

The Challenges of Digital Diplomacy in the Era of Globalization: The Case of the United Arab Emirates

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The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has embraced digital diplomacy as a part of its foreign relations strategy. Thus, this research uses case study methodology via in-depth interviews with Emirati officials and scholars and UAE-based foreign policy academics and practitioners to investigate the challenges associated with UAE digital diplomacy. Although the UAE has embraced globalization and its associated digital tools in furtherance of its foreign policy, it is plagued by deglobalization challenges that threaten the full benefits of digital diplomacy. Institutionally, this includes the following: obstacles presented by state security and state censorship, media regulations, organizational culture, personnel challenges, and linguistic challenges. Structurally, the UAE also faces challenges such as negative regional perception, difficulty in audience identification and targeting, keeping up with a fast-paced global media environment, fake news from hostile sources, usage by nonstate actors, a culture of anonymity, risk of cyberattacks, and technical and digital divides. Finding the right balance between digital empowerment and regulating the digital realm to address legitimate national security concerns will ultimately determine the success or failure of UAE's digital diplomacy.

Keywords: United Arab Emirates, digital diplomacy, public diplomacy, globalization, deglobalization, social media, twitter, Abraham Accord

This research seeks to find out the challenges associated with UAE's use of digital diplomacy because, despite the country's increasing reliance on digital diplomacy tools, little research has been done about the challenges it faces. Although research in the field of digital diplomacy has blossomed over the last two decades with diverse cases "ranging from Canada to Chile, Ethiopia India, Iran, Israel, Kenya, Korea, Palestine, Peru, Russia and more" (Manor, n.d., para. 2), notably absent are cases studies from the Arab/Middle East, a perennial conflict and diplomatic hotbed that offers an untapped laboratory for the exploration of how digital diplomacy is shaping diplomacy and conflict resolution. In addition, most of the research on the impact of new media and social media on politics and society in the Arab/Middle East are disproportionately focused on how they are used to challenge state authority (i.e., Arab Spring and how terrorist groups use it to spread their ideologies or to mobilize against regimes). Thus, the UAE case is studied because it has defied the aforementioned research treatment and enriches the literature with yet another case from an underexplored region of the world. The UAE case shows how a country can embrace

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globalization via the use of digital tools for public diplomacy and the attendant deglobalization challenges. This research argues that in this era of globalization, the key to the realization of the full potential of digital diplomacy is finding the right balance between empowering more diplomats, citizens, and residents in the utilization of digital tools and minimizing the excesses of digital tools inimical to national security.

After this section, the study is organized as follows: a theoretical discussion of the competing currents of globalization and deglobalization, methodology, a discussion of the challenges facing the UAE's digital diplomacy, and the conclusion.

Globalization and Deglobalization Currents

Manor posits that the proliferation of information technology has created a "global media ecology" marked by the continuous transmission of information within and between networks of individuals and inhibited by space and time of national boundaries (Manor, 2019, p. 9). However, this new "global media ecology" is challenging traditional diplomacy in the following ways: First, diplomats and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFAs) have lost their monopoly over diplomatic communication, as nonstate actors have also been empowered by digital tools (Pamment, 2012). Second, nonstate actors serving as new public-diplomacy actors have transformed the digital arena into a competitive arena whereby multiple actors are competing for the attention of the digital audience while trying to influence them as well (Manor, 2016). Third, the global media ecology has fragmented public diplomacy audiences into "networks of selective media exposure" (Hayden, 2012, p. 3).

The UAE government has successfully incorporated new information and communication technology platforms into its public diplomacy agenda. According to Ilukhina (2019), the UAE has two major digital diplomacy objectives. The first objective is to both digitize administrative services to provide more efficient public services and project an image of the UAE as the most digitally advanced country in the Middle East. The second objective is to use online digital tools to promote the soft power of the UAE.

In pursuance of these objectives, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai Sheikh Mohammad Bin Rashid Al Maktoum launched the UAE Soft Power Council in April 2017. The council is tasked with developing and executing a comprehensive soft-power strategy to uphold the country's values of respect and tolerance and to promote the country's achievements internationally. This soft power strategy is to be implemented using modern information and communication technology platforms with the involvement of both domestic and international audiences (Gulf News Online, 2017).

In furtherance of UAE's soft power strategy, the government launched the "Cultural and Digital Diplomacy" initiative in March 2018 with the aim of promoting:

The most significant Emirati stories of success and creativity besides the country's cultural and historical landmarks and achievements. It covers areas of audiovisual arts, performance arts, music and architecture. It will also shed light on some Emirati prominent personalities who have made significant contributions to the country in the political, cultural, economic, sports as well as social domains. (Emirates News Agency, 2018, para. 2)

The UAE's digital diplomacy initiative has evolved out of the government's e-governance model, which seeks to digitize public services as part of an overall government vision for providing completely comprehensive e-government services. Ilukhina (2019) asserts that all government institutions in the UAE have a robust online presence in the form of official websites and digital platforms, such as smartphone applications offering fast and convenient administrative services. In recognition of the UAE's success in digitizing government services, the Swiss International Institute for Management and Development (IDM) ranked the UAE first in the middle and 14th globally in its 2020 World Digital Competitiveness rankings (IMD World Digital Competitiveness Ranking, 2020).

