

From the Global to the Local and Back Again: MFAs' Digital Communications During COVID-19

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Recently, scholars have suggested that ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) use social media to practice domestic digital diplomacy as they interact with national citizens, not foreign populations. In this study, we explore the practice of domestic digital diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. An analysis of the Facebook activities of 8 MFAs suggests that once the pandemic erupted, diplomats' Facebook posts were locally oriented and targeted the national citizenry. We postulate that MFAs saw the pandemic as an opportunity to develop a domestic constituency that would help safeguard their role within governments. Posts targeting citizens helped them make sense of an unprecedented crisis. A statistical analysis found that as the pandemic progressed and citizens became accustomed to a new reality, MFAs retargeted foreign populations, going from the local to the global. The statistical analysis also found high engagement rates with domestic Facebook posts suggesting that MFAs do attract a domestic, online following.

Keywords: digital diplomacy, public diplomacy, social media, COVID-19

Crises have become a permanent fixture in international relations. The 2014 Crimean Crisis was soon followed by the 2015 Brexit referendum, the 2018 Turkish invasion of Syria, and the 2021 collapse of Afghanistan. Some scholars have argued that crises are the new "normal" in international affairs. However, 2020 brought a novel crisis, one not witnessed since the early years of the 20th century. In March of 2020, a global pandemic made its way across the globe, bringing with it unrepresented levels of uncertainty. Unlike wars or terrorist attacks, the COVID-19 pandemic constituted a global, national, and personal crisis.

While all crises are characterized by high levels of uncertainty (Allison & Zelikow, 1999), COVID-19 was unique as both citizens and governments had little experience in dealing with a highly contagious virus. Epidemiologists agreed that COVID-19 was unique and dissimilar to all other pandemics witnessed in recent decades. Scholars writing in *Nature Reviews Microbiology* stated that,

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Being highly transmissible, this novel coronavirus disease, also known as coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), has spread fast all over the world. It has overwhelmingly surpassed SARS and MERS in terms of both the number of infected people and the spatial range of epidemic areas. The ongoing outbreak of COVID-19 has posed an extraordinary threat to global public health. (Seale et al., 2020, p. 141)

According to *Tropical Diseases, Travel Medicine and Vaccines*, "Public health emergencies of international concern in the past 20 years include COVID-19, poliomyelitis, H1N1, Ebola and Zika, COVID-19 is the worst pandemic in scale and speed of this century associated with the highest number of global deaths" (Wilder-Smith, 2021, p. 1). Similar sentiments were expressed in editorials published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* (2020).

In most countries, there was no past template that could help manage individuals' expectations or guide national policies. Military operations and diplomatic coalitions—tools used to resolve other crises—had no effect on the virus's spread in the globalized world. Soon, individuals and their families were told to enter into social isolation and to distance themselves from their communities and families, while information relating to the dangers of the COVID virus varied greatly. As images of collapsed health-care systems dominated news cycles, many turned to digital platforms in the hope of learning more about the virus and the dangers it posed to their nation and loved ones. Among others, individuals encountered diplomats who had also migrated online to communicate with digital publics.

In this study, we explore how ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) used social media during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we explore whether MFAs and diplomats used social media to communicate with their national citizenry, as opposed to foreign populations. We postulate that COVID-19 facilitated the practice of domestic digital diplomacy, a contradiction in terms as diplomacy is generally targeted at foreign citizens. By digital diplomacy, we refer to diplomats' growing use of digital technologies to obtain foreign policy goals (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). Unlike traditional digital diplomacy, we hypothesize that diplomats may have targeted their fellow citizens to demonstrate the MFA's contribution to national efforts to stem the spread of the COVID-19 virus, to offer information pertaining to travel, to repatriate citizens, and to assure citizens that diplomatic mechanisms used to manage crises were still in place (e.g., alliances, foreign projects). We also expected that, as time passed and the pandemic became a part of daily life, MFAs refocused their attention on their traditional constituency—foreign populations—and returned to posting information that was globally oriented.

We also explored audience engagement with the MFAs' social media messages, while assessing whether domestically oriented Facebook posts received similar engagement rates to globally oriented posts. Notably, we define social media as a set of online tools that are centered on social interaction and facilitate two-way communication (Lee & Kwak, 2012). We also adopt Manor and Adiku's (2021) definition of engagement as any interaction between followers and diplomats' content, specifically "liking," "sharing," and "commenting." To achieve these goals and widen our understanding of MFAs' communications during a global crisis and its implications, our analysis examined the Facebook posts of eight MFAs during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis (March–July 2020).

Literature Review

When examining the emergence of domestic public diplomacy, Manfredi-Sánchez employs the theoretical prism of deglobalization, an economic and political process that leads states to prioritize communicating with the national citizenry as opposed to foreign populations. From an economic perspective, deglobalization is manifest in reductions in commercial exchanges and international investments or disruptions to global supply chains. Economic deglobalization is coupled with political deglobalization as trade wars and protectionism impact political leaderships that begin to frame globalization as a threat to national interests (James, 2017; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2021). For instance, the UAE frame globalization as a national security risk given the free flow of uncensored information (Antwi-Boateng & Mazrouei, 2021).

