержании и границах цифровой дипломатии как самостоятельного феномена. Особое внимание уделено процессу разграничения и смещения понятий «публичной дипломатии» и «цифровой дипломатии», что позволило выявить изменения в их иерархии, смысловых контурах и сферах применения. Предложена авторская периодизация истории цифровой дипломатии, основанная на хронологическом анализе ключевых событий, институциональных реформ и технологических сдвигов с 1990-х до середины 2020-х гг. Периодизация выявляет постепенный переход от экспериментальной стадии цифровой коммуникации внешнеполитических ведомств к этапу институционализации и далее — к фазе алгоритмизации дипломатических практик. Центральное место в исследовании отведено концепции алгоритмической асимметрии. Показано, что алгоритмы не только проецируют влияние во времени и пространстве с иной скоростью и плотностью, но и создают асимметричные условия для государств с разными уровнями адаптивности, технологического потенциала и развития и цифровой креативности. Алгоритмическая асимметрия проявляется в трех измерениях: пространственном, временном и властном. В заключении отмечается, что цифровая дипломатия развивается в условиях постоянной реконфигурации цифрового пространства, а алгоритмы наращивают влияние в международном взаимодействии. Сформированный рейтинг государств демонстрирует лишь временное состояние поля, поскольку в условиях алгоритмической асимметрии позиция государства определяется его восприимчивостью к инновациям, способностью к адаптации, стратегическому освоению цифровых режимов власти и умением превращать особенности цифровых платформ в ресурс внешнеполитического влияния.

Ключевые слова: история цифровой дипломатии, власть и коммуникация, цифровизация, информационная безопасность, технологическая медиация, публичная дипломатия

Вклад авторов. Арляпова Е.С.: концепция исследования, хронология и периодизация цифровой дипломатии. Пономарева Е.Г.: методология исследования, цифровые технологии в реализации «мягкой силы». Оба автора ознакомлены с окончательной версией статьи и одобрили ее.

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Introduction

Although the history of digital diplomacy spans less than half a century, yet the speed and scale of the changes it has generated in international relations make it an exceptionally significant historical phenomenon. Diplomacy, without exaggeration, is “undergoing a radical transformation before our eyes.”¹ To the point that “digital technologies and the level of their development have begun to determine states’ positions on the international stage and the range of foreign-policy opportunities available to them” (Lebedeva & Zinovieva, 2023, p. 145), and, at times, this even concerns “the emergence of previously unknown concepts of how diplomacy may be conducted.”²

Digitalization is often placed alongside the two other “great technological inventions that shaped the development of diplomacy”—writing and electricity.³ At the same time, the very term “digitalization of diplomacy” implies an understanding that this is a long-term process whose impact extends far beyond the simple adoption of new technologies.⁴ Moreover, technology itself is playing an increasingly prominent role on the

international agenda, and even research that is free from “techno-messianic overtones” is expected to demonstrate that “artificial intelligence—the defining technology of our time—is prepared to revolutionize the ancient art of diplomacy” (Kurbalija, 2025, p. 315).

Engaging with the ongoing discussion about the direction and current state of developments in this field, the main objective of this study is to clarify (and expand) the chronological boundaries and to attempt a periodization. A secondary or accompanying objective is to test the hypothesis of the so-called “asymmetric advantage,”⁵ or the more familiar but also externally borrowed notion of “asymmetric influence,” applied to the practice of digital diplomacy by analogy with other fields (military affairs, counterterrorism, information security, etc.) where this phenomenon has long been extensively studied. The core of this hypothesis is that in the sphere of digital diplomacy, with the use of modern and continuously evolving technologies, a form of asymmetric influence emerges that is similar to the kind observed in warfare, terrorism, and information-communication operations. Accordingly, the research question is formulated as follows: can digital diplomacy become, and is it becoming, an environment in which asymmetric influence is formed and exercised? If the answer is affirmative, another question arises automatically: is this process deliberate? This, however, takes us into a broader thematic domain of the risks and losses associated with digital diplomacy that, while inseparable from the topic, lies beyond the scope of this article.

¹ Zonova T. The New in Diplomacy: From “TwiPlomacy” to “TechPlomacy” // Russian International Affairs Council. April 18, 2019. (In Russian). URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/novoe-v-diplomatii-ot-tviplomasi-k-tekhplomasi/> (accessed: 15.09.2025).

² Lebedeva O. Modern Tools of “Digital Diplomacy” as a Crucial Element of “Soft Power” // International Affairs. May 31, 2019. (In Russian). URL: <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/22665> (accessed: 25.10.2025).

³ Berridge G. Book Review by G.R. Berridge: History of Diplomacy and Technology: From Smoke Signals To Artificial Intelligence, 2nd edition, Jovan Kurbalija (DiploFoundation, 2025) // DiploFoundation. 2025. URL: <https://www.diplomacy.edu/resource/book-review-jovan-kurbalija-history-of-diplomacy-and-technology-from-smoke-signals-to-artificial-intelligence-2nd-edition-diplofoundation-geneva-2025/> (accessed: 26.10.2025).

⁴ Manor I. The Digitalization of Diplomacy: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Terminology // DigDiploRox Working Paper. 2018 (January). No. 2. URL: <https://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/DigDiploRoxWP2.pdf> (accessed: 26.10.2025).

⁵ Spader B. Waging Information Warfare for Asymmetric Advantage: Increasing Multi-Domain Speed, Survivability, and Lethality in the Indo-Pacific // Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs. April 1, 2022. URL: <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2979934/waging-information-warfare-for-asymmetric-advantage-increasing-multi-domain-spe/> (accessed: 04.10.2025).