The success of the UAE's digital diplomacy strategy has been supported by the robust online presence of esteemed Emirati government officials, including Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai Sheikh Maktoum. Indeed, Sheikh Maktoum has 9.8 million followers on Twitter, making him the most followed Arab leader and the 11th most followed world leader. In addition, UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdallah is one of the most followed foreign ministers in the world on Twitter, with 4.5 million followers. The popularity of UAE leaders on social media enables the country to project an attractive national image to the world (Ilukhina, 2019).

Cyrill and Pasha (2019) posit that the political, social, and economic spheres of the UAE have been greatly impacted by the adoption of a wide range of social media platforms belonging to the Web 2.0 environment, such as blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, Snapchat, and Instagram. By utilizing these tools, UAE government agencies can promote their agendas, engage citizens, and receive feedback while also shaping public opinion and the course of world events.

Furthermore, the UAE has actively employed the tools of digital diplomacy to achieve its public diplomacy goals. For example, the UAE uses digital tools for national branding and political advocacy. Cyrill and Pasha (2019) define national branding as "how a government tries to improve its image without seeking particular support for any immediate policy objective" (p. 90). In this regard, digital tools have been deployed to promote "Brand Dubai" and project the UAE as a progressive and desirable destination for tourism, business, and innovation. To attract visitors to the country, digital tools are used to popularize certain landmarks and events as iconic symbols of the UAE, such as the Burj Khalifa skyscraper, the Global Village, and the Dubai Property Show. As these examples demonstrate, digital diplomacy serves to enhance the soft power capabilities of the UAE (Cyrill & Pasha, 2019).

According to Cyrill and Pasha (2019), the UAE's digital diplomacy strategy for promoting national interests has been "designed to achieve specific and immediate policy objectives, unlike the long-term perception management of 'branding' strategies" (p. 90). Following the Arab Spring uprisings in early 2010s, the UAE was quick to use digital tools to engage citizens and ensure stability. Moreover, the UAE's leadership has used digital diplomacy tools to convince the public of the legitimacy of its position in a diplomatic row with Qatar (Cyrill & Pasha, 2019).

In recent years, the UAE's digital diplomacy strategy has been orientated toward safeguarding the country's strategic and economic interests and protecting the country from geopolitical instability, such as the destabilizing effects of the social media-fueled Arab Spring, Iran's activities in the region, and the diplomatic row with Qatar (Cyrill & Pasha, 2019). Increasingly, the UAE uses digital tools such as Twitter for crisis

communication and for announcing major diplomatic initiatives. For example, the UAE announced its 2017 boycott of Qatar and the justification for it over Twitter. It also continued to aggressively advocate its stand on the conflict to both domestic and international audiences via Twitter through the accounts of its Minister of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and MoFA. According to Al-Mansouri, Al-Mohannad, and Feroun (2021), both the UAE's MFA and MoFA tweeted a total of 661 times during the first 100 days of the boycott by mostly focusing on retweets centered on Qatar and terrorism-related stories. In addition, UAE's effective use of digital diplomacy was on display when the country signed the historic peace agreement with Israel under the Abraham Accord in the fall of 2020 that led to the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Images of UAE leaders openly meeting with their Israeli counterparts and signing the peace agreement at the White House was posted on the UAE's MoFA social media pages and that of the foreign minister's and other high-ranking UAE government officials. Before the signing and announcement of the agreement, high-ranking UAE officials and their Israeli counterparts followed each other on Twitter and teased the normalization of relations in a form of signaling aimed at preparing the minds of their respective citizens.

There is a growing concern among diplomats and countries that the promise of social media as an interactive platform for engagement is fading into a tool of mass deception. This concern is rooted in the increasing weaponization of social media platforms by state actors in a bid to sway public opinion and interfere in the democratic processes of foreign countries. This is achieved via the spreading of misinformation, misrepresentation of public information, and sowing public discord via emotionally charged propaganda such as the Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. elections, Brexit elections in 2016, and the 2017 German elections (Manor, 2019).

Another issue of concern for diplomats is the worry that social media, backed by algorithmic filtering, is undermining diverse interactions and discourse online and instead, promoting hyper-partisanship, political polarization, and extreme online views. Thus, an inflamed audience is less likely to interact or dialogue with diplomats, thereby undermining the building of relationships. In addition, pervasive disinformation undermines reality and truth and reduces the credibility of diplomatic institutions that suffer collateral damage from increasing public mistrust. Furthermore, media houses that willfully misinform the public undermine the democratic credentials of the media as the fourth estate. This puts diplomats in the uncomfortable situation of having to play media judges for the public by telling them which media outlets are credible and which ones are not. The emergence of digital echo chambers made up of same-minded people consuming the same misinformation makes it digitally impossible for diplomats to interact with the online public and threatens the practice of diplomacy (Manor, 2019). In addition, the proliferation of disinformation also poses a daunting financial challenge to many cash-trapped MFAs in their bids to counter fake news, as such information reaches more people, is deeply diffused, and replicates faster than accurate news (Bjola & Pamment, 2018).