Manfredi-Sánchez (2021) and others have argued that one way of combating deglobalization is discussing "global commons" or areas of shared interests such as climate change or public health (Ronfeldt & Arquilla, 2020). When leaders ignore "global commons," deglobalization becomes a powerful narrative that is wielded by populists and nationalists. In deglobalization, leaders begin to shy away from international responses to shared challenges, especially if such responses carry a heavy domestic price. Changes in political mindsets translate to novel public diplomacy practices. Though public diplomacy's ethos was once founded on shared responses to shared challenges (Cull, 2019), deglobalization leads to a new ethos marked by an emphasis on national security and territorial integrity

Scholars have argued that deglobalization encourages lack of cooperation between states with public diplomacy being used primarily to support national projects. In this sense, public diplomacy becomes a tool for validating domestic leadership among foreign populations (Bødker & Anderson, 2019). Under deglobalization, there is also an alignment between domestic and foreign communications as public diplomacy is used to disseminate domestic political narratives among foreign populations (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2021).

In extreme cases, public diplomacy and digital diplomacy are used to erode trust in the international system. This was evident in Russia's use of bots to sway elections and referendums in other countries or the isolationist rhetoric spread by the alt-right in the United States (Hall-Jamieson, 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Fuchs (2018) argues that social media such as Twitter fuel deglobalization as leaders use these platforms to emphasize national needs more than the international ones. Other times, social media may be used to craft messages that resonate with the national citizenry who then share such content with their online peers, while feeling involved in an important national effort (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2021).

The aforementioned scholars have all observed the new phenomenon of domestic public diplomacy and have tied it to growing uncertainty (Rathbum, 2007). Populism and nationalism breed uncertainty as they undermine international cooperation. Brexit, Trump's decision to hinder agreements in the World Trade Organization, and growing criticism of the European Union by right-wing leaders all undermine global commons while creating a complex and uncertain world in which the institutions that shape multilateral diplomacy are criticized. COVID-19 brought new levels of uncertainty as international collaborations were abandoned in favor of closed borders and vaccine nationalism. Moreover, the slow response of international

institutions (e.g., European Union) to the pandemic further fueled deglobalization as leaders attacked these institutions while touting the benefits of health nationalism (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2021).

This study also focuses on the phenomenon of domestic public diplomacy as practiced on social media. However, the study offers a different prism for understanding the practice of domestic public diplomacy. Focusing on digital technologies, the study argues that social media have a deterritorializing impact that blurs the boundaries between the national and the foreign. Moreover, individuals now use digital technologies to follow national MFAs in hopes of making sense of an uncertain world. Finally, MFAs and diplomats currently seek to cultivate a domestic constituency. These processes are explored next.

The Digitalization of Diplomacy

Recent years have seen the accelerated digitalization of diplomacy, or the growing use of digital technologies by diplomats and their institutions (Antwi-Boateng & Al Mazrouei, 2021; Danziger & Schreiber, 2021). Diplomats have launched virtual embassies (Metzgar, 2012), used social media to manage their nation's global image (Garud-Patkar, 2021; Huang & Wang, 2020), and developed smartphone applications and established big data and algorithmic units (Manor, 2019). By digitalization, we refer to a long-term process in which digital technologies shape diplomats' norms, values, and working routines.

The digitalization of diplomacy is the result of two processes. First, digital technologies elicit certain behaviors and enforce certain norms. For instance, social media sites are predicated on the constant dissemination of personal information as everything once done privately is now done in public and for public consumption (Bauman & Lyon, 2013). When societies adopt digital technologies, they invariably embrace new norms and behaviors (Manor, 2019). This is also true of diplomats as MFAs are social institutions (Hocking & Melissen, 2015). Processes that affect society as a whole also affect diplomats and reshape MFA practices.

For instance, when social media were perceived by societies as democratic tools and the enablers of the Arab Spring, diplomats used social media to interact with foreign populations and practice public diplomacy (Collins, DeWitt, & LeFebvre, 2019). However, once societies came to regard social media as a menace and as tools for spreading disinformation, MFAs created units tasked with neutralizing fake social media accounts (Bjola & Pamment, 2018).

Second, digitalization impacts institutions that orbit and influence diplomatic practices. For instance, digitalization has led media institutions to comment on and narrate events in near-real time (Seib, 2012), given that digital publics want to learn about world events as they unfold. As Castells (2013) has argued, the digital society is one that strives to annihilate time and space. As MFAs compete with news organizations over the attention of digital publics, they too have embraced the norm of commenting on world events as they unfold, practicing what Seib (2012) has titled real-time diplomacy.

Notably, diplomats' initial migration online was a result of their desire to communicate with foreign populations and shape digital publics' understanding of the world around them. The U.S. State Department first embraced digital technologies to counter Al-Qaeda's online recruitment efforts and foster better ties with Muslim

Internet users (Hallams, 2010; Khatib, Dutton, & Thelwall, 2012). Israel's migration online was part of an effort to shape how foreign publics perceive Israel's policies vis-à-vis the Arab World (Manor, 2019). Since 2008, the MFAs of Canada, Ethiopia, Kenya, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Sweden, among others, have all employed digital technologies to shape digital publics' understanding of world events including the 2014 Gaza War, the 2014 Crimean Crisis (Manor, 2019), and the 2016 attempted Turkish coup (Sevin, 2018)

Digitalization and the Nation-state

Digitalization has a reterritorializing and deterritorializing effect on the nation-state. That is to say that digital technologies such as social media can either expand or contract the borders of the state, clearly identifying who is and who is not part of the state. On one hand, diplomats may use digital tools such as social media sites to create stronger ties with diasporas, thus digitally extending the boundaries of their nations. Currently, the MFAs of Kenya and Ethiopia implement digital diaspora policies that center on public outreach, as these countries are reliant on diasporas' financial support. However, digital platforms have a deterritorializing effect when states limit interactions with critical diasporas while labeling them as foreign entities (Bernal, 2014; Manor & Adiku, 2021). Digital platforms also have a deterritorializing effect as the audiences of diplomacy come to include both local and foreign populations.