To pursue these objectives, the following steps will be taken: selecting and systematizing the most significant events in the history of digital diplomacy; reviewing key cases; and tracing changes in its temporal, spatial, and actor-communication dimensions. It should also be clarified here that the term “algorithmic asymmetry” in the title is not used as a technical term but as a metaphor for a historical shift. In the past, diplomatic asymmetry grew out of a range of material factors, such as military capabilities, resources, media access, and so forth. It was created and amplified through communication. Now it is produced through algorithms and the digital architecture that structures visibility, access, speed, and the prioritization of information. It is algorithmic rather than material factors that now shape the emergence of this asymmetry: who controls digital platforms and data; who sees which messages and how quickly they spread; how they spread; how one discourse is amplified while another is suppressed, and so on.

In the theoretical section on asymmetric influence, the study draws on the classic and most recent works on asymmetric conflict (Taber, 1965; Mack, 1975; Hangström, 2025) and “non-conventional” wars (Van Creveld, 1991; Kaldor, 2013). It also considers the subsequent legal and ethical research—not only on the moral-legal aspects of asymmetry but also on the application of traditional laws of war to such conflicts (Buffaloe, 2006; Lee, 2018), since this regulatory experience will inevitably be in demand in the diplomatic domain.

Thematically and contextually relevant to our work is a substantial body of research on information warfare and communications (Repnikova & Chen, 2023). These studies examine specific cases of cyber and information operations that create asymmetric advantages over a more powerful adversary,⁶ analyze the

strategies of small states in the digital domain (Li, 2024), and focus directly on information manipulation.⁷ Their conclusions echo those drawn earlier in military and counterterrorism scholarship: a non-traditional or simply weaker actor can use information and digital tools (or technologies) to offset the resource advantage of a stronger actor. Moreover, small states, alongside having fewer resources, also bear proportionally fewer infrastructural burdens; their institutional structures are often more flexible, dynamic, and inventive.

The communicative dimension of terrorism is particularly compelling in the context of effective networked action. Terrorist organizations possess extensive experience in this regard, which is studied both within the theory of asymmetric conflict⁸ and in the field of political communication (Pattwell, Mitman & Porpora, 2015). Like other relatively weak actors, terrorists seek to achieve an effect disproportionate to their resources and do so through the use of information and symbols, technological innovation, and unconventional methods. Terrorist structures have undoubtedly become beneficiaries of the digital era and environment, alongside other non-traditional actors. Freedom of maneuver, low predictability, and the continuous adoption of new technological solutions⁹ consistently help

Survivability, and Lethality in the Indo-Pacific // *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*. April 1, 2022. URL: <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2979934/waging-information-warfare-for-asymmetric-advantage-increasing-multi-domain-spe/> (accessed: 04.10.2025).

⁷ Chang Y., Kebli M. F., Li R., Iakovou E., White III C. C. The Value of Misinformation and Disinformation // *ArXiv*. January 8, 2019. URL: <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1901.01464> (accessed: 26.10.2025).

⁸ Stepanova E. Terrorism in Asymmetrical Conflict: Ideological and Structural Aspects // *SIPRI Research Report*. 2008. No. 23. URL: <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/RR/SIPRI23.pdf> (accessed: 01.10.2025).

⁹ Milevski L. Asymmetry is Strategy, Strategy is Asymmetry // *Joint Force Quarterly*. 2014 (4th Quarter). No. 75. P. 77–83. URL: https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-75/jfq-75_77-83_Milevski.pdf (accessed: 02.11.2025).

⁶ Spader B. Waging Information Warfare for Asymmetric Advantage: Increasing Multi-Domain Speed,

them gain advantages and achieve significant effects in recruitment, mobilization, and propaganda on social media (Ishengoma, 2013; Moncrieff et al., 2024).

Finally, recent years have seen the publication of studies that do not formulate the idea of asymmetry directly in the context of digital diplomacy but nevertheless examine the phenomenon of disproportionate influence in foreign policy from multiple angles. These studies focus on the cultural, communicational, and other sources of initial diplomatic inequality (Rachmawati et al., 2024), on how such asymmetry shapes diplomatic crises (Zaharna, 2004), and especially on its manifestations in public diplomacy.¹⁰ While not directly linked to our topic, these studies provide an important conceptual background for the broader problem of asymmetric influence through communication. They also address issues central to our analysis: agency, space, and the “materiality” of this new form of diplomacy (Hedling & Bremberg, 2021). Naturally, this includes close attention to the role of digital technologies and platforms in the exercise of states’ soft power—something that, on the one hand, grows more accessible, and on the other, more vulnerable to risk and manipulation. Of practical relevance are the latest studies of discursive asymmetry—inequalities in producing meanings, narratives, defining “reality,” and contributing to the symbolic order of international communication between states, and sometimes between political leaders (Brady et al., 2019). It is notable that, at the level of country-specific analysis, cases of US-Asian and intra-Asian rivalries (Japan—South Korea, for example)

have become particularly prominent among analysts (Huang & Wang, 2021; Lee & Shahin, 2023; Repnikova & Chen, 2023).

The same cluster of practice-oriented work includes studies of digital diplomatic initiatives (Tsinovoi, 2020) and asymmetric communication techniques employed in foreign interference or influence operations (Truong et al., 2024). Among them is the so-called “asymmetric flooding” of social media (Cirone & Hobbs, 2023). Its essence lies in intentionally overloading the information space with content to decrease the visibility of a particular message, complicate its retrieval, and exhaust the audience. In our context, this method is illustrative because it requires few resources yet generates a significant effect, clearly demonstrating a typical form of asymmetric influence. Technically, the logic is simple: large quantities of posts, hashtags, or comments are published—often automatically—in reaction to a target message. Soon the feed becomes clogged, search results are hindered, and the original message “sinks.”