Digital diplomacy has been criticized for its overreliance on social media as a tool of influence, for shaping public opinion, and for relegating other digital tools. This is compounded because diplomats tend to be clueless as to why they are using a particular social media tool. For example, while Twitter usage enables diplomats and embassies to react to world events quickly, it also limits their ability to consult their foreign ministries, as Twitter is designed for short, rapid responses (Riordan, 2019).

Moreso, the impact of tweets or posts are debatable as most tweets and posts are not liked or retweeted by recipients. In some cases, the intended purpose of the tweets or posts are not achieved as in the 2014 viral campaign to free the Chibok girls kidnapped by the Boko Haram terrorist group in Nigeria. Rather, the global campaign inadvertently made a once-obscure regional terrorist organization, a global household name without holding them accountable for their horrific crimes (Riordan, 2019).

Riordan (2019) posits a cyberspace and physical space that are interlinked and that requires diplomatic maneuvering for both spaces. Digital technology facilitates the participation of nonstate actors in international events and debates in both the physical space and cyberspace. Darker nonstate actors, such as extremists and terrorists, traverse both spaces and launch harmful attacks on states and their citizens. Of grave concern are cyberattacks launched by darker nonstate elements that are ambiguously linked to state actors. These attacks are difficult to attribute responsibility.

Another challenge of digital diplomacy is the Internet's "culture of anonymity," whereby anyone can adopt any persona, address, or even attack anyone (Yakovenko, 2012, para. 6). In the light of this anonymity, anyone can mimic and pretend to be someone else or actively seek to cause mischief. Interestingly also, sometimes, even digital diplomacy advocates and practitioners also commit blunders in their uses. For example, Carl Bildt, the Swedish Foreign Minister, attracted major online backlash when, on the eve of the 2012 World Economic Forum in Davos, he tweeted as follows: "Leaving Stockholm and heading for Davos. Looking forward to World Food Program dinner tonight. Global hunger is an urgent issue! #davos" (Adesina, 2017, p. 11). The minister's tweet was roundly condemned online as insensitive and politically incorrect, as tweeting about fighting against hunger and craving a sumptuous dinner in the same breath was seen as inappropriate (Adesina, 2017).

There are dangers associated with digital diplomacy, such as information leakage, hacking, and the anonymity of Internet users. A good example of information leakage is the Wikileaks episode. According to Manor (2015a):

On the 28th of November 2010, pandemonium spread among foreign ministries throughout the world as WikiLeaks began publishing some 250,000 diplomatic cables sent between U.S. missions around the world and the State Department in Washington. These cables included frank assessments by U.S. diplomats of world leaders, governments and their host countries. (Manor, 2015b, para. 1)

Hacking is another risk that has existed since the advent of the Internet. A recent example is the case of a hacking attack on the personal website of Yuli Edelstein, Israeli Minister for Public Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs. Commenting on this, the minister said that nothing could stop him from performing public diplomacy on behalf of the State of Israel. He intends to continue to defend the interests of the state on all fronts, including on the Internet (Permyakova, 2012).

Apart from the dangers associated with the use of digital diplomacy, there are also criticisms about its effectiveness. Citing "slacktivism," a term originally coined by Malcom Gladwell to characterize the use of social media in politics, Holmes (2015) argues that it is much easier to join a cause on social media than

to pursue the effective-but-difficult path of policy making to tackle a problem that might be costly (p. 29). In addition, states can also get into trouble with the same ease with which they tweet, produce videos, and disseminate information in response to global events (Holmes, 2015). According to Richard Solomon (2000), president of the United States Institute of Peace and a former U.S. Foreign Service officer, information about breaking international crises that once took hours or days for government officials and media to disseminate is now being relayed in real time to the world, not only via radio and television, but over the Internet as well. He adds that instant dissemination of information about events both far and near is proving to be as much a bane as a bounty.

Alongside the widespread diffusion of Internet technologies across the globe, many countries have embraced digital tools, such as social media, blogs, and websites, to promote a positive image of themselves and pursue foreign policy objectives (Adesina, 2017). Although there are competing definitions of digital diplomacy, scholars agree that the concept originated in the United States. The U.S. Department of State was a pioneer in the field of digital diplomacy, implementing a diplomatic strategy incorporating the use of information technology known as "21st-century statecraft" (Adesina, 2017, p. 8; Verrekia, 2017, p. 15).

