

DIGITAL DIPLOMACY IN THE POST WEB 2.0 ERA

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Abstract: Media platforms are being increasingly used in the communication between states. Nowadays, Twitter is one of the platforms that state representatives rely on to communicate with their counterparts abroad. At the same time, we are witnessing an information revolution that allows the emergence of new social media platforms that facilitate communication between various entities, also offering total transparency. This new dynamic allowed the emergence of new research methods that adapted to the new technologies. This paper will indicate how the sentiment analysis method successfully identified trends and patterns in China's discourse on Twitter. Furthermore, we will demonstrate the importance of digital diplomacy and which methods are best suited for the Twitter platform in order to assess the diplomatic strategy of a state.

Keywords: digital diplomacy; e-diplomacy; Twitter; social media; wolf warrior diplomacy.

1. Introduction

Digital platforms are increasingly being used in the diplomatic communication, determining the emergence of concepts such as "digital diplomacy", "e-diplomacy", "public diplomacy 2.0", "cyber diplomacy", etc. Similarly, diplomatic communication represents a new and unique element within the practice of traditional diplomacy. Although the emergence of new technologies has provided many opportunities for the states to develop a new diplomatic strategy in order to promote their image and interests beyond their borders, many of them still did not manage to build a structured communication at the diplomatic level. However, the ways of communication between state representatives on social media platforms have become the subject academic research in recent years.

As a result, this paper will highlight the progress made in the field of digital diplomacy, focusing on the particular case of China's diplomacy, and its ramifications, that are influencing the public opinion through a very popular social network – Twitter. The critical analysis is based on the systematic study of the reference field, starting from the fundamental works in this field and up to the most recent researches. The impact of personal contributions on the studied field will be embodied in this paper by identifying and explaining the main working concepts, finally formulating the main conclusions and the main limits of research.

Considering the complexity and novelty of the working concepts, we believe it is essential to clarify and define terms such as diplomacy, digital diplomacy, public diplomacy, Twiplomacy, by highlighting the main differences between the concepts.

The research and final part of the paper will focus on the particular case of China's digital diplomacy, defining and explaining the main characteristics of the *wolf warrior* diplomacy and the media coverage it had in the latest years.

2. The conceptualization of diplomacy

2.1. Classical diplomacy

The concept of "diplomacy" originates from the Latin word "diploma" and from the modern Latin adjective "diplomaticus", the two terms being used to describe official documents that offered privileges or different recommendations. Such documents were often used for traveling between states or provinces. In the context of international relations, the term "diplomatic" was used for the first time in the 18th century, and later, diplomacy was formalized in the context of the emergence of the modern state structures that brought with them the bureaucracy, but also the establishment of external services (Langhorne, 2011).

Researchers in the field of international relations have identified diplomatic practices dating back to the beginning of mankind. However, the concept of "diplomacy" and the terms derived from it entered our vocabulary only in the last decade of the 18th century. Meanwhile, the concepts of "negotiation", "policy" covered part of this gap, along with special titles such as "ambassador", "minister", etc., without this totality of practices existing under the umbrella of a single term. In addition, the concept of diplomacy itself has traveled through many fields in terms of international representation and influence.

Considering the plurality of the concept of diplomacy today, certain authors consider it as "transprofessional", which means that the space in which diplomacy is practiced has expanded significantly, encompassing an even wider sphere of activists, researchers, journalists, but also consultants in business, which currently have an important role in international affairs, regardless of whether or not they are considered part of current diplomatic practice (Constantinou, 2017). Of course, the value of a good diplomat also lies in communication, negotiation and persuasion skills, as Hamilton and Langhorne argue (2011).

Furthermore, Teodor Meleşcanu offers an overview of the understanding of diplomacy in a broad and narrow sense, in the course held at the Doctoral School of SNSPA, called "*The Theory and Practice of Negotiations*", where he makes a reference to the *Diplomatic Guide of Charles de Martens* (1866), in which diplomacy is defined as the science of the foreign relations or foreign affairs of states or, in a narrower sense, the science or art of negotiation (Meleşcanu, 2022).