It is important to note that the activity of trolls and bots (a specific instance of traffic manipulation) also creates methodological challenges. The issue of combating them “is one of the most critical for researchers of digital diplomacy” (Pavlyuchenko, 2024, p. 240). This applies to both manual and machine-based methods of data analysis. At present, the list of research vulnerabilities has expanded significantly due to the rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) and its confident penetration into the diplomatic sphere. It is clear that technological innovation is almost inseparable from the theme of risks and security threats. The ambivalence of digital technologies, along with the depth and irreversibility of their integration into all spheres of contemporary society, has long

¹⁰ Ahmed S. The Role of Soft Power in the Digital Age // The SAIS Review of International Affairs. March 7, 2025. URL: <https://saisreview.sais.jhu.edu/the-role-of-soft-power-in-the-digital-age/> (accessed: 10.11.2025).

been firmly established in critical media studies (Castells, 1996; 1997; 1998; Fuchs, 2025; Shilina & Hepp, 2021). One can only hope that diplomacy, which “has always approached technological change cautiously and selectively” (Kurbalija, 2025), will do so again.

Digital Diplomacy: Evolution of the Term and Conceptual Differentiation

The question of when and where digital diplomacy originated cannot be answered without first delineating the contours of the concept itself. Just a few years ago, some practitioners (including U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry) claimed that the term “digital diplomacy” was becoming obsolete because diplomacy as a whole had already become digitalized and digital technologies had fully migrated into the very process of diplomatic activity.¹¹ It is entirely possible that this prediction will one day prove accurate: few people today think of wired communication systems when speaking of telephony, or of horse-drawn carriages when discussing urban transport. Nevertheless, the term “digital diplomacy” is still widely used, and debates surrounding it remain active.

In Russian international political studies, digital diplomacy is primarily considered a component of public diplomacy (Pavlyuchenko, 2024, p. 228). A similar approach, in which digital diplomacy is conceptualized as a form of public diplomacy, is also found in foreign, predominantly Western historiography. The central emphasis there naturally falls on “the use of digital technologies and social media

platforms, such as *Twitter*,¹² *Facebook*,¹³ and *Weibo*—by states to engage foreign audiences, typically in a relatively low-cost format” (Adesina, 2017, p. 2).

Within this perspective, digital diplomacy is a “sub-division” of public diplomacy and is accordingly conceived as the “fifth element” of its umbrella structure.¹⁴ Both literally and figuratively, this refers back to the American experience: the United States is often cited as a pioneer of the digital industry (along with South Korea and Japan), as well as an early leader in e-diplomacy and an advocate of umbrella-type institutional models. Notably, the first practical U.S. initiative—the virtual embassy in Tehran—was created on exactly this principle: a single umbrella identity, “*USABehFarsi*,” unified multiple communication channels across social media (including messaging and video platforms), such as *Facebook*,¹⁵ *Instagram*,¹⁶ *Telegram*, *Twitter*,¹⁷ and *YouTube* (Arlyapova & Ponomareva, 2023, p. 33).

¹² The social network *X* (formerly *Twitter*) has been blocked in the Russian Federation at the request of the Prosecutor General’s Office of the Russian Federation (*Editor’s note*).

¹³ The social network *Facebook* (part of the *Meta* group of companies) is banned in the Russian Federation. *Meta* is recognized as an extremist organization in the Russian Federation (*Editor’s note*).

¹⁴ Cull N. J. The Role of Public Diplomacy in the Digital Age: Comparative Models // Public Diplomacy Council of Catalonia. DIPLOCAT Agora 1. May 3, 2019. P. 8. URL: <https://catalunya-internacional.cat/media/upload/arxius/publicacions/AgoraDP/AgDP1-DiplomaciaPublicaEraDigital-EN.pdf> (accessed: 26.10.2025).

¹⁵ The social network *Facebook* (part of the *Meta* group of companies) is banned in the Russian Federation. *Meta* is recognized as an extremist organization in the Russian Federation (*Editor’s note*).

¹⁶ The social network *Instagram* (part of the *Meta* group of companies) is banned in the Russian Federation. *Meta* is recognized as an extremist organization in the Russian Federation (*Editor’s note*).

¹⁷ The social network *X* (formerly *Twitter*) has been blocked in the Russian Federation at the request of the Prosecutor General’s Office of the Russian Federation (*Editor’s note*).

¹¹ Zonova T. The New in Diplomacy: From “*Twiplomacy*” to “*TechPlomacy*” // Russian International Affairs Council. April 18, 2019. (In Russian). URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/no-voe-v-diplomatii-ot-tviplomasi-k-tekhplomasi/> (accessed: 15.09.2025).

Within the framework that views digital diplomacy as a “sub-division” of public diplomacy focused on communication with foreign publics through digital technologies (and sometimes only through social networks, depending on the approach), public diplomacy itself is interpreted far more broadly. It encompasses the full spectrum of tasks aimed at shaping influence over foreign societies in the interest of a given state. From this perspective, a state-centered approach becomes the most coherent and therefore the most common, although the actor-communication dimension will be examined in more detail below.

From today’s standpoint, the earlier conceptual pairing of digital and public diplomacy—and especially the hierarchical relationship implied between them—appears to be the premature fixation of evolving phenomena at a specific point in their ongoing development. Such a fixation resembles a snapshot of knowledge that was relevant at the time but must inevitably be updated as the phenomenon itself evolves. Otherwise, one risks a situation in which practical development continues and even accelerates, while the theoretical construct remains static. A few years later, in response to the straightforward question “What is the difference between digital diplomacy and public diplomacy?” the *DiploFoundation*¹⁸ website offered the following answer: “Public diplomacy covers only one aspect of digital diplomacy, namely the use of tools such as *Twitter*,¹⁹ *Facebook*,²⁰

and other social networks in diplomatic activity.”²¹ In fact, due to the high media visibility of diplomats’ activity on social networks, digital diplomacy is frequently reduced exclusively to public diplomacy, even though “in practice, it is far broader and more complex.”²² It includes additional dimensions as well: the generation of new topics on the diplomatic agenda (digital governance, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and so forth), the shifting geopolitical and geoeconomic environments shaped by technology, and new tools within diplomatic practice (Kurbalija, 2025).