As researchers and scholars have provided multiple definitions of digital diplomacy that share both similarities and differences, there is no universally accepted definition of the concept. Adesina (2017) defines digital diplomacy as a form of public diplomacy conducted by states that uses digital technologies and social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Weibo, to inexpensively communicate with the citizens of foreign countries. Similarly, Hanson (2012) defines digital diplomacy as "the use of Internet and new information communications technologies to help carry out diplomatic objectives" (p. 2). However, scholars do agree that digital diplomacy emerged from public diplomacy, which is defined as an "instrument used by states to understand cultures, attitudes, and behavior; build and manage relationships; and influence thoughts and mobilize actions to advance their interests and values" (Melissen, 2013, p. 436). This conceptualization of digital diplomacy fits into the UAE government's goal of cultivating soft power via digital technology by building "strong diplomatic relationships and systems . . . to make the UAE a global example of prestige and excellence" (Arabian Post, n.d., para. 6).

Nevertheless, the UAE's attempt at digital diplomacy faces challenges associated with currents of deglobalization that "consists of a regression in the international flows of trade, services, capital, and people, which is evidenced by 'trade protection, the limitations of movements of people, the regulation of capital flows and the attempts to restrict information access'" (James, 2017, p. 1). In the case of the UAE, while the government has been a willing participant and beneficiary of globalization via trade, increased foreign direct investment, tourism, and immigration, it has been restrictive when it comes to information flow from within and outside its borders, under the guise of national security. The restriction of information inflow and outflow via censorship poses a challenge for the realization of the objectives of public diplomacy via digital diplomacy as it limits individual agency necessary for the success of public diplomacy. Manfredi-Sánchez (2021) warns that, "Without any willingness to cooperate or to identify shared expectations, political hyper- leadership has become a breeding ground for populism and nationalism, both political expressions of deglobalization" (p. 908). Furthermore, states increasingly view international relations as a zero-sum game in an increasingly anarchic world. Hence, states deem it necessary to restrict or marshal international

communication tools toward the defense of their positions on the world stage, preserve political values and maintain the political status quo at home. Deglobalization assumes that such a calibration is necessary because, in an anarchic world, the tools of public diplomacy could be used for harmful purposes if left unchecked (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2021).

Methodology

A combination of primary and secondary source data was used for this research. Utilizing a qualitative research methodology, data was collected through in-depth personal interviews with top UAE foreign policy officials, scholars, UAE-based foreign diplomats, and expatriate academics and foreign policy experts at UAE think tanks and universities.

In the selection of candidates for interviews, the research used the purposive selection mechanism by deliberately targeting specific people because they had the expertise and knowledge to address the questions pertinent to the research. This was further supplemented by the snowball approach, whereby, during the interviewing or data collection stage, interviewees recommended additional qualified interview candidates, thereby enriching the scope of research. The interview questions were semistructured to narrow the focus of the research while also allowing for unsolicited and unanticipated responses from interviewees. The interviews were recorded in English and Arabic and were transcribed for further analysis. These interviews constitute elite interviews and presented no possibility of psychological or physical harm to participants. Interviewing elites granted access to otherwise hidden knowledge and experiences related to the field of digital diplomacy.

After, the data were collected from all interviewees and transcribed, the responses were thematically coded to classify common themes and patterns emanating from the interviewee responses. The codes used were ascribed using a deductive approach based on the familiarity of the literature and anticipated responses, while also making room for new recurring themes that may be unique to the UAE case.

Moreover, some diplomats and top-level officials were hesitant to share their experiences, possibly because of workplace confidentiality rules, security concerns, or ethical considerations. Academics were hesitant to share their thoughts on diplomacy to safeguard the exclusivity of their research projects. Finally, some interviewees questioned the intentions of the researchers and were concerned about how their statements would be interpreted or represented in the analysis and conclusions of this research study. Therefore, to alleviate these concerns, before each interview began, interviewees were assured that they would be given access to a full transcript of their interviews and that their responses would remain anonymous, as promised in the letter of consent they signed.

In addition, each interviewee was offered the opportunity to sign a consent and confidentiality form before being interviewed and was told that he or she could stop participating at any time during the interview. Participants were also offered the option of having their answers remain anonymous. Interview data was supplemented with primary and secondary data from official UAE government sources, publications from international agencies, and reports from domestic and international media outlets.

Challenges of Digital Diplomacy

The challenges of digital diplomacy are as diffused as the information that digital tools generate and disseminate, a testament to the shrinking shared cyber and physical spaces under which digital diplomacy is conducted. The UAE as an emerging global player is not impervious to some of the major challenges associated with digital diplomacy as reviewed in the literature. It faces the same structural challenges identified in the literature, such as susceptibility to fake news, threats posed by the usage of digital tools by hostile nonstate actors, anonymous usage, cyberattacks, negative regional perceptions, challenges associated with the digital divide, difficulties in identifying and targeting the right audience, and the challenge of keeping up with a fast-paced global media landscape. However, there are unique institutional challenges associated with the UAE case as follows: generational issues, organizational culture, impact of UAE media regulations, personnel and linguistic challenges, and threats to government censorship and state secrets. These challenges constitute deglobalizing factors that undermine the goal of public diplomacy and digital diplomacy, which is to connect and build relationships in a globalized world.