Traditionally, MFAs have been regarded as institutions that face the world with their backs to the nation as diplomats were tasked with communicating with foreign populations (Cull, 2019). However, on social media, the borders of nation-states become blurred as citizens may follow their MFAs to learn about nations' foreign policy achievements or actions taken to advance domestic interests. Here, digitalization has a deterritorializing effect. Importantly, citizens also turn to their diplomats to make sense of an increasingly complex world in which the actions of one state send immediate ripple effects throughout the globe (Bjola & Pamment, 2018).

Diplomats are eager to amass a domestic following for several reasons. First, in a global world, numerous ministries face the world and collaborate with their peers from abroad. Ministries of agriculture, science, and the environment now routinely implement foreign agendas. MFAs have thus lost their monopoly on managing a state's external affairs (Manor, 2019). Second, digitalization and globalization have increased the public profile of world leaders who increasingly assume the duties of diplomats (Ish-Shalom, 2015). By globalization, we refer to an accelerating set of processes involving flows that lead to increasing integration and interconnectivity (Ritzer, 2007). Finally, MFAs throughout the world have faced drastic budget cuts, whether because of the 2008 financial crisis or the global profile of other ministries (Hocking & Melissen, 2015). This increases diplomats' need to be viewed as relevant and important by their own citizens.

For all these reasons, diplomats now seek to cultivate a domestic constituency that may help MFAs protect their territory within governments. One way of doing so is by using digital technologies to offer better consular services, whether through dedicated websites or consular smartphone applications (Melissen & Caesar-Gordon, 2016).

Another way of cultivating a domestic constituency is publishing information that demonstrates how diplomatic achievements serve the national interest. Such was the case with the Obama

administration's use of Twitter to "sell" the Iran Deal as a triumph of American diplomacy (Bjola & Manor, 2018). Other times, diplomats use digital platforms to assure citizens that foreign policies are bearing fruit. The UK Foreign Office used Twitter to demonstrate the damage inflicted on Daesh in an attempt to assure British tax payers that foreign policies were yielding tangible results (Manor, 2019).

The Limitations of Digitalization

Although diplomats sought to interact and converse with online publics, studies have found that actual conversations between diplomats and social media followers rarely take place (Manor & Adiku, 2021; Mazumdar, 2021). This is sometimes a result of limited MFA resources, as engagement requires that diplomats spend time replying to queries or providing services (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). However, the lack of engagement may also stem from diplomats' definition of the term. Studies have found that in many MFAs, the term "engagement" relates to the number of "likes" and "shares" that MFA content elicits (Manor & Kampf, 2022). Thus, diplomats themselves do not define engagement as conversation with followers.

Domestic Digital Diplomacy During COVID-19

COVID-19 constituted an unprecedented, global crisis. Not since the Spanish Influenza of 1918 has the world been so profoundly impacted by a pandemic. The world after COVID-19 differed greatly from the pre-COVID world. The world was no longer as global, given that nations shut their borders and airports emptied. The post-COVID world was also not as diverse, as similar scenes of social distancing, quarantines, and desolate streets were seen worldwide. State-centric policies also replaced multilateral activity, as each nation adopted its own set of policies to deal with the pandemic in what has become known as "vaccine nationalism" (Bollyky & Bown, 2020). While Austria shut its borders, Sweden looked to achieve herd immunity, and Israel turned to a national vaccination effort. Last, nearly all mechanisms of international diplomacy came to a halt. Much of diplomacy migrated to virtual settings with world leaders and UN diplomats meeting on Zoom (Bjola & Manor, 2022; Danielson & Hedling, 2022).

Even more fundamentally, COVID-19 represented a global, national, and personal crisis as it threatened not only states but also the lives of individuals. People had no prior experience with global pandemics, and so COVID-19 constituted a novel crisis that bred uncertainty at the personal and national levels. People were unfamiliar with the epidemiological jargon that dominated the news (e.g., super-spreaders). In some countries, COVID-19 restrictions also frequently changed as the pandemic progressed. In Israel, citizens were urged not to wear masks in public until wearing masks became mandated by law. In Germany, restrictions on the number of individuals allowed in stores changed continuously. Citizens of these countries were forced to remain abreast of changing regulations (Ginzburg et al., forthcoming).

This study focuses on the social media communications of MFAs during the first wave of the pandemic. We aim to test three assumptions, each of which was translated into a research question. The first is that during the initial stages of COVID-19, MFAs focused their social media communications on domestic publics and not foreign populations. Thus, they practiced a form of domestic digital diplomacy, as opposed to a more traditional digital diplomacy. We also assume that as time passed, MFAs refocused their

attention on their traditional constituency—foreign populations. MFAs may have sought to promote national success stories in stemming COVID (e.g., Sweden’s unique model), while identifying measures taken to aid other nations struggling with the pandemic (e.g., German medical aid to Italy).

Our second assumption sought to examine the nature of diplomats’ domestic communications. Did MFAs use social media to share consular success stories and disseminate images of ambassadors leading citizens to specially chartered flights? If so, this would support the assumption that MFAs turned locally to boost their domestic reputation and consolidate a domestic constituency. However, it is also possible that MFAs turned inward to frame the pandemic’s impact on the world and the nation, to manage public expectations, to share medical information pertaining to other countries, to assure citizens that nations were coordinating actions with global partners, and to inform citizens of measures taken to obtain vaccines. Such online communications may have reduced feelings of uncertainty and helped citizens understand the new COVID world.