Finally, we can affirm that diplomacy is the method through which states manage their external relations, pursuing their own national interests. Despite the existing interests, the results brought by diplomatic practices have been only positive, being often used to prevent wars and violence, to discuss global issues or to promote the economy. Without diplomacy, the international system would not have pacifist alternatives, based on communication or compromises.

2.1. Public diplomacy

The concept of "public diplomacy" originates in the United States, when, in 1965, Edmund Gullion coined the term to describe managing a state's reputation outside its own borders or, in other words, influencing public opinion in other states (Anholt, 2006). From this perspective, the process includes all communication activities around this objective, including expansive activities such as interacting with foreign media or practicing intercultural communication.

This type of diplomacy serves to understand and capitalize on state policies and ideas, with the main goal of standing out globally through mobilization and persuasion. In the same context, it is clearly what public diplomacy is not, namely, mere advertising for states. In reality, public diplomacy does not replace the classical diplomacy, but complements it, the difference between the two being that classical diplomacy is centered on governments, and public diplomacy focuses on engaging with non-governmental actors and the general public. Thus, public diplomacy has an effect only through the attitude and reaction of the public.

2.3. Digital diplomacy and the *new public diplomacy*

As the experience of traditional soft power tools teaches us, the conceptualization of digital diplomacy is complicated by the fact that it is an umbrella term. At the same time, the complexity of digital diplomacy is all the more complicated to define and explain, given that it manifests itself in a variety of forms – by its presence on both social media platforms and on official government websites or in the journalistic publications of the states.

A gap in the field can be represented by the lack of a definition or a working framework for the concept of "digital diplomacy". However, there are studies that have initiated speculation regarding the meaning of the concept of "digital diplomacy" and how it works. On another hand, Potter describes digital diplomacy as a range of diplomatic practices exercised through digital and networked technologies, including the Internet, mobile devices, and social media channels (2002).

Moreover, Holmes states that digital diplomacy is a strategy to manage change through digital tools and virtual collaboration, done with the support of information collected from several reliable sources, with the expertise of specialists in the field of classification, interpretation and analysis of key aspects and implications for peace and security. Governments thus rely on foreign ministries both to capitalize on the national vision and to represent national interests. Holmes also believes that digital diplomacy is a strategy to manage change through digital tools and virtual collaborations (Holmes, 2015).

Manor and Segev argue in their research that digital diplomacy involves the use of social media platforms by states to achieve foreign policy goals and for image and reputation management (2015). Also, a definition by Lewis describes digital diplomacy as the use of digital communication tools, namely social media, by diplomats to interact with each other and the public at large (2022). Another insight is that of Sotiriu Sabrina, who focuses more on the collective relationship resulting from the exchange of information between citizens, government, media and other entities (2015).

In order to create a very clear theoretical framework, it is essential to indicate the main differences between digital diplomacy and public diplomacy. This approach is necessary because digital diplomacy, being a relatively new concept, does not have a substantial literature behind it, such as that of traditional diplomacy or public diplomacy.

In the academic field, there are researchers who believe that digital diplomacy is the new public diplomacy, arguing that the changes in the conceptualization and practice of public diplomacy are a consequence of the proliferation and rapid integration of social media platforms in recent years. For this reason, digital diplomacy emerged out of the need to manage the new media environment characterized by audience fragmentation across multiple networks based on selective exposure (Hayden, 2012).

Additionally, two-way communication is what differentiates digital diplomacy from public diplomacy, the latter being characterized by one-way communication and limited interactions between transmitter and receiver (Pamment, 2012). As a result, the purpose of public diplomacy has shifted from simply transmitting information to building a quality relationship with the foreign public, achieved through a high degree of engagement on media platforms.

