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PhD Thesis Booklet

The effects of Web 2.0 online platforms on diplomatic activities

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1. Research background, topic selection, and research gap

In the early decades of the twenty-first century, diplomacy has quietly undergone one of the most profound transformations in its long institutional history. Not through formal treaties or great organisational reforms, but through the everyday digital practices of its practitioners.

The rapid global spread of Web 2.0 online platforms has fundamentally reshaped the ways diplomatic actors communicate, gather information, coordinate tasks, and engage with both domestic and international audiences. While the diplomatic profession has historically been characterised by confidentiality, hierarchical communication structures, and carefully managed public visibility, the emergence of interactive online tools has introduced new expectations of immediacy, openness, and responsiveness. These changes have gradually affected not only public diplomacy and strategic messaging, but also the internal routines and operational logics of diplomatic work.

The topic of this dissertation was selected in response to this evolving professional and scholarly landscape. Over recent years, digital diplomacy has become an increasingly visible field within international relations research. A growing number of studies have examined the communicative dimensions of diplomats' online presence, including social media strategies, public engagement practices, and the use of digital tools in foreign policy signalling. However, these contributions often focus on specific segments of diplomatic activity, treating communication-related developments in relative isolation from other professional domains.

In practice, diplomatic work consists of a broad spectrum of interconnected tasks. The everyday performance of these activities forms the operational backbone of diplomatic institutions. Yet the ways in which Web 2.0 technologies have influenced these less visible, routine dimensions of diplomatic practice remain insufficiently explored in existing scholarship. Addressing this imbalance provided a key motivation for undertaking the present research.

Another important background factor concerns the empirical perspective from which digital transformation in diplomacy has been analysed. Much of the literature relies on externally observable indicators such as online communication outputs, audience reach, public perception, or high-level foreign policy manifestations of online diplomacy. Although these aspects are undoubtedly relevant, they do not fully capture how diplomats themselves experience and interpret the structural and cultural implications of digitalisation in their daily professional environments. Insight into practitioners' perceptions, including their assessments of opportunities,

risks, and adaptive strategies, remains comparatively limited, despite its importance for understanding institutional change from within.

Furthermore: existing studies, empirical or theoretical alike, often display a geographical concentration on Western diplomatic ideas, systems, examples, particularly those of North America and Western Europe. Such a focus risks implicitly universalising conclusions, while overlooking potential variations in region-specific practices, organisational solutions, or digital adaptation across different cultural contexts. In response to this gap in representation in balanced data, the dissertation adopts a deliberately global research design that seeks to incorporate diverse diplomatic perspectives and professional experiences.

The scholarly debate on digital diplomacy has also occasionally been shaped by implicit normative assumptions. In certain strands of the literature, increased digitalisation is portrayed as necessarily generating greater transparency or effectiveness in diplomatic practice. While these expectations may reflect observable tendencies, they require careful empirical examination, especially with regard to unintended consequences such as heightened risk exposure, information overload, or evolving accountability pressures. A balanced analytical framework, therefore, necessitates systematic attention to both enabling and constraining effects of Web 2.0 technologies.

Against this backdrop, the central aim of the dissertation is to provide a comprehensive and integrative examination of how interactive online tools have transformed diplomatic activities across multiple professional dimensions. Combining geographically representative data collection with a grounded, practitioner-oriented analytical approach, the research seeks to bridge existing gaps between theoretical concepts and the lived realities of diplomatic work. In doing so, it aspires to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of digital transformation in diplomacy, recognizing the complexity, multidimensionality, and ongoing evolution of this process within contemporary international relations.

Through this broader perspective, the study positions itself within the emerging field of digital diplomacy research, simultaneously extending its analytical scope beyond the easily visible communicative practices. By incorporating routine operational activities and practitioner insights, it aims to strengthen the empirical foundations of the field and to offer a more holistic account of the ways in which Web 2.0 platforms continue to reshape diplomatic practice worldwide.

2. Research question and the main theses of the dissertation

Having identified the research gap and the goal of a comprehensive analytical approach, the dissertation is structured around one overarching research question designed to capture the multidimensional character of digital transformation in diplomacy:

In what ways and to what depths have Web 2.0 online tools transformed diplomatic activities?

The deliberately broad formulation of this question reflects the complex and interconnected nature of the examined phenomenon. Changes induced by interactive online platforms do not only affect a single functional area of diplomacy, but rather reshape multiple layers of professional practice simultaneously. In order to examine this transformation in a systematic manner, the dissertation proposes three main theses, each addressing a key dimension of change.

The first thesis argues that Web 2.0 tools have generated a fundamental transformation in the form and content of diplomatic activities. On the one hand, the form of diplomatic work has been reshaped by instantaneous communication, the expansion of interaction channels, and the increasing integration of digital information flows into everyday professional routines. On the other hand, these changes have also influenced the substantive content of diplomatic practice, affecting everyday and strategic activities alike, modifying the relative importance of different diplomatic tasks.