Over time, not only has a conceptual differentiation occurred between “digital diplomacy” and “public diplomacy,” but also an inversion of their meanings. This leads to the conclusion that earlier predictions about the short lifespan of the term “digital diplomacy” were not entirely unfounded. A brief overview of the evolution of the key definition helps illustrate this tendency.

At the early stage of its study, “digital diplomacy” was understood as diplomatic practices conducted using digital and networked technologies, including the internet, mobile devices, and social platforms (Potter, 2002). Despite the absence of certain modern technologies (especially AI, which was not yet known in its current form), this definition is useful as an illustration of the idea that “the new is the well-forgotten old.”

Among the subsequent broader definitions, which likely contributed to their relative success by protecting them from immediate

¹⁸ “DiploFoundation” or “Diplo” is a Swiss-Maltese non-governmental organization specializing in capacity building in the field of Internet governance and digital policy.

¹⁹ The social network *X* (formerly *Twitter*) has been blocked in the Russian Federation at the request of the Prosecutor General’s Office of the Russian Federation (*Editor’s note*).

²⁰ The social network *Facebook* (part of the *Meta* group of companies) is banned in the Russian Federation. *Meta* is recognized as an extremist organization in the Russian Federation (*Editor’s note*).

²¹ What Is the Difference Between Digital Diplomacy and Public Diplomacy? // Diplo. URL: <https://www.diplomacy.edu/ufaq/what-is-the-difference-between-digital-diplomacy-and-public-diplomacy/#:~:text=Public%20diplomacy%20only%20covers%20one,geopolitical%20or%20geo%2Deconomic%20ENVIRONMENT> (accessed: 02.11.2025).

²² Ibid.

obsolescence amid rapid technological change, two similar formulations stand out: digital diplomacy as the use of the internet and new information and communication technologies to support diplomatic activities;²³ and digital diplomacy as the use of digital communication tools (social networks) by diplomats to engage with the general public.²⁴

These interpretations are similar in that they both require the involvement of digital technologies. On this basis, one can group numerous English-language terms and their Russian-language equivalents that function as synonyms or near-synonyms of the main concept: “e-diplomacy,” “cyber-diplomacy,” “net diplomacy,” “#diplomacy,” “diplomacy 2.0,” “public diplomacy 2.0,” “networked diplomacy,” “real-time diplomacy,” “21st-century statecraft,” “diplomacy in the digital age,” “digitalization of diplomacy,” “digidiplomacy,”²⁵ as well as “digital diplomacy,” “virtual diplomacy” (Eggeling, 2017), “TwiPlomacy,” “TechPlomacy,”²⁶ and others. A similar diversity is visible in practice: Germany’s MFA describes its approach as “vernetzte Diplomatie” (“networked diplomacy”), Danish diplomats refer to their model as “techplomacy,” and the Francophone world relies on “diplomatie numérique.” In essence, all these terms refer

to practices, procedures, and norms of diplomacy under conditions of digitalization (Eggeling, 2017).

It is logical to assume that this is where one should look for a way out of the terminological maze. Given the continuing and accelerating pace of technological development, the conceptual and categorical trajectory likely involves moving away from excessive specialization. This is supported by previous attempts at conceptualization in the field of digital diplomacy itself. Multiple efforts have been made, particularly in recent years, to avoid an overly narrow definition of the field. Among the most visible is the call to replace the term “digital diplomacy” with the broader and more inclusive “digitalization of diplomacy.”²⁷ This initiative is grounded in the observed specificity of information and communications technologies’ (ICT) impact on the diplomatic sphere. Most importantly, it stems from the understanding that digitalization is a process, not a binary state. In other words, one cannot categorize diplomats as “digital” or “non-digital” (to use Manor’s analogy). The same applies to diplomatic institutions. This simple insight brings us back to John Kerry’s idea regarding the short life cycle, temporality, and conditional nature of the widely used term “digital diplomacy.” And although in 2025, as a decade earlier, one can still confidently state that no universally accepted definition of digital diplomacy exists—just as there remains “no reliable conceptual framework for assessing the effectiveness of social media” (Bjola & Jiang, 2015) or, more broadly, digital technologies in diplomacy—the current directions of theoretical debate are gradually

²³ Hanson F. Baked in and Wired: eDiplomacy@State // Foreign Policy at Brookings. 2012. Series No. 30. P. 2. URL: <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/baked-in-hansonf-5.pdf> (accessed: 01.11.2025).

²⁴ Lewis D. Digital Diplomacy. Gateway House // Indian Council on Global Relations. December 19, 2014. URL: <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/digital-diplomacy-2/> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

²⁵ Holmes M. Digital Diplomacy // Oxford Bibliographies. 2019. URL: <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199743292/obo-9780199743292-0258.xml> (accessed: 23.10.2025).

²⁶ Zonova T. The New in Diplomacy: From “TwiPlomacy” to “TechPlomacy” // Russian International Affairs Council. April 18, 2019. (In Russian). URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/novoe-v-diplomatii-ot-tvplomasi-k-tekhplomasi/> (accessed: 15.09.2025).