From a practical point of view, digital diplomacy or the new public diplomacy is a concept that mirrors the diplomat's adaptation to digital tools, both in mindset and in actual action. Similarly, Fletcher believed that digital diplomacy is actually the diplomatic reaction to the digital revolution (2016).

3. Twiplomacy and the emergence of *wolf warrior* diplomacy

3.1. Defining Twiplomacy

Researchers indicated that phone users spend an average of 3 hours and 10 minutes per week surfing the Internet to stay up-to-date on world events (Andreas, 2013). Another study indicates that 70% of online adults get access to news through the Facebook platform, while 36% also get news information from Twitter. (Mergel, 2012)

Thus, *Twiplomacy* refers to how individuals form a relationship with state officials by "following" them on the Twitter platform. It is interesting how this subfield of digital diplomacy has been perceived by academics, being a new term, but with an extremely interesting potential, the studies to date being focused on the connection between the concept of "Twiplomacy" and international relations.

Globally, the term "Twiplomacy" was used for the first time in 2011 by Burston-Marsteller, one of the largest global public relations firms, also the founder of the web domain twiplomacy.com (Kuzniar, 2017). Every year, Burson Marsteller publishes studies on state government Twitter accounts on Twiplomacy. In 2020, in the studies published on Twiplomacy we can notice that, unlike previous years, sensitive topics such as the Covid-19 pandemic were also addressed (Twiplomacy, 2019). At the same time, according to an analysis carried out by Twiplomacy for 2020, in terms of the degree of engagement of world leaders on Twitter, India occupies the first place through Narendra Modi, followed by Donald Trump - we note that in this list, China is completely missing (2020).

On the other hand, special attention must also be paid to the platform itself, which has served in recent years as an extremely versatile form of new public diplomacy. The use of Twitter has become an integral part of international relations, this being explained on the one hand by the nature of the events that took place in recent years, which determined the transition to a "digitalized" diplomacy.

The influence of social networks in the diplomatic sphere is visibly growing. From the President of the United States becoming increasingly vocal about his counterparts, to India's former Minister of External Affairs using Twitter to offer assistance to citizens of Indian origin around the world, social media has led to a change in paradigm in the evolution of diplomacy (Chhabra, 2020).

Therefore, *Twiplomacy* merges classical diplomacy, digital diplomacy and the Twitter platform - when a world leader sends a message through this platform related to an event with a high impact or changes in state policies, his counterparts use the same method to answer, share the idea, criticize it or simply to give an opinion regarding the

topic under discussion (2020). This exchange of lines leads to an online discourse that has the role of shaping public opinion.

Classical diplomacy is built on a foundation of formality - "Twitter diplomacy" is placed at the opposite pole, eliminating the bureaucratic barriers related to the dissemination of information of interest, reducing the limits. The ease and flexibility with which certain platforms are open to the public, such as Twitter, have increased the degree of connectivity between individuals, institutional / organizational communication through certain key features such as the similarity of interactions, dialogues, the degree of involvement between organizations and the target audience. At the same time, the use of such a platform can lead to a decrease in the financial costs of traveling to official meetings.

The Chinese government is no stranger to these digital changes – it has taken advantage of doors opened by the technological progress, managing to mobilize various fields, among which we consider the field of diplomacy worth mentioning. It was concluded that 2015-2019, following several researches carried out, that China's diplomacy on social networks is just at the beginning - this being especially proven by the fact that in 2019, only 14 consulates and embassies of China had officially verified Twitter accounts, and of these, only 3 diplomatic accounts were active (Zhao, 2021). Moreover, Huang and Wang identified in another research prior to the above that the Chinese government used various social media platforms to project its so-called "Chinese dream".

In addition, the "Twitter" diplomacy has a high degree of transparency, this aspect raising many ethical issues among diplomats, this profession being based on confidentiality, making it difficult to identify a balance between transparency and discretion, by simultaneously using technology to its full potential.