Institutional Challenges

Organizational Culture

The organizational culture of a country's foreign policy establishment significantly impacts its capacity to effectively use digital tools and therefore is central to the successful of digital diplomacy. A conservative and cautious establishment preoccupied with preserving traditions and steeped in secrecy, hierarchy, and collectivism is less amenable to the change and innovation demanded by the adoption of digital diplomacy (Robertson, 2018, p. 681). Despite undergoing a rapid economic transformation, the UAE remains a conservative society that values tradition, status, and hierarchy. This conservatism also extends to government institutions, as government officials—particularly older officials—are often slow to adopt new communication technologies. Indeed, Fletcher points out that the UAE "is a conservative society and anyone doing digital diplomacy has to be conscious of representing a society" (T. Fletcher, personal communication, March 14, 2019).

In addition, the rapid transition to the use of digital tools by MFAs risks creating organizational conflict especially among senior diplomats who may be used to the traditional mode of diplomatic communication and not abreast with the latest communication technology (Bjola, 2018). Although the younger generation of Emirati diplomats may be more abreast with the latest digital diplomacy tool, they have less autonomy to use them because of the organizational culture and hierarchical nature of MFAs. T. Fletcher (2019) points out that in the UAE:

The more senior people or the people who are maybe closer to the leadership can take more risks because they know what the lines are. It's much harder for everyone else to do that. And so I think that holds back some UAE digital diplomacy. (T. Fletcher, personal communication, March 14, 2019)

Generational Issue

In recent years, the younger generation of diplomats have displayed an eagerness to explore the potential of social media and the Internet as a means for communicating with other nations. Traditional diplomats of the older generation, however, have been apprehensive to incorporate new technologies into traditional diplomatic activities. For example, on national holidays, traditional diplomats prefer to attend celebratory receptions. In contrast, younger diplomats may make a social media post congratulating the opposing party on the national holiday. Director General of the Emirates Diplomatic Academy Bernardino León Gross observed that older diplomats such as himself have been trained to work in secrecy. According to traditional orthodoxy, diplomacy is thought to have better chances of succeeding in an atmosphere of secrecy. In contrast, new diplomatic thinking privileges transparency and openness. This shift poses a major challenge to the UAE and the Gulf region, where the older generation of diplomats has yet to be replaced by a younger cohort (B. Gross, personal communication, March 12, 2019). Bjola (2018) warns that further generational rifts could emerge from a digital standpoint if, suddenly, older diplomats are instructed to start communicating in a different format or to use tools that they are not familiar with.

UAE Media Regulations

The UAE has some of the strictest Internet and social media regulations in the world, which are primarily aimed at safeguarding the reputation of the country as well as its leaders, citizens, and institutions. These regulations also seek to prevent hateful and abusive commentary against citizens online. In line with these goals, the UAE has blocked access to most popular video-calling applications, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Skype, only allowing citizens to sign up for video-calling services that can be accessed via state Internet carriers for a fee. While these prohibitions may serve a security goal, they also limit the capacity of ordinary UAE citizens and residents to engage in public diplomacy via digital tools out of fear of crossing legal limits. Buttressing this point, Fletcher (2019) argues that:

People are very cautious. I think that's the main factor because it is a more hierarchical system than most in the world. People are quite worried about making a mistake and so that tends to make them a bit more cautious. And we know that basically effective social media requires people to be a bit brave and I think at the moment, there is culturally a sense of nervousness. (T. Fletcher, personal communication, March 14, 2019)

In response to criticism, the UAE government has allowed access to the free video-calling application ToTok, which has become the most popular free video-calling application in the Middle East and North Africa. However, in 2019, Google and Apple delisted ToTok from their online application stores in response to media reports about its security features, prompting the cofounder of ToTok, Giacoma Ziani, to issue the following statement denying these allegations:

We firmly deny this baseless accusation, and we are profoundly saddened by this complete fabrication that was thrown at us. We feel caught up in some vile conspiracy against the UAE, and even jealousy by some people, who do not wish an app like ours from this region to ever become a global player. (Kumar & Salim, 2019, para. 11).

In addition, requiring Internet users to register with a state agency to use social media could impede the development of influencers who could support the government's digital diplomacy initiatives. As a result, social media tools are overly concentrated in the hands of government officials who may be less acclimatized to the trends and tendencies of the Internet. Similarly, Fletcher (2019) acknowledges that, while the geopolitical difficulties facing the UAE warrant a certain level of social media regulation, social media is more effective when people feel free to express themselves openly (T. Fletcher, personal communication, March 14, 2019).

Personnel Challenges

Because of the inadequate supply of qualified information technology professionals, there is fierce competition among countries to attract highly skilled technology workers. According to a 2020 survey of industry salaries by recruitment firm Robert Half, 82% of businesses in the UAE struggle to recruit top talent for existing positions in high demand sectors, such as information technology (Mansoori, 2019). The private sector offers higher pay to information technology professionals than the public sector, making it difficult for public sector institutions to recruit the highly skilled information technology professionals needed for an effective and sustainable digital diplomacy strategy.