²⁷ Manor I. The Digitalization of Diplomacy: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Terminology // DigDiploROx Working Paper. 2018 (January). No. 2. P. 4. URL: <https://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/DigDiploROxWP2.pdf> (accessed: 26.10.2025).

moving toward terminological consensus and the development of more robust and effective analytical tools.

History of Digital Diplomacy: Chronology and Periodization

Having clarified the key concepts and outlined a commitment to understanding the phenomenon in a sufficiently broad manner (for example, as all diplomatic activity occurring in the online sphere), we can now turn to its chronology and periodization. To do this, we will consider two parallel streams.

The first is an evolutionary event-based line that includes the main milestones and stages that formed the foundations and conditions for the emergence of digital diplomacy.

The second is the accumulated corpus of practical cases that reflect not the initial process of formation, but the outcomes of digital diplomacy as it began functioning in practice and the experience accumulated through its application. The event-based line includes the institutional component only partially, as this aspect has already been widely and thoroughly covered in the scholarly literature.

Despite the later terminological separation, the starting point of “digital diplomacy” in the research field is commonly identified with the publication of “Public Diplomacy in the Computer Age” in 1984 (Hansen, 1984). The book was the first to question the established public assumptions regarding the division between cultural and information activities. It devoted particular attention to the profound transformations that had occurred within the U.S. Information Agency under the influence of technological advancements (the *WorldNet* innovation, computerization, the moderniza-

tion program of Voice of America,²⁸ and so forth) during the preceding five years. Thus, the true point of departure can be considered to be 1979 at the latest.

In 1994, the first exchange of emails between heads of state took place: Bill Clinton (United States) and Carl Bildt (Sweden). Here is the text of the messages (it is preserved at the National Museum of American Diplomacy²⁹):

Dear Bill,

4 February 1994

Apart from testing this connection on the global Internet system, I want to congratulate you on your decision to end the trade embargo on Vietnam. I am planning to go to Vietnam in April and will certainly use the occasion to take up the question of MIA's. From the Swedish side, we have tried to be helpful on this issue in the past, and we will continue to use the contacts we might have.

Sweden is—as you know one of the leading countries in the world in the field of telecommunications, and it is only appropriate that we should be among the first to use the Internet also for political contacts and communication around the globe.

Yours,
Carl

Dear Carl,

5 February 1994

I appreciate your support for my decision to end the trade embargo on Vietnam and thank you for all that Sweden has done on the question of the POW/MIAs.

²⁸ The Voice of America radio station is included in the register of foreign agents of the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation (*Editor's note*).

²⁹ First E-mails Between Heads of State. Sweden/ United States 1994 // National Museum of American Diplomacy. URL: <https://diplomacy.state.gov/items/first-e-mails-between-heads-of-state/> (accessed: 26.10.2025).

I share your enthusiasm for the potential of emerging communication technologies. This demonstration of electronic communication is an important step toward building a global information superhighway.

*Sincerely,
Bill*

It is indeed quite logical that the first exchange of electronic correspondence occurred between American and Swedish leaders: the United States and Sweden soon became pioneers in the field of digital diplomacy. This distinguishes them from other highly technological states such as Japan,

South Korea, or Singapore, a global digital hub. Despite their advanced infrastructure and high technological capacity, these countries did not succeed in securing leading positions in digital diplomacy and, for a long period, have remained in a catching-up position. This suggests that a country's technological potential may create favorable conditions for growth, but by itself does not guarantee either rapid and effective development or, even less, automatic leadership in this sphere.

The next important milestones in the chronology are the appearance dates of key social networks, which will be presented in the Table 1, along with other significant markers.

Table 1. Chronology of the Development of Digital Diplomacy

Stream 1			Stream 2		
Date	Event	Comment	Date	Event	Comment
1969	First ARPANET packet transmission	Emergence of the Internet USA			
1983	Transition to the TCP/IP protocol	Emergence of the architecture of the modern Internet (United States)			
1991	Launch of the World Wide Web (WWW)	Formation of an open global communication space; beginning of mass digital publicity (United States)			
1991	Appearance of the first website	CERN Research Center (Switzerland)			
			1994	First exchange of email messages between heads of state (United States—Sweden)	Symbolic start of digital diplomacy; confirmation of the possibility of interstate interaction online
			1994	Appearance of the first text-based “gopher” website of a foreign affairs agency (United States)	Internet precursor to the U.S. Department of State’s state.gov website
			1995	Appearance of the first website of a foreign affairs agency (United States)	
			2003	Establishment of the Office of Electronic Diplomacy within the structure of the U.S. Department of State	Beginning of the institutionalization of digital diplomacy, not yet on a mass scale

Continuation of the Table 1

Stream 1			Stream 2		
Date	Event	Comment	Date	Event	Comment
2003	Appearance of <i>LinkedIn</i>	USA			
2004	Appearance of <i>Facebook</i> *	USA			
2005	Launch of <i>YouTube</i>	USA			Formation of a new audiovisual diplomacy
2006	Launch of <i>Twitter</i> **	Later a leading microblogging site and the most useful tool of digital diplomacy (USA)			A platform for instantaneous political communication; the phenomenon of <i>TwiPlomacy</i>
2006	Founding of <i>WikiLeaks</i>	Switzerland			
2006	Launch of <i>Vkontakte</i> (VK)	Russia, also popular in CIS countries			
			2007	Opening of Sweden's virtual embassy in <i>Second Life</i>	The world's first virtual diplomatic mission (in virtual space), an important milestone in the history of digital diplomacy
			2007	The Maldives open a virtual embassy in <i>Second Life</i>	Confirmation of global interest in virtual diplomacy
			2009	The first tweet published by a sitting ambassador	The Ambassador of Mexico to the United States. Tweet text: "Great to be the first ambassador to the U.S. with a personal <i>Twitter</i> ** account; an excellent way to speak directly with America about Mexico!"
2009	Launch of <i>Sina Weibo</i>	China			
2010	Appearance of <i>WhatsApp</i> *	USA			
			2010	The first high-ranking UN official creates a <i>Twitter</i> ** profile	Former Prime Minister of New Zealand
2011	Launch of <i>Snapchat</i>	Under the name <i>Picaboo</i> , CIA			
			2011	The United States' virtual embassy in Tehran	The first example of a "bypass" online embassy for engagement with an otherwise inaccessible audience
			2012	A White House tweet (an in-person meeting of selected <i>Twitter</i> ** users for a specific purpose), United States	The visit of the British Prime Minister to Washington became an open event for the followers of the White House's <i>Twitter</i> ** account