Indeed, Twitter is the platform that the representatives of China use the most in the practice of digital diplomacy. One of the reasons might be the awareness of the extensive opportunities that the platform offers.

3.2. The wolf warrior diplomacy. Internal and international perception

There is a new term circulating both in the Middle East media publications and in the Western ones – the "wolf warrior" diplomacy. The term originates from a series of patriotic action films that have been very successful in China, in which Rambo-like protagonists fight both inside China and outside its borders with foreigners to defend the country's interests. The first film in the series was released in 2015 and grossed over \$76 million or 545 million yuan, according to CNN (Jiang, 2020). Following this success, the second film in the series came out two years later, quickly becoming the most watched film in China. The motto of this film was that "anyone who confronts China will pay even from 1000 km away".

A comparison between such films and China's diplomats emerged in July 2019, when Zhao Lijian, then a counselor at the Chinese embassy in Pakistan, began accusing the US government via the Twitter platform. Thus, Zhao stated that the US has no right to criticize China on the topic of human rights abuses, given that the US itself has various problems with racism, income inequality, gun violence, or other internal problems that have persisted for a long time.

Moreover, Chinese diplomats on missions around the world were inspired to adopt Zhao's tactics on Twitter, a platform long banned in China. Hua Chunying, Zhao's former

superior, the director-general of the Foreign Ministry's Intelligence Department, and her Twitter account, established in 2019, has about 500,000 followers. Hua states that many people are making up lies about China and conspiracy theories amid the deterioration of Sino-American relations in the context of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Regarding the "wolf warrior" diplomacy, it is worth mentioning that it has never represented an official diplomatic strategy of the Chinese government. Moreover, for a better understanding of China's diplomacy, it is necessary to analyze the pre-pandemic period, which is particularly characterized by the transition from Deng Xiaoping's diplomacy to "hide capabilities and maintain a low profile". In the Chinese media, it has been argued that the new type of "wolf warrior" diplomacy does not change China's specific diplomatic style, but only that it is less subtle than Deng's style.

At the same time, it is important to know the political context in which the diplomacy of the "wolf warriors" was born. In addition to the consequences of the global financial crisis of the late 2000s, China and the US were involved in a series of trade disputes in the years leading up to the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, the prominent role of the Chinese Communist Party in shaping the state's foreign policy was made concrete by the release of a plan in 2018 stating that it will continue to reform the parties and state institutions.

Despite the media coverage in China, this type of diplomacy has not been officially recognized by the Chinese government in documents. In this regard, Le Yucheng, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of China, pointed out the problematic nature of this term in Chinese foreign policy, saying that it is more of a misunderstanding of Chinese diplomacy, arguing that the attitude of diplomats is a response to how were treated over time, by the ones that were "interfering in their internal affairs, discrediting and insulting them constantly".

Moreover, after 2010, when China's economic power surpassed that of Japan, reaching the second place in the world after the US, China became much more confident and its foreign policy became much more assertive, moving away slightly by Deng's principles. In other words, economic development has given China the confidence to assert itself internationally, leading to a much bolder foreign policy.

Thus, a language used on Facebook and Twitter by Chinese diplomats was born, reflecting the nationalist tone that came to be known in later studies and in the Western media as "warrior wolf" diplomacy.

4. Assessing China's *wolf warrior* diplomatic strategy on Twitter

Social media content analysis is a fusion of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Mixed research methods have the role of providing a deep and analytical approach, which is why it became more and more preferred in the study of international relations.

Nowadays, social networks are suitable to provide long-term viable results, as they contain both quantitative data visible at first glimpses, as well as data that can be subjected to an objective content analysis to observe the connections between several entities. Although the quantitative analysis of social networks provides particularly important information regarding the trends and developments of certain platforms, but also the position of influential people, an in-depth look at the mechanisms through which these data materialize can only be done with the support of the qualitative approach to the problem.