Our third assumption was that MFAs’ communications altered over time. While MFAs may have initially focused on consular advice, once repatriation efforts ended diplomats may have focused on other issues, including international collaborations, whether in terms of creating coalitions to share resources or reorienting existing partnerships such as using NATO infrastructure to deliver medical equipment to member states.

In this study, we examined public engagement rates such as “likes,” “comments,” and “shares.” Though scholars have called these “vanity metrics” (Bjola, 2018), we measured such rates to understand whether MFA posts, which target the domestic population, garnered similar engagement rates to posts targeted at foreign populations. We assumed that engagement rates with MFA content would decrease over time as the pandemic turned from a novel crisis into a new “normal.”

By addressing these assumptions, the present study deals with greater questions in the field of public diplomacy, including the deterritorializing of the nation-state, the emergence of domestic public diplomacy, and diplomats’ use of social media to shape public understanding of world events.

To examine these hypotheses, we analyzed all content shared on Facebook during the first wave of the pandemic (March–July of 2020) by eight MFAs: Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Israel, New Zealand, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. We focused on Facebook, as opposed to Twitter, for three main reasons. First, studies suggest that diplomats use Facebook as an elite-to-public medium through which they communicate with digital publics. Twitter, on the other hand, is used as an elite-to-elite medium through which diplomats seek to interact with policy makers or journalists (Bjola, 2018). Second, in some of the countries we examined, Facebook is used by the general public, while Twitter is used by niche audiences such as journalists (e.g., Israel). Facebook would thus offer MFAs the means to communicate with a more diverse domestic constituency compared with Twitter. Moreover, studies suggest that while Twitter is used to communicate with foreign populations, Facebook is used to communicate with national audiences and diasporas (Collins et al., 2019; Spry, 2018). Finally, Facebook is a popular social media platform in all the nations that comprised our sample, as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Facebook Users by Country (Percentage of Population).*

Country	Population	Number of Facebook Users (%)
United Kingdom	68,497,907	64
Germany	83,883,596	45
New Zealand	4,898,203	73
Israel	8,922,892	69
Denmark	5,834,950	70
Austria	9,066,710	55
Sweden	10,218,971	84
France	65,584,518	59

* Source: World Population Review (2022).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Our first research question examined whether MFAs did, in fact, target domestic Facebook users in the early stages of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. There may be several reasons for this, including that MFAs sought to aid their citizens, whether in the form of repatriating family members or ensuring that loved ones could reenter a country. MFAs may have also realized that they were confronted with an opportunity to cement a domestic constituency by emphasizing their contribution to national efforts to stem the pandemic and repatriate citizens from across the world. Thus, while MFAs do not traditionally communicate with citizens, their narrowing remit within governments, the deterritorializing effect of digital technologies, and the desire to cultivate a domestic constituency may have led diplomats to focus their online communications on the national citizenry.

RQ1: Did MFAs target domestic Facebook users during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic by publishing more locally oriented posts than globally oriented posts?

To answer this question, we formulated a research hypothesis, which stated that when the pandemic first erupted (March–April of 2020), MFAs published mostly local information that would be most relevant to domestic Facebook users and less so to foreign populations. However, our hypothesis also stated that as time progressed, MFAs altered their Facebook content and published information that would be relevant to foreign populations—their traditional target audience (May–July of 2020). This may have occurred for several reasons. First, by the end of March 2020, many MFAs had finished offering emergency consular aid to their citizens and thus began to deal with issues of global concern, such as sharing resources or developing vaccines with allies. Second, MFAs may have retargeted foreign populations once the pandemic became the new “normal” as levels of personal uncertainty decreased and individuals became accustomed to social isolation.

H1a: At the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, MFAs published more locally oriented than globally oriented posts on their Facebook pages.

H1b: As the COVID-19 pandemic progressed and became part of the day-to-day reality, MFAs refocused their communications from domestic Facebook users to foreign users and increased their globally oriented postings.

Our second research question sought to identify the issues addressed by diplomats when communicating with domestic Facebook users. For instance, it is possible that MFAs highlighted successful consular operations. Notably, MFAs have come to regard themselves as service providers that must meet the demands and expectations of citizens (Manor, 2019). During COVID-19, MFAs could meet citizens' demands by repatriating citizens stranded abroad. MFAs also may have demonstrated their own adherence with COVID-19 restrictions, thus emphasizing their belonging to the national community. However, it is also possible that MFAs focused on vaccine procurement, as vaccines were identified as the main vehicle for fighting the pandemic (during our time sample vaccines were still being developed). Given that few studies to date have investigated the practice of domestic digital diplomacy, we employed an exploratory research question and did not formulate a specific hypothesis.

RQ2: What issues did diplomats address when communicating with domestic Facebook users? Were there differences in the issues addressed as the pandemic progressed?

Finally, our third hypothesis sought to examine public engagement rates with MFA content. We expected that engagement rates would decrease over time as COVID-19 morphed from a novel, unfamiliar crisis to a part of everyday life. Indeed, by July 2020, wearing face masks in public spaces was not as daunting or alienating as it had been in March 2020. As health scholars have noted, mass media campaigns and government-sponsored public health adverts all increased compliance with mask wearing, as did the growing familiarity with public spaces populated by people wearing masks (Seale et al., 2020). Some news reports argued that mask wearing became a "new normal" (Farr, 2020). Similarly, the sight of individuals maintaining a distance of two meters in public spaces became commonplace. As the pandemic progressed, individuals grew more familiar with a world governed by COVID-19 restrictions (Ducharme, 2021).