The second thesis focuses on the evolution of transparency and accountability, courtesy of the digital diplomatic environment. The rise of social media platforms and other interactive online tools has contributed to a higher level of public visibility of diplomatic activities, thereby increasing expectations regarding openness and accessibility. At the same time, this enhanced transparency has been accompanied by growing accountability pressures, both externally from public audiences and internally within institutional hierarchies. The dissertation therefore examines how diplomats perceive and manage this dual dynamic, which simultaneously expands opportunities for engagement and imposes new constraints on professional conduct.

The third thesis addresses the transformation of the risk environment of diplomatic practice. The use of Web 2.0 platforms has introduced new categories of professional risks, including reputational vulnerabilities, information security challenges, exposure to misinformation dynamics, and the potential for unintended escalation of diplomatic tensions in fast-moving online communication contexts. These risks coexist with the operational advantages provided by

digital tools, creating a complex landscape in which diplomats must continuously balance efficiency, visibility, and strategic caution.

Together, these three theses provide an integrative framework for analysing the broader impact of Web 2.0 tools on contemporary diplomacy. By examining changes in form and content, transparency and accountability, and the evolving spectrum of risks, the dissertation seeks to offer a structured yet holistic account of how this era of digitalisation reshaped diplomatic activities across institutional levels and thematic branches; both in external output and internal mechanisms.

3. Methodology

To examine the multidimensional transformation of diplomatic activities driven by Web 2.0 technologies, the dissertation applies a qualitative research design following the principles of grounded theory. This methodological choice reflects the exploratory nature of the research question and the need to capture diplomats' own interpretations of digitally induced professional change. Rather than testing predefined causal relationships, the research seeks to identify emerging patterns of transformation through systematic engagement with empirical material.

The primary data collection method of the research consists of semi-structured expert interviews conducted with practicing diplomats and representatives of related international institutions. This approach provided the balance between analytical focus and interpretive openness. Interview guides were designed to explore participants' experiences across all major dimensions of the research question. The flexible structure of the interviews allowed the research process to remain responsive to newly emerging themes, in line with the iterative logic of grounded theory.

Participant selection followed a principle of deliberate proportionality combined with elements of theoretical sampling. The aim was not statistical representativity, but the inclusion of diverse diplomatic perspectives reflecting variation in geographical region, institutional background, rank, and a wide range of diplomatic responsibilities. As successive interview rounds progressed, the composition of the sample was adjusted to address analytical gaps or to strengthen conceptual saturation. The process continued until no substantially new themes emerged, indicating that an adequate level of theoretical saturation had been reached.

In addition to interview-based primary data collection, the research incorporated the examination of diplomats' online presence and institutional communication practices across major Web 2.0 platforms. The analysis of official social media profiles and related digital outputs provided empirical illustrations and contextual validation for themes identified in the interviews. This complementary approach enabled the triangulation of practitioner narratives with observable communication patterns, thereby enhancing the analytical validity of the findings.

A further important component of the methodology was an extensive review of secondary literature in the fields of digital diplomacy and international relations, complemented by literature in communication studies and technology through the lens of social sciences. Existing theoretical and empirical contributions were used both to contextualise emerging insights and to cross-reference interview-based interpretations. This added triangulation strategy helped in mitigating potential researcher bias and strengthened the credibility of the analytical conclusions.

Throughout the research process, particular attention was paid to methodological transparency. All interview participants were informed about the academic purpose of the study and participated under conditions of anonymity. Data were coded and analysed through an iterative process involving gradual coding stages, allowing empirical observations to be progressively integrated into the final framework. Where applicable, the intersubjective nature of the findings was discussed to allow for future peer scrutiny.

Overall, the adopted methodological approach enabled the dissertation to capture the complex, practice-oriented nature of digital transformation in diplomacy. Combining grounded theory-based interviewing, examination of online diplomatic activity, and literature analysis, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of how Web 2.0 technologies reshaped contemporary diplomatic work.

4. Findings and conclusions of the research

The research confirms that the spread of Web 2.0 online platforms in the diplomatic realm has led to a systemic transformation of diplomatic activities, affecting not only highly visible communication practices, but (among a long list of further aspects) also the deeper operational structures and professional norms of diplomatic work. These changes are neither uniform nor linear; rather, they unfold as an uneven process of institutional adaptation, in which process increased efficiency, outreach, and information access coexist with new constraints, vulnerabilities, and burdens.

At the most general level, the findings suggest that digitalisation has contributed to a gradual reconfiguration of the diplomatic profession itself. Diplomats increasingly operate in an environment characterised by accelerated information flows, and heightened demands for responsiveness, both from superiors and public audiences. As a result, the traditional image of diplomacy as a predominantly discreet and isolated set of activities is being complemented by new patterns of visibility, connectivity, and real-time interaction. Nevertheless, this transformation does not imply the disappearance of classical diplomatic functions; instead, traditional and modern live on side by side as complementary tools to be utilized depending on the task at hand.