In addition, because of the lack of skilled workers locally, the UAE relies heavily on foreign expertise in the information technology sector, impacting the sustainability of any digital strategy adopted by the government. Furthermore, concerns over confidentiality and national security limit the extent to which a country can rely on expatriate works to oversee government communication strategies. As a result, UAE citizens are under increased pressure to receive training in digital technologies. The government has also felt the need to retrain government officials to realize digital communication goals.

Linguistic Challenges

In addition to innovative communication tools and skilled practitioners, an effective digital diplomacy strategy also requires the soft skills of language specialists capable of crafting effective messages and content in various languages to target diverse audiences. In the UAE, most digital communications concerning foreign policy are predominantly relayed in English and Arabic. According to an examination of the UAE's foreign policy tweets by Cyrill and Pasha (2019), 65.1% of communications were in Arabic and 34.9% were in English. Scholars have warned that failing to use various languages in digital diplomacy communications not only limits engagement with larger audiences but also impedes the ability of UAE diplomats to shape and influence international public opinion (Cyrill & Pasha, 2019).

Al-Muftah, Weerakkody, Rana, Sivarajah, and Irani (2018) stated that "the issue of language plays a significant role in the failure of digital diplomacy approaches. Language barriers may affect the ability of diplomats to communicate with their partners effectively" (p. 507). To better serve its large foreign population, the UAE has developed a multilingual e-government platform as a part of its smart government initiative. According to Lt. Colonel Faisal Mohammed Al Shimmari, the Executive Director of the Ministry of Interior's Smart Government program,

The list of languages now includes German, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Chinese, Hindi, Urdu, Korean, Japanese, Portuguese, Bengali, Indonesian, and Tagalog in addition to the main ones of Arabic and English. The initiative endeavors to bridge the language barrier and facilitate use of the ministry's smart application, regardless of education or cultural background. (Emirates News Agency, 2016, para. 2)

However, this approach has not been extended to the UAE's international diplomatic relations. Thus, Mansoori (2019), Chair of the Department of Media Studies and Creative Industries at the UAE University, argues that in addition to Arabic and English, other languages should be used when crafting messages directed toward an international audience. In addition, he recommends that other digital platforms and media environments be used to reach a larger audience (A. Mansoori, personal communication, February 24, 2019).

Challenges to State Secrets and Censorship

The open and egalitarian nature of social media makes it difficult for states to protect secrets and censor information deemed harmful to state security. This poses a major challenge to traditional diplomacy and foreign relations, which demand secrecy and control over information. For example, immediately following the UAE's boycott of Qatar in 2016, the country also barred the Qatari-owned news station Al-Jazeera from broadcasting in the UAE out of concerns that the media network was biased in its coverage of the UAE. Consequently, Etisalat, the UAE's major Internet carrier, blocked Al-Jazeera's news website and delisted it from its domestic TV channels. While this drastically reduced the viewership of the Al-Jazeera news network in the short term, this ban is likely not sustainable long term, as UAE residents can easily use digital tools to circumvent government censorship. In addition, the media content of banned websites such as Al-Jazeera can be viewed on other media platforms through reposts and shared content. Furthermore, the UAE is not the only country that uses censorship in the name of national security and must also contend with the censorship of other countries for digital diplomacy. Using China as an example, the head of the Emirates News Agency, Al Raysi (2019) pointed out that:

Today, they don't use Twitter, they don't use Facebook or anything, you know, they have their own network, they have their own social media so we have to be part of this. And they are billions of people there. (A. Raysi, personal communication, March 13, 2019)

Structural Challenges

Negative Regional Perception

Political turmoil at home could imperil a country's capacity to effectively use digital diplomacy. Buttressing this point, Al-Muftah and colleagues (2018) have observed as follows:

Political factors may impede the implementation of a digital approach in diplomacy. Political instability may make it more difficult for diplomats to carry out their responsibilities. In some cases, political instability necessitates restrictions of the use of digital measures, increasing reliance on traditional measures. (p. 507)

Although the UAE attempts to leverage its digital diplomacy to promote itself as a tolerant and welcoming Islamic country, this goal is hampered by the widely held negative perception of the Middle East as a violent and war-prone region. Fletcher (2019) argues that the obstacles hindering the promotion of tolerance by the UAE through digital diplomacy are external rather than internal. Indeed, he defines this external obstacle as "the perception of the region, particularly some of the neighbors here," who make "it harder for the UAE to set out as an independent view of the world" (T. Fletcher, personal communication, March 14, 2019). Indeed, many social media users outside of the Middle East have negative views of the region as being conflict-ridden and intolerant, and they judge the UAE based on these same assumptions. Such negative perceptions make it difficult for the UAE to successfully promote positive messages of tolerance.

Problems Identifying and Targeting an Audience

Current diplomats also face the challenge of properly targeting audiences. It is imperative that diplomats understand who they are targeting, what messages to send, and when to promote a certain message. Countries must avoid across-the-board approaches and instead conduct market research to identify what media tools are best for targeting each country, what messages to deliver, and which audience to target. Fletcher (2019) states that "any diplomat who's using social media is partly trying to influence abroad and partly at home. I think a lot of the UAE's communication work is about talking to Emiratis, when it should be talking to the world" (T. Fletcher, personal communication, March 14, 2019).