Continuation of the Table 1

Stream 1			Stream 2		
Date	Event	Comment	Date	Event	Comment
			2012	Official “rotating curator,” Sweden	The project was recognized as one of the country’s official platforms on social media
			2013	Pope Francis begins to tweet @Pontifex	Created a year earlier by Pope Benedict XVI
			2013	Trailer for Barack Obama’s visit to Israel	
			2013	The <i>Facebook</i> * page of the U.S. Embassy in Pakistan became the first diplomatic page on <i>Facebook</i> * to reach 1 million followers	
			2013	The Embassy of Israel in the United States created and posted a fake <i>LinkedIn</i> profile of the President of Iran	
			2014	The U.S. Department of State launches official applications for interaction with travelers, prospective interns, and others	
			2014	Worldwide online protest action #Bring-BackOurGirls	Regarding the missing schoolgirls in Nigeria
			2014	“Map war” in <i>Twitter</i> **	NATO vs. Russia
			2014	The U.S. Embassy in Moscow and Ambassador J. Tefft register on <i>VK</i>	
			2014	Estonia launches e-Residency	Formation of the first large-scale digital consular instrument
			2015	Launch of the UN’s VR video series	The aim was to convey the world’s most pressing problems to decision-makers and to concerned publics around the globe
			2015	Emergence of emoji diplomacy	The Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs gave an interview using only emojis
			2015	Cooperation between <i>Microsoft</i> and the U.S. Diplomacy Center aimed at developing interactive and digital diplomacy	
			2015	The United Kingdom’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office became the first foreign ministry to launch an account on <i>Snapchat</i>	This marked the beginning of the active use of <i>Snapchat</i> by foreign ministries in their engagement with youth

Ending of the Table 1

Stream 1			Stream 2		
Date	Event	Comment	Date	Event	Comment
			2015	The United Nations launches an account on <i>Snapchat</i>	
			2016	The Foreign Minister of Iceland used <i>Snapchat</i> for the first time during an official visit to India	
			2016	<i>WhatsApp</i> * becomes a tool of digital diplomacy	Emergence of “ <i>WhatsApp</i> * diplomacy”

Notes. * — Social networks *Facebook* and *WhatsApp* (part of the *Meta* group of companies) are banned in the Russian Federation. *Meta* is designated as an extremist organization in the Russian Federation.

** — Social network *X* (formerly *Twitter*) is blocked in the Russian Federation at the request of the Prosecutor General’s Office of the Russian Federation.

Source: compiled by E.S. Arlyapova.

An attentive reader will notice that, despite differences in how such tables are filled, they almost always end in 2016. It seems likely that the reason is that after this point digital diplomacy ceased to be a sphere of instrumental innovations and became an independent environment of international relations. In other words, 2016 marked the end of the formative period and the beginning of a new stage in its development—the algorithmic stage (2016–2018). The name reflects the emergence and soon the dominance of algorithmic feeds on social networks such as *Twitter*³⁰ and *Facebook*³¹ and on the video-hosting platform *YouTube*. During this period, states and their foreign-policy institutions encountered for the first time a situation in which algorithms, rather than themselves, determined what the audience would see, how, and when.

Against the backdrop of algorithmically induced asymmetries in information visibility, the diplomatic world was introduced to the

phenomenon of asymmetric influence. The algorithmic turn created favorable conditions for small states to break through into high-level diplomacy (even before global changes in the composition of diplomatic actors). In practical terms, a race began for content “optimized for the algorithm.” Development continued in this vein for several years, and in 2018–2020 it was enriched by two notable phenomena: “influence diplomacy” and political targeting. The latter refers to targeted influence on specific groups of people through digital tools and, naturally, for political purposes.³² During this period, diplomatic competition on *Instagram*³³ accelerated rapidly, *Facebook*³⁴ introduced transparency in political advertising, and the first “digital war rooms” or “digital situation rooms” began

³² Druckman J. Persuasive Political Targeting: A Remarkably Understudied Dynamic // Northwestern Institute for Policy Research (IPR) Working Paper Series. July 28, 2023. URL: <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/documents/working-papers/2023/wp-23-31.pdf> (accessed: 02.11.2025).

³³ The social network *Instagram* (part of the *Meta* group of companies) is banned in the Russian Federation. *Meta* is recognized as an extremist organization in the Russian Federation (*Editor’s note*).

³⁴ The social network *Facebook* (part of the *Meta* group of companies) is banned in the Russian Federation. *Meta* is recognized as an extremist organization in the Russian Federation (*Editor’s note*).

³⁰ The social network *X* (formerly *Twitter*) has been blocked in the Russian Federation at the request of the Prosecutor General’s Office of the Russian Federation (*Editor’s note*).

³¹ The social network *Facebook* (part of the *Meta* group of companies) is banned in the Russian Federation. *Meta* is recognized as an extremist organization in the Russian Federation (*Editor’s note*).

to appear in foreign ministries—centers for digital management of political or diplomatic situations in real time (typically during information crises). It is logical that the concept of “real-time diplomacy” gained popularity during this period.