In this sense, we carried out a social media research on 5 Twitter accounts belonging to Chinese diplomats and officially verified by China. The data analysed for the purpose of this research was categorized and grouped based on existing information on the Twitter platform using the following criteria: information of general interest – name / date of creation of the respective account / total number of posts since opening the account, total number of followers, number of posts per day, number of likes per post, most users interacted with, most hashtags used. The 5 accounts belonged to Lijian Zhao, Zhang Heqing, Min. of Foreign Affairs, Hua Chunying and Cao Yi.

As a main result, we can observe similarities and differences between the analysed accounts. Based on our data, we discovered that both Lijian Zhao and Zhang Heqing enjoy a particularly high popularity among the Western public, with over 1 million followers on Twitter. On the other hand, referring to their posts, the one who occupies almost the last place in terms of followers, namely Zhang Heqing, is the leader in terms of the number of published posts. This indicates a high degree of commitment.

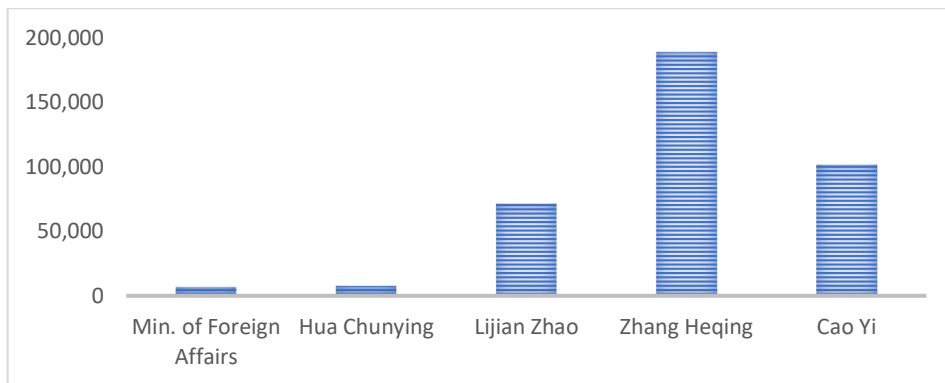


Figure 1. Comparison on the number of tweets in each Twitter account

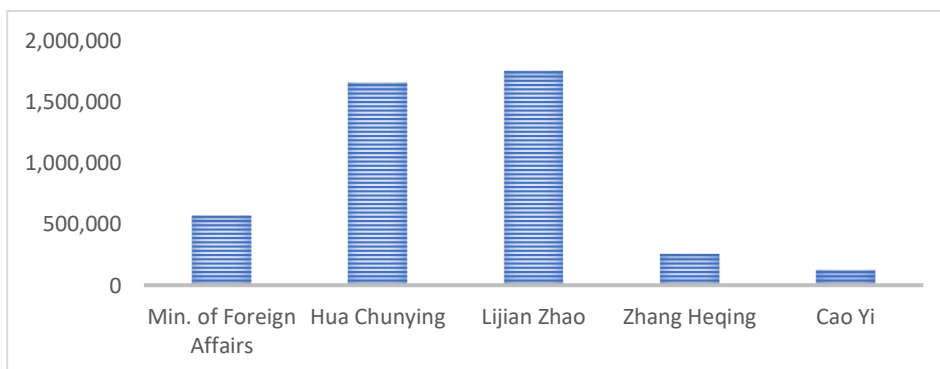


Figure 2. Comparison on the number of followers in each Twitter account

Moreover, considering the daily activity carried out by the 5 entities, we can affirm that the higher the popularity (defined by the number of followers), the lower the engagement rate (number of social media posts/ “Tweets”) and vice-versa. Further, by

exploring the most used tags, we noticed that in 4 out of 5 analysed accounts that the United States is the main topic of discussion. Also, all of the accounts mention China, which is to be expected, but 3 out of 5 accounts, unexpectedly for the field of traditional diplomacy, mention Xinjiang, a controversial topic in the international scene. Also, the accounts mention Covid and Taiwan frequently.