H2: As time progressed, MFA posts received lower rates of likes, comments, and shares.

Methodology

In line with the study's goals, and to examine MFAs' use of Facebook during the pandemic, we conducted a content analysis of all Facebook posts published by eight MFAs during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (March–July 2020¹). Table 2 presents information about the MFAs we examined and their rates of Facebook use during the first wave ($N = 1,787$ posts).

¹ Our decision to focus on this time frame was made by an examination of the number of monthly COVID-19 cases in the countries sampled in our analysis (data that are also used in our multilevel analysis). It appears that March and April best represent the outbreak in the countries used in our study, while in May, the number of cases decreased in most countries (all but Sweden, which had a unique COVID-19 policy).

Table 2. MFA Accounts and Posts.

Country	Number of Facebook Posts (March–July 2020)
United Kingdom	203
Germany	382
New Zealand	184
Israel	259
Denmark	284
Austria	265
Sweden	132
France	78

We deliberately chose to investigate a diverse sample with regard to geographic location to examine whether domestic digital diplomacy was common practice throughout the world. However, all nations in the sample shared important characteristics. First, all eight nations faced a COVID-19 pandemic by March 2020 as measured by epidemiologists. Indeed, in all eight nations, there were more than 100 reported cases of COVID-19 by the month of March (Ginzburg et al., forthcoming). Second, all eight nations had considered implementing similar measures, including social distancing and mask wearing in public. Such measures were also part of media discourse in all eight nations (Ginzburg et al., forthcoming). Finally, in all eight nations, national health agencies urged citizens to keep abreast and follow COVID-19 restrictions. As such, the study sample allowed us to investigate the practice of domestic digital diplomacy among eight nations who faced a similar crisis and considered similar remedies.

Our analysis examined various elements of MFA posts, including whether the focus is local or global and the main topic of the post. Notably, local posts were those that were of relevance only to domestic populations. These posts included travel warnings, consular information, sharing consular success stories, posts demonstrating diplomats' adherence with national health guidelines, or posts in which diplomats thanked health staff for their efforts. Importantly, posts in which MFAs lauded their nations' handling of the pandemic were not labeled as local posts. In many cases, MFAs shared national success stories given an attempt to manage the national image and depict a nation's ability to successfully contend with the pandemic. Thus, data about Israel's success in lowering the number of COVID cases were all categorized as targeting *foreign* populations.

As for the topics of the posts, in an initial examination, we identified several recurring themes that were used in our analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) roadmap to thematic analysis. The themes identified were as follows: (1) COVID-19, (2) current events, (3) foreign relations, (4) repatriating citizens, (5) tourism, and (6) travel advice. We also examined whether or not posts focused on COVID-19. When examining COVID-19-related posts, we also identified several recurring themes, including: (1) international collaborations, (2) the way the country has dealt with the pandemic, (3) foreign aid, (4) medical information, and (5) information pertaining to vaccines. Last, we evaluated engagement rates in terms of likes, shares, and comments. More information about the coding process can be found in the appendix.

To widen our understanding about MFAs' online communications during a novel crisis—focusing mostly on local versus global postings and user engagement rates—a multilevel analysis (using SPSS MIXED model) was conducted. We decided to use this method of analysis because of the nature of our data—Facebook posts

of eight different MFAs—over a period of five months. The analysis included two levels of measurement: the country level and the post level. The multilevel procedure facilitates analysis of data collected simultaneously at multiple levels (Hayes, 2006). This analysis allowed us to examine the contribution of both the posts published by the MFAs during the first wave of the pandemic and the information about the country in relation to the pandemic (e.g., the number of reported cases). On the country level, we examined the number of COVID-19 cases per capita (compared to population size) in each month and took the overtime trend (months) into account (Worldometer, 2022). On the post level, we examined the focus of the post (targeting local versus global publics), whether COVID-19 was the main topic of the post, and the user engagement rates it generated.

The information retrieval from MFA Facebook pages took place between February and July 2020; the content analysis was conducted by two coders who underwent training and a reliability examination (of over 10% of the posts analyzed, with an agreement level of not lower than 80% for each category).

Results

Our analysis begins with an examination of the focus of Facebook posts published by the eight MFAs (i.e., locally or globally oriented), followed by an analysis of the topics presented in those posts (including an emphasis on posts that focus on COVID-19) and an analysis of user engagements with those posts (using a multivariate analysis).

The findings about the local versus global orientation of Facebook posts revealed that, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, MFAs around the world focused their Facebook communications on local issues. In contrast to the traditional global nature of their work, 63.6% of the Facebook posts published by the eight MFAs in our sample focused on local issues. To learn whether this focus on local issues was the result of nations' initial need to deal with this new crisis or whether the focus was prevalent throughout the first wave of the pandemic, we examined differences over time. Figure 1 presents the overtime trend of MFAs' posts focusing on local issues.