The years 2020–2022, marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, became a “point of no return” in terms of accelerated and seemingly irreversible digitalization. This was the period of hybrid and fully virtual briefings, summits, and even the UN General Assembly (held for the first time in hybrid format in September 2021). The full shift of consular services online was completed, and countries previously lagging behind were forced to accelerate the digitalization of their foreign ministries.

The years 2022–2024 saw another wave of technological innovations and diplomatic developments. In the broadest sense, the nature of this stage is captured by the term “*TikTok* diplomacy,” which is currently the fastest-growing direction, in which foreign-policy actors use a network of vertical videos (driven by recommendations rather than subscriptions) to reach audiences directly. The emphasis shifted toward short visual content. It soon became an official format of communication, as video creates connection faster than text—this is “emotional diplomacy.” Along with *TikTok*, youth audiences entered the space of diplomatic influence for the first time.

Finally, the most recent years have been marked by yet another breakthrough—the emergence of AI diplomacy and the gradual spread of immersive formats. The automation in content generation, crisis forecasting, monitoring, and the necessity, but also the technical possibility of analyzing big data brought several new professions into the diplomatic sphere: AI attachés, digital analysts, specialists in metaverse diplomacy, and others.

Speaking of metaverses, the most well-known among them include *Decentraland* (Expo 2020), *Somnium Space*, *Roblox*³⁵ (with its child and adolescent target audiences), and *Meta Horizon Worlds*³⁶ (designed for soft-power events), among others.

Thus, digital diplomacy has advanced rapidly and decisively from the first email exchanges in 1994 to virtual simulations in 2024. Moving away from specific dates and events, the following periodization can be proposed in Table 2.

If painted in the broadest strokes, there would be only two segments in the periodization (Table 3).

Periodization will not work in a country-specific perspective, except for the states that act as locomotives of digital diplomacy. All actors in this sphere are individual in their reactions, adaptation, and simple ability to generate digital content—especially on a continuous basis and under the harsh conditions of competition among storylines and narratives. The characteristics of the digital landscape and the nature of the changes it introduces alter the balance of power: many “small and medium-sized states have hurried to introduce digital support for their foreign policy activities, hoping in this way to increase their weight on the world stage.”³⁷ Illustrative examples include Denmark’s rise with “TechPlomacy” and the appointment of the world’s first Minister of Artificial Intelligence in the United Arab Emirates.

³⁵ The platform has been blocked by decision of Roskomnadzor (*Editor’s note*).

³⁶ The *Meta Horizon Worlds* platform is part of the *Meta* group of companies, which is recognized as an extremist organization in the Russian Federation (*Editor’s note*).

³⁷ Zonova T. The New in Diplomacy: From “TwiPlomacy” to “TechPlomacy” // Russian International Affairs Council. April 18, 2019. (In Russian). URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/novoe-v-diplomatii-ot-tviplomasi-k-tekhplomasi/> (accessed: 15.09.2025).

Table 2. Periodization of Digital Diplomacy

Period	Event	Comment
1995–2000	Appearance of the first MFA and embassy websites	Digital expansion of traditional diplomatic missions
2000–2012	The first virtual embassies and other technological experiments	Entry into the virtual diplomatic environment
2012–2015	Structural integration of digital units into the foreign ministries of various countries	Institutionalization of digital diplomacy, transition from experiments to systematic practices
2016–2020	Mass entry into social networks	Digitalization of public diplomacy, formation of a new norm of diplomatic presence
2020–2023	The COVID-19 pandemic and the complete transition of consular services online	Blurring of boundaries between online and offline diplomacy
2023–2025	Emergence of pilot VR embassies, introduction of AI	Beginning of virtual-immersive diplomacy

Source: compiled by E.S. Arlyapova and E.G. Ponomareva.

Table 3. The Most General Periodization of Digital Diplomacy

Period	Event	Comment
Before 2016	Formative period	Emphasis on digital tools
After 2016	Period of institutionalization	Transition from digital tools to the digital environment

Source: compiled by E.S. Arlyapova and E.G. Ponomareva.

In conclusion, data from one of the best-known digital diplomacy indices, the Digital Diplomacy Index (for G20 states active on *Twitter*³⁸), will be presented as a research reference point, so that, in the absence of unified analytical frameworks for assessing the effectiveness of digital diplomacy across countries, it becomes possible, at least partially, to navigate the current balance of power.

Spatial, Temporal, and Power Asymmetries of Digital Diplomacy

In the digital environment, space, time, and power cease to be fixed and become variable, algorithmically mediated categories. Diplomatic actors operate under complex conditions of compressed (and, conversely, stretched) distances, accelerated (and,

conversely, slowed) communication cycles, and unstable regimes of attention shaped by platforms. The process of digitalization transforms the actors themselves—it affects how they interpret their own world: for example, “if diplomats perceive their world as networked, they aim to become nodes in transnational networks of influence ... If they see the world as hierarchical, they focus on engaging with elites.”³⁹ It also signals which working procedures should be changed, which skills developed, and so forth. Finally, digitalization is “a process that over time redistributes power within diplomatic institutions.”⁴⁰

Digital diplomacy is no longer a state-centered domain. Now, a variety of actors are involved, including international organizations, municipalities (for example, Barcelona with

³⁸ The social network *X* (formerly *Twitter*) has been blocked in the Russian Federation at the request of the Prosecutor General’s Office of the Russian Federation (*Editor’s note*).