An interesting insight is the engagement of the accounts in non-typical conversations, which are not specific to the practice of traditional diplomacy. For example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs account brings up Nancy Pelosi, who caused a big international debate, and an internal one within China, with her recent visit to Taiwan. China's reaction is harsh, accusing the US of waging wars in Arab countries and that these are the real problems internationally.

At the same time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs account frequently addresses the US, one of the examples being its most redistributed message on Twitter, with negative connotation and controversial accusations. Other affirmations as such are also brought up by Hua Chunying, who publicly condemned the US-Taiwan alliance. Moreover, her most redistributed message is ironic towards the US and refers to crimes committed in the name of democracy.

Furthermore, Lijian Zhao, the first wolf warrior, known for his controversial talks and reinventing the concept of Chinese digital diplomacy, does not overlook the actions of the US - referring to them, he has a tough and direct speech to the challenges and mistakes of the West. Zhang Heqing also brings accusations against the US, its domestic policy and internal problems, most likely in response to the controversies about the internal situation in Xinjiang. Cao Yi, who completed his diplomatic mission in Lebanon recently, also brought up the situation in Taiwan, reaching out to the whole world.

Correspondingly, the use of labels indicates an intention by China to influence the conversation with the open public. Of the total hashtags used by China-approved Twitter accounts, we note that an impressive number were allocated to Covid-19, US, Xinjiang, Taiwan, and China itself.

5. Conclusions and limits

Overall, China's Twitter communication remains controlled and succinct. Regarding the official Chinese-approved accounts, it is interesting how they have a greater preference for retweeting messages over posting new messages. Moreover, engagement in conversations on Twitter remains quite low – not because Chinese representatives do not want (ex. Lijian Zhao), but because other parties involved are reluctant to respond.

In addition, the sources of the redistributed messages originate from Chinese media posts, obviously referring to media companies approved by the Chinese government. Interestingly, this preference for redistributing media messages as opposed to a dialogue initiated by the government / embassy staff themselves, indicates a preference for maintaining the "core" message or the narrative and continuing the mission to promote Chinese media. We can provide the example of the short Twitter exchange between Zhou Lijian and Susan Rice that may offer an explanation for the reluctance to engage in further discussions with the West. Based on our systematic study of Chinese Twitter accounts, other diplomats from China prefer an approach opposite to that of the "warrior wolf", one devoid of "extreme" or controversial ideas – as we noticed the cases of Cui Tiankai or Fu Ying (Chinese diplomats that have a low-key pacifist approach).

Moreover, this article found that China is focused on the engagement with the foreign public on the Twitter platform, to the point of gaining popularity, and this has very much evolved in a span of 3-4 years. It is expected that in the following years, these numbers will grow, and more opportunities for research will arise. With this being said, “China’s story” is well-told by the very best of its officials, reinventing in a very interesting way the traditional practices of diplomacy, in the era of digitalization.

However, the term “wolf warrior” diplomacy has a negative connotation because of its association with more aggressive approaches used in the past. At the moment, China encourages a rather assertive approach, without the use of aggressiveness, by promoting and defending the national interests. On the long term, China has assessed the negative impact of how this strategy has been used and took the measures necessary in order to counter the exacerbation of tensions between states. Moreover, the last years have shown a decrease of aggressiveness in China’s strategy and an increase in its engagement rate on Twitter.

It is worth noting that by toning down this aggressive tone used on Twitter, often associated with the *wolf warrior* diplomacy, China has acknowledged this rhetoric as inappropriate and prevented the country from reaching its foreign policy goals. To conclude, the wolf warrior strategy represents an important feature in China’s diplomatic strategy, and it will likely continue to play an important role in its international discourse.

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