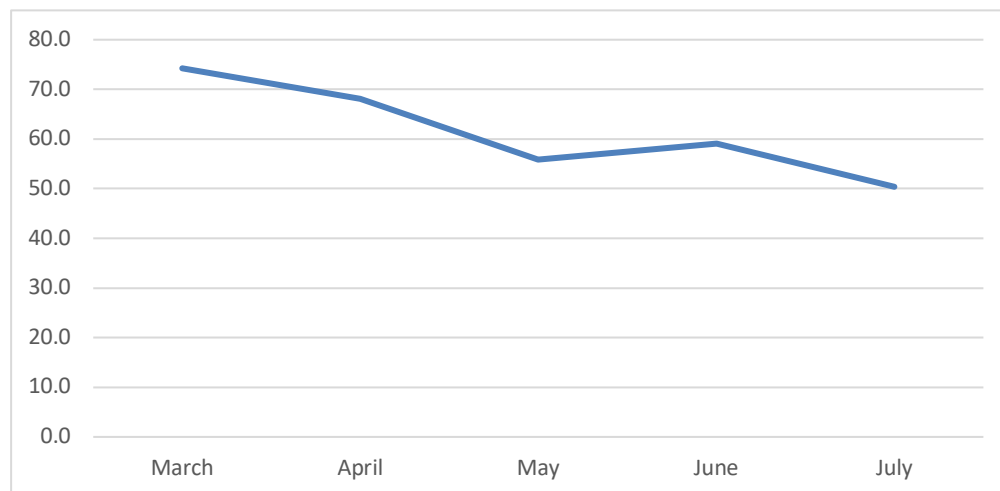


Figure 1. MFAs' locally oriented Facebook posts over time.

The results, as presented in Figure 1, suggest that the focus on local issues was salient throughout the first wave of the pandemic, beginning with about 74% of all posts during March 2020 and decreasing over time (but remaining relatively high) to about 50% in July 2020. The decrease over time is mild and significant ($R = .174$; $p < .001$). Before we examine the content of the local versus global posts, it is important to look into differences between the various MFAs analyzed in the study. While examining the overtime focus on local issues by country, we can see differences between different nations, as presented in Figure 2.

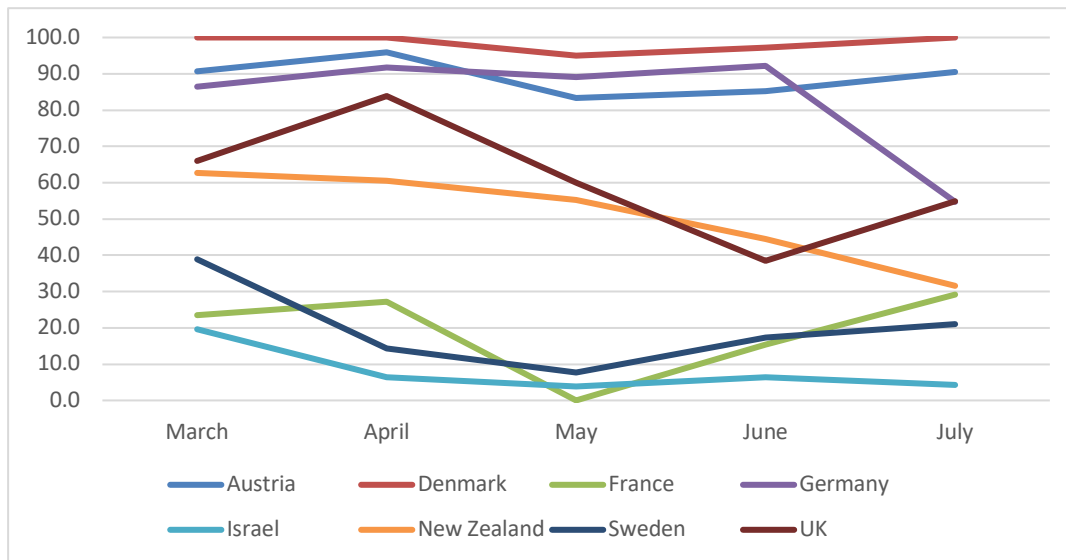


Figure 2. MFA's focus on local issues over time (by country).

As shown in Figure 2, Denmark and Austria focused on local issues throughout the first wave of the pandemic, while in Germany, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand, we see a decrease over time. It appears that Sweden, France, and Israel had placed less emphasis on local posts throughout the time frame examined. This difference, in the messages of Sweden—and, to some extent, of Israel—may be attributed to the health strategies these countries adopted. Though Sweden had decided not to enforce restrictions on its population, Israel was one of the first countries to take extreme measures, such as closing its airspace and enforcing a nationwide quarantine. It is possible that both MFAs sought to communicate their unique COVID-19 strategies to global publics.

Next, to better understand the aim of the eight MFAs social media activity and their target audiences, our analysis focused on the topics addressed in MFA Facebook posts. Figure 3 presents the main topics addressed, divided into locally versus globally oriented messages.