Examining the empirical material through the lens of the first main thesis, the research demonstrates that Web 2.0 tools have significantly reshaped both the form and the content of diplomatic activities. In terms of form, everyday professional routines have become more networked and time-sensitive. Communication cycles have shortened, and the boundaries between internal coordination and external representation have become increasingly blurred. In outgoing messaging, new genres infiltrated the previously rigid repertoire, and a new, casual diplomatic style overtook the previously strictly formal communications.

In parallel, substantive changes have also occurred in the content of diplomatic work. Digital awareness now play a growing role in choosing objectives, projects, and topics, altering the substance of what diplomatic work used to mean. Certain sub-branches of diplomacy bloom, while others fade away. Enhanced access to open-source information and the constant availability of online updates have expanded diplomats' analytical capacities, but it has also increased their workload and the need for speed in execution. These developments have contributed to a gradual blurring of traditional functional distinctions within diplomatic practice, reinforcing the multidisciplinary character of modern diplomatic roles.

The second thesis concerning the evolution of transparency and accountability is also strongly supported by the findings. Interview participants widely acknowledged that the spread of social media and other interactive online tools has led to a noticeable increase in the transparency of diplomatic activities. From the “need to know” imperative, diplomacy has been shifting towards the “share, share, share” imperative. This enhanced transparency has naturally improved the public understanding of diplomatic work and created new opportunities for engagement with diverse audiences. However, a key conclusion of the research is that while Web 2.0 tools have substantially increased the transparency of routine, low-impact diplomatic activities, they have not produced a comparable opening regarding high-impact, politically contested issues, where discretion and confidentiality continue to prevail as defining features of diplomatic practice.

From the angle of accountability, increased openness has been accompanied by rising expectations regarding consistency, credibility, and responsiveness. Diplomatic actors now face heightened scrutiny not only from political leadership and institutional hierarchies, but also from media actors and digitally empowered publics. This dynamic has also reshaped professional strategies and decision-making processes, requiring diplomats to continuously balance the benefits of visibility with the necessity of maintaining strategic discretion.

The findings related to the third thesis highlight the transformation of the risk environment in which diplomacy is now conducted. Web 2.0 platforms introduced new forms of professional exposure, including reputational risks associated with rapid online reactions, potential amplification of misinterpretations or communication errors, and, certainly, vulnerabilities linked to information security and disinformation dynamics. The immediacy of digital communication can accelerate the escalation of diplomatic tensions, while the permanence and global accessibility of online content increase the long-term implications of seemingly minor professional missteps.

Taken together, the conclusions of the dissertation underline that the impact of Web 2.0 technologies on diplomacy should be understood as an interconnected and evolving process. Changes in the format of diplomatic interaction often generate corresponding shifts in the content of professional activities, while increased transparency tends to be accompanied by heightened accountability pressures and evolving risk perceptions. These interdependencies suggest that digital transformation in diplomacy cannot be adequately captured through single-focus explanations, but requires integrative frameworks capable of addressing overlapping institutional and behavioural dynamics.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings contribute to ongoing debates within international relations and diplomatic studies by categorizing empirical practitioner experiences and grounded

interpretations. They offer foundational material to multiple schools of thought. The conclusions support constructivist ideas by presenting insights into how institutional practices and professional identities are continuously reshaped through interaction between actors in evolving communicative structures. From a realist perspective, the findings illustrate how digital platforms have become additional arenas of power projection, signalling, and reputational competition among states, while also generating new vulnerabilities in the strategic environment. From a liberal angle, the results highlight the strengthening of networked interaction patterns and the growing embeddedness of diplomatic actors within broader transnational communication structures that increase expectations of openness, responsiveness, and multilevel engagement.

Overall, presenting this comprehensive album of changes, the dissertation shows that Web 2.0-driven transformation represents neither a purely technological adjustment nor a “one-cut” major shift, but rather a deep, gradual, paradigmatic redefinition of diplomatic practice shaped by the ever-ongoing interaction between tradition and innovation. This understanding provides a foundation for future academic research and offers practical relevance for diplomatic institutions seeking to address the challenges and opportunities of the irreversibly digitalizing international environment.

These conclusions highlight that the digitally driven transformation of diplomatic activities unfolds as a cumulative and self-reinforcing process, in which the changes in professional form, substantive content, expectations of transparency and accountability, and risk perceptions continuously interact. Naturally, the story of digital diplomacy is still accelerating, shaped by the everyday choices of practitioners navigating between inherited traditions and the unavoidably evolving technological environment. As diplomacy continues its shift from the quiet corridors of confidentiality towards the dynamic platforms of online interaction, its future will be determined not only by technological innovation, but by how practitioners reconcile enduring strategic traditions with the irreversible logic of global connectivity.

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