Fletcher (2019) also stresses that content is central to effective digital diplomacy and commends the contents of the Twitter posts of the UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, by making the following observation:

Look at the content of Dr Anwar tweets. It's very strong and kind of sophisticated messaging. I think there is a need for a script so that senior diplomats or junior diplomats can use, which can have core messages on Louvre or Special Olympics or the F1 or the rights of women which can be delivered to other nations when mentioning UAE in certain topics. (T. Fletcher, personal communication, March 14, 2019)

The Fast-Paced Global Media Environment

In the current fast-paced global media environment, the UAE remains vulnerable to the growing phenomenon of fake news propagated for political purposes by adversarial actors, organizations, and states. According to Reuter, Hartwig, Kirchner, and Schlegel (2019), fake news traditionally referred to satirical news shows; however, perceptions have changed in recent times, as fake news often now becomes viral and can affect international politics and influence public opinions on a large scale.

Although most fake news is deliberate misinformation, some fake news is generated as consequence of today's fast-paced media environment. Al Raysi stated:

The challenges will be the raw material when we have the information provided very quickly, whereas gathering information at the right time in a fast way is recommended especially, now that people want the action to be there within seconds. (A. Raysi, personal communication, March 13, 2019)

Fake News from Hostile Sources

The proliferation of digital tools such as social media has caused a crisis of trust in information on the Internet. According to Dina Matar, a media scholar at the School of Oriental and African Studies, the media is "not only a political battle, it's also a media battle. We have a huge problem in the Arab world just as you do in the West. Fake news is everywhere" (Pinnell, 2018, para. 29). Indeed, the Dubai Police, in cooperation with the UAE's telecommunication regulatory body, have blocked 5,000 fake social media accounts since 2017 to combat fake news (Library of Congress, 2020). In addition, to remove false or harmful content, countries must appeal directly to social media companies such as Facebook and Twitter. In many cases, considerable damage to a country's reputation can take place before the harmful content can be removed.

For countries to address the difficulties they face in dealing with fake news spread by hostile entities, Former Canadian diplomat Drayl Copeland stressed the need for states to develop robust and rapid-response mechanisms to counter malicious social media disinformation. For example, the Indonesian model of developing a crisis response center to anticipate and counteract malicious content on the Internet is worthy of emulation (D. Copeland, personal communication, February 27, 2019). The Director of the Emirates News Agency, Al Raysi, has also stated that the "UAE has to be proactive when it comes to fake news because of some individuals/countries that are working against the UAE in different parts of the world" (A. Raysi, personal communication, March 13, 2019).

Usage by Nonstate Actors

New digital communication technologies also have the potential to be appropriated by extremist groups and other nonstate actors to manipulate the opinions of the public. The Internet has proven to be an effective platform for violent extremists to recruit individuals and spread violent ideologies (Rashica, 2018). ISIS and the Houthis, terrorist groups in conflict with the UAE, have online presences and operate several social media accounts to advance their terrorist agenda. These groups even attempt to recruit young children by infiltrating online video games and chat applications. They also use platforms such as YouTube and Instagram to glorify their barbaric acts of terror. Hence, the activities of these nonstate actors remain a concern for states such as the UAE that feel threatened by their digital reach.

The Culture of Anonymity

Another major challenge for digital diplomacy is the ability for anonymous users to assume fake identities with the goal of injuring the reputations of individuals, states, and organizations. The abuse of online anonymity and the creation of fake narratives can trigger diplomatic disagreements as well as hamper the ability of world leaders to manage crises when they emerge. Indeed, the relentless assault of malicious statements by anonymous online users forces states to be preoccupied with preventing and removing such content and reassuring audiences (Rashica, 2018). Indeed, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has become a target of anonymous cyberattacks. This is both a result of the wealth of the council and a consequence of rising tensions in the region, such as the boycott of Qatar by the UAE and unfriendly actions by Iran. According to a Microsoft security report, the GCC is an attractive target for cyber criminals using “botnets,” a tool that enables hackers to remotely seize control of the devices of unsuspecting victims (Debusmman, 2018). The report further indicated that bot attacks on the GCC constitute nearly 11.4% of all bot attacks in the Middle East, with the Saudi capital of Riyadh accounting for 43.1% of bot attacks in the region and Dubai accounting for 24.7% of bots’ attacks, making it the second most bot-infected city in the GCC (Debusmman, 2018). The UAE is particularly vulnerable to anonymous cybercrimes because it has positioned itself as the commercial hub of the Middle East, making it an attractive target for financially motivated criminal groups. In addition, the UAE’s adoption of an assertive regional foreign policy strategy in reaction to mounting geopolitical threats has also made it a prime cyber target for competing regional powers and actors.