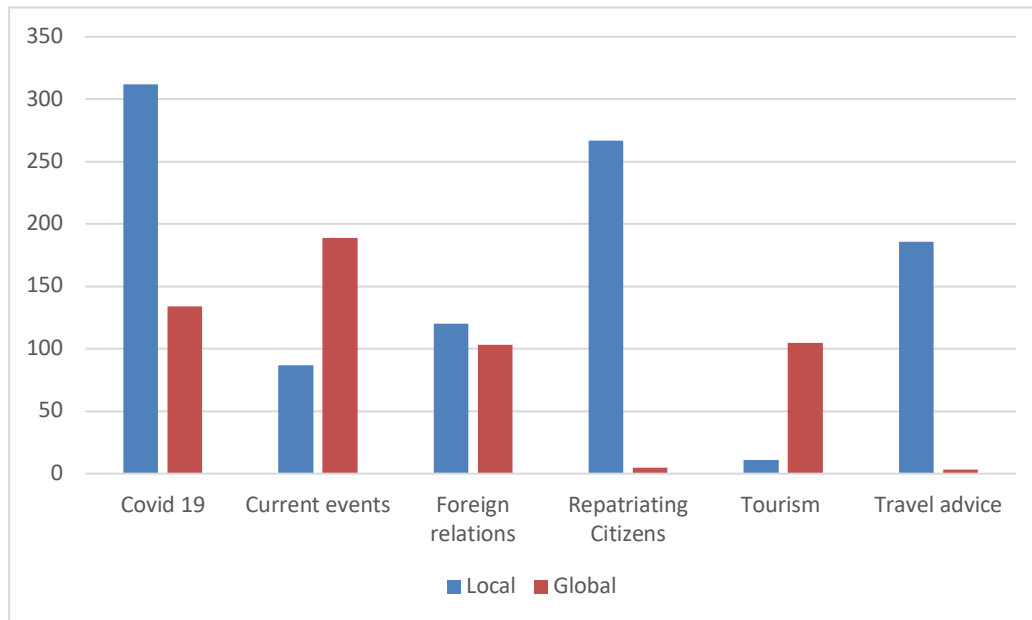


Figure 3. Locally versus globally oriented issues present in MFAs' posts.

Unsurprisingly (as seen in Figure 3), inherently global issues, such as tourism and current events, appeared in globally oriented posts, while inherently domestic issues, such as repatriating citizens (helping the country's citizens to return home) and travel advice, appeared in locally oriented Facebook posts. The content of those posts and their relevance to the local population demonstrate that MFAs were targeting their local audience. Interestingly, COVID-19–related issues appeared more frequently in locally oriented posts, while posts dealing with foreign relations (a key component in the work of MFAs) were almost equally distributed between globally and locally oriented posts, demonstrating that even when focusing on domestic issues, MFAs' main focus is foreign relations.

We were also interested in measuring how many posts focused on COVID-19 over time—in other words, whether the pandemic was the main topic addressed in a post. As presented in Figure 4, it appears that there is a significant decrease ($R = .256$; $p < .001$) in COVID-19 posts over time, beginning with an extensive focus on the pandemic (about 93% of the posts published in March) and decreasing to about 50% in July. This finding suggests that MFAs reduced the amount of COVID-19 posts throughout the first wave of the pandemic. A possible explanation could be that, unlike the initial stages of the pandemic, when people actively searched for information online, over time, publics developed a form of "COVID fatigue" and became more interested in other topics. This change in public appetite impacted the issue addressed online by MFAs. This assumption is partially supported by the very weak correlation between the number of COVID-19 cases in a country and the number of COVID-19–related posts that MFAs published ($R = .066$; $p < .05$).

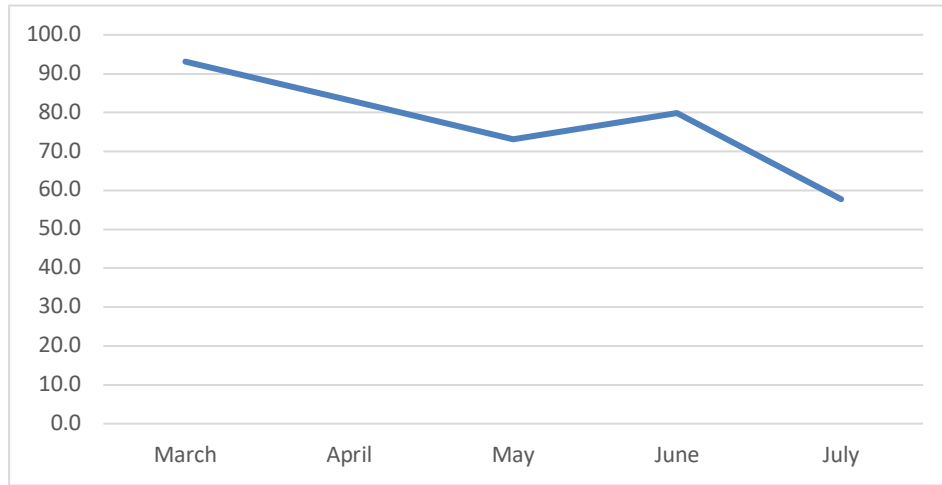


Figure 4. Posts focusing on COVID-19 over time.

While examining the themes prevalent in COVID-19 posts, it appears that two themes were especially salient: (1) the way their country deals with the pandemic (in about 41% of the posts), and (2) international collaborations (in about 29% of the posts). The focus on these issues fits the mission statement of MFAs—as they seek to promote their country’s image on the one hand and are responsible for its international relations on the other. The distribution of issues addressed in COVID-19 posts over time is presented in Figure 5.