³⁹ Manor I. The Digitalization of Diplomacy: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Terminology // DigDiploROx Working Paper. 2018 (January). No. 2. P. 4. URL: <https://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/DigDiploROxWP2.pdf> (accessed: 26.10.2025).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

its independent digital diplomacy, separate from Spain's MFA), private companies, media, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), platforms, activists, bloggers, volunteers, and ordinary users. The pool of actors has expanded substantially and it is likely that this expansion is not yet complete.

The logic of communication has changed, with a shift from a strictly vertical model: MFA—embassies—audience, to horizontal and networked structures. Diplomatic content, once untouchable, is now discussed, edited, parodied, meme-ified, and subjected to counter-narratives. Communication itself has become algorithmically mediated, with all interactions taking place through algorithms such as recommendation, moderation, search, and targeting. In other words, the MFA—audience chain has transformed into MFA—algorithm—audience. This is the key source of algorithmic asymmetry.

Algorithms set the limits of visibility and determine the rhythm of events in communication, redistributing influence among state and non-state actors. Actors are embedded in unequal spatial and temporal power configurations, where digital platforms eliminate physical distance and enable instantaneous communication regardless of geography. However, actors are also forced to occupy new spaces created by digital environments, such as social networks, streaming platforms, and metaverses. These spaces are typically regulated by platform algorithms, making them difficult for states to directly influence. This creates asymmetry in the communication landscape.

A similar duality exists with regard to time. On the one hand, there is an acceleration (compression), since news spreads within seconds and responses must be immediate. On the other hand, some processes slow down or even loop. All of this occurs without the direct involvement of traditional diplomatic actors.

Finally, the main transformation concerns relates to the shift in power (within the digital environment). Today, platforms (algorithms) determine who will see what, when, and how. Traditional actors, especially states, do not control key stages of the modern information-communication cycle: ranking, moderation, banning, filtering, and so on. There is also a phenomenon of micro-power, manifested in likes, shares, and comments that shape diplomatic narratives. This power is held by the audience—the primary reference point of public diplomacy in any environment, digital or traditional. However, even this is not all: bloggers, influencers, journalists, activists, and many others intervene in diplomatic communication, competing with the state and its foreign-policy institutions for attention.

Digital technologies do not merely offer new functions; they also promote new norms and help form new behaviors. Digitalization encompasses all dimensions and areas of diplomacy: audiences, institutions, practitioners and practice; norms, values and beliefs; behavior, procedures, metaphors, and mental frameworks.⁴¹ The state, as one of the most influential actors, proceeds along parallel paths, trying simultaneously to extract maximum benefit from the technological race and to establish control over it. In some parts of the world, this succeeds to a certain extent.

Conclusion

Digital diplomacy is a relatively new phenomenon in international relations, and therefore it is interpreted, described, and understood differently by researchers, though with noticeable similarities. The nuances of

⁴¹ Manor I. The Digitalization of Diplomacy: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Terminology // DigDiploROx Working Paper. 2018 (January). No. 2. P. 4. URL: <https://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/DigDiploROxWP2.pdf> (accessed: 26.10.2025)

how it is interpreted by diplomatic practitioners contribute even further to terminological eclecticism. Although key terms have undergone considerable evolution over time—differentiating from one another, as in the case of “digital” and “public” diplomacy—the search for a commonly accepted definition and for a conceptual model that encompasses the main definitions continues.

Given the ongoing and even accelerating pace of technological development, the most suitable direction appears to be the researchers’ effort to avoid excessively narrow interpretations in favor of a broader, more dynamic understanding of digital diplomacy. An illustrative attempt at a comprehensive, integrative conceptualization of this new diplomatic reality is the proposal to adopt the term “digitalization of diplomacy.” This term easily reflects both the influence of digital technologies on the entire spectrum of diplomatic practices and the pervasive effects of digitalization. Most significantly, it emphasizes the normative and temporal impact of digital technologies, clearly indicating that digitalization is a long-term process whose outcomes and consequences extend far beyond the limited problem of the “simple” use of innovative technologies.

Today, digital diplomacy constitutes an autonomous environment of international relations in which algorithms, visual communication, artificial intelligence, and hybrid formats exert greater influence than classical diplomatic channels. Video has become the primary carrier of diplomatic meaning. Online services have officially become a part of diplomatic obligations. VR/AR and metaverses have entered an experimental phase (pilot projects in the United Arab Emirates, Singapore, and South Korea). Immersive environments are not merely decorative experiments but a real attempt to

substantially expand diplomatic presence, create new channels of communication, and develop new digital consular services.

The overall ranking of G20 states in the sphere of digital diplomacy (based on *Twitter*⁴²) in 2023 was as follows (Table 4).

Table 4. Digital Diplomacy—Ranking of States

Place	State	Trend
1	USA	–
2	Russia	↗
3	India	↘
4	Indonesia	↗
5	France	↘
6	Mexico	↗
7	Saudi Arabia	↗
8	Turkey	↘
9	Canada	↘
10	UK	↘
11	China	↗
12	Brazil	–
13	Japan	↘
14	Australia	↗
15	Italy	↘
16	Argentina	↗
17	Germany	↘
18	South Africa	–
19	South Korea	–

Source: Digital Diplomacy Index. URL: <https://digital-diplomacy-index.com/> (accessed: 26.10.2025).

Of course, this ranking is only a partial indicator of the effectiveness of digital diplomacy, as it does not cover the full spectrum of digital channels and platforms. It already differs from today’s reality and will diverge even more in the future: in the age of algorithmic asymmetry, the resilience of diplomatic actors, including states, is determined not so much by the volume of their resources as by their adaptability, creativity, and their ability to recalibrate their digital presence across time and space.

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⁴² The social network *X* (formerly *Twitter*) has been blocked in the Russian Federation at the request of the Prosecutor General’s Office of the Russian Federation (*Editor’s note*).

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