The Risk of Cyber Attacks

The increased use of digital tools by world leaders and diplomats has exposed them to cyberattacks. These threats come not only from traditional state adversaries but also from nonstate actors who seek to paralyze government communication systems and steal sensitive information to further their own interests (Rashica, 2018, p. 85). The UAE remains a major target of hackers. Indeed, according to a report by the cyber security and compliance firm Proofpoint, 82% of organizations in the UAE reported being attacked in 2019, with 51% reported multiple incidents (Mansour, 2020). In a major breach of diplomatic communications, the e-mail account of the UAE Ambassador to the United States Yousef Al-Otaiba was hacked, and sensitive information about the country’s foreign policy stance toward Qatar was shared with Qatari and American media outlets at the beginning of the conflict with Qatar. Indeed, many observers believe that “Qatari media outlets employed these hacked e-mails to publish reports that aim to harm relations between Saudi Arabia and the UAE” (Al Arabiyya English, 2017, para. 8).

According to Dr. Mansoori (2019), the Chair of the Department of Media and Creative Industries at UAE University, technological access can be a double-edged sword. He argues that in a situation:

Where everyone has access to technology, it can evolve into security challenges. In the digital world, people can use fake accounts which count as a challenge . . . at the end, the security and hacking is also one of the biggest challenges that face us and we need to take some action. (A. Mansoori, personal communication, February 24, 2019)

The UAE government is aware of cyber threats and has introduced digital security measures with enhanced security features, such as the Emirates Identification and Smart Pass systems, to safeguard the personal data of users. In addition, UAE initiatives such as the e-crime website, the Dubai police website, and the "My Safe Society" application have made it easier to report cybercrimes. The government has implemented some of the harshest punishments in the world for cybercrimes and has deemed cybercrimes to be federal crimes that are liable to federal prosecution (UAE Government Website, 2019).

The Technical and Digital Divide

Technology is rapidly evolving within our competitive global communication environment. Thus, countries must rapidly invest in digital platforms to prevent being left behind. Indeed, a Senior Fellow at the Emirates Diplomatic Academy (EDA) has called for the adoption of advanced network technologies, such as 5G, to increase Internet connectivity speed (N. Janardhan, personal communication, March 3, 2019).

However, in a world of worsening budget austerity, this also has financial implications for ministries in charge of foreign affairs around the world. As the latest technological innovation, 5G wireless technology is being touted as offering the fastest Internet broadband connectivity possible. Whereas countries such as the UAE have invested heavily in the adoption of 5G technology to upgrade their digital infrastructures, many countries on the other side of the digital divide that the UAE engages with are unable to make such investments. The digital divide between the Global North and the Global South also has implications for the digital diplomacy of the UAE about its relations with countries in the Global South. For example, as Alblooshi (2020) writes, "the African continent has the lowest internet penetration rate in comparison to other regions. Africa has a penetration rate of 26.5 per cent as opposed to Europe, which has 70.5 per cent, and North America, 87.7 per cent" (para. 8). Hence, although the UAE has excellent digital infrastructure that surpasses some advanced Western countries, the same cannot be said of countries in the Global South, impeding the UAE's engagement with those countries. To overcome this gap in digital capacities, Associate Professor of Media Studies at UAE University Dr. Oyeleye (2019) posits that the UAE government should provide:

Technical assistance through Internet services to poor countries counting as part of soft diplomacy strategy. In association with the internet services to poor countries, the media and entertainment industry can use the opportunity of promoting the reputation of UAE country and this opportunity can be reached to the nations in the poor countries and open a field of cultural and economic interactions. (A. Oyeleye, personal communication, April 23, 2019)

Though the structural challenges are not unique to the UAE and cannot be easily fixed overnight, the institutional challenges can be ameliorated. Bjola (2018) calls for the development and implementation of codes and guidelines for digital practice and social media usage ranging from a continuum of very strict to a liberal regulatory regime based on each country's institutional challenges. The UAE can borrow from the British model, whereby diplomats are encouraged to use social media without contradicting official policy stands, being politically biased, bringing the office into disrepute, engaging in illegal activity or behavior, leaking state secrets, and breaching professional code of conduct (Bjola, 2018).

Conclusion

This research has shown that the transformation of diplomatic practices as a result of globalization and technological innovations presents both opportunities and challenges to states such as the UAE. Traditional tools of diplomatic communication have historically enabled states to control the flow of information and keep diplomatic interactions out of public view. Theoretically, the UAE case demonstrates that although a state can embrace digital diplomacy tools in furtherance of its public diplomacy or soft power goals, it can be hindered by institutional challenges such as media regulations and censorship in the name of security that have a deglobalizing effect. In addition, though modern digital tools have expanded the scope of diplomacy and diversified the types of participants taking part in the diplomatic process, this is hampered by deglobalization currents by governments determined to insulate their states and political spaces from unfettered information and influences deemed harmful to national security or challenging to political status quo narratives. This is evident in the case of the UAE where the government has embraced digital diplomacy as a tool for public diplomacy and soft power projection yet heavily regulates its digital realm that inhibits diplomats or individuals in the use of digital tools for public diplomacy. Finding the right balance between empowering more diplomats, citizens, and residents in the utilization of digital tools and safeguarding against the excesses of digital tools harmful to national security remains the greatest challenge in the attainment of the benefits of digital diplomacy.

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