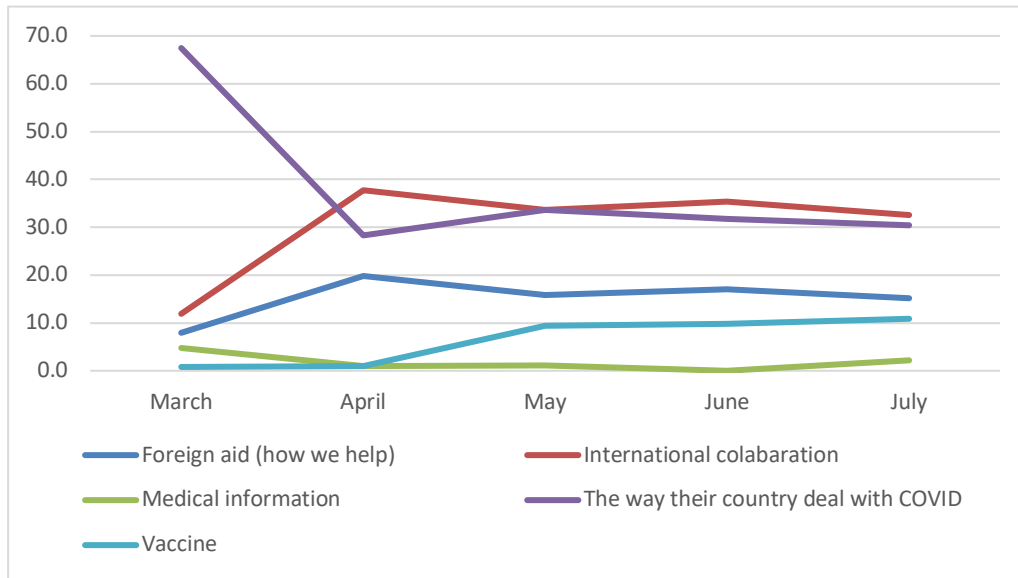


Figure 5. Distribution of issues of COVID-19-focused posts over time.

The overtime analysis of COVID-19 posts (Figure 5) reveals that during the outbreak of the pandemic, MFAs dealt mostly with the way their country was dealing with the crisis. We saw a sharp decrease in such posts

in April 2020, but this issue remained somewhat salient over time (at around 30% of COVID-19–related posts during the first wave). It appears that the issue of “international collaborations” became salient following the initial reaction to the pandemic, as we found a sharp increase in such posts during April 2020 and can see that it remained a salient topic in MFA posts throughout the first wave of the pandemic (about 30%–40%). Another issue that became more salient following the initial reaction to the pandemic is foreign aid (about 10%–20% of COVID-19–related posts). Thus, it appears that even amid great uncertainty, MFAs sought to fulfill their international position—showing the world how their country was contributing to the international arena through foreign aid such as donating protective medical gear. Other less-salient issues were vaccinations (which were only being developed during the first wave of the pandemic) and health-related issues, which are less central to the work of MFAs.

Next, our analysis turns to an examination of the social media users’ engagement with COVID-related posts (in terms of the number of likes, shares, and comments). An initial analysis of differences in users’ engagement with MFAs locally versus globally oriented posts did not reveal significant differences. Similarly, no differences were found in users’ engagement with the various themes or issues addressed in Facebook posts. Because of the nature of our data—Facebook posts of eight MFAs, over a period of five months—we decided to use a multilevel analysis approach, using an SPSS MIXED model. The analysis included two levels of measurement: the post level and the country level. The multilevel procedure is beneficial since it facilitates analysis of data collected simultaneously at multiple levels (Hayes, 2006). This analysis allowed us to examine the contribution of both the post published by the MFAs during the first wave of the pandemic and information about the country in relation to the pandemic. On the post level, we examined the focus of the post—local versus globally oriented, and whether COVID-19 was the main topic of the post and the user engagement rates it generated (that is, likes, shares, and comments). On the country level, we examined the number of COVID-19 cases per capita (compared to population size) in each month and took the overtime trend (months) into account. Table 3 presents three models that predict users’ engagement: Model 1—likes, model 2—shares, and model 3—comments.

Table 3. Multilevel Models Predicting Audience Engagement With MFA’s Facebook Posts.

	Model 1: Likes		Model 2: Shares		Model 3: Comments	
	<i>B</i>	<i>e^b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>e^b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>e^b</i>
Fix effects						
Local vs. global (=1)	–2,276.37**	73.67	–256.56*	104.70	–117.62 [#]	60.55
COVID-19 main issue (=1)	–2,420.28**	17.11	–293.69**	96.85	–95.70 [#]	54.52
Country’s monthly COVID cases per capita	15,456.60***	627.57	2,039.93***	552.59	1,056.56***	316.54
Month	609.35**	227.57	54.73*	26.98	63.62***	5.19
Intercept	–202.12		94.39		–127.81	
Variance of random effect (country)	2,309,554.24		41,152.74		26,942.23	
–2 Restricted log likelihood	23,318.83		18,613.49		17,345.35	
<i>N</i>	1,108		1,108		1,108	

Note. The statistical procedure is a multilevel (hierarchical) model (using an SPSS MIXED generalized linear model). The variance type is variance component. SPSS uses the restricted maximum likelihood (REML) method for mixed-model analysis. Entries are parameter estimates.

****p* < .001, ***p* < .01, **p* < .05, [#]*p* < .1.

The evidence, presented in Table 3, suggests similarities between the various user engagement rates. For likes, shares, and comments, we see a significant increase in users' engagement with locally oriented posts—in terms of more likes, shares, and comments (marginally significance for comments); a decrease in users' engagement (less likes, shares, and comments) in posts focusing on COVID-19 (marginally significance for comments); and a significant increase in users' engagement overtime. We also found that an increase in the number of COVID-19 cases per capita significantly increases user engagement with MFA Facebook posts.²

Discussion and Conclusions

Previous studies have analyzed domestic public diplomacy through the prism of deglobalization. This study sought to enrich the literature on this phenomenon by focusing on how digital technologies blur the boundaries between the global and the local, while also emphasizing diplomats' incentive for communicating with national citizens. Thus, we set out to answer two research questions. The first asked whether, during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, MFAs focused more on local Facebook followers. Results indicate that as time progressed and COVID-19 became an integral part of daily life, MFAs published less locally oriented posts and more globally oriented posts. However, throughout the pandemic's first wave, locally oriented posts remained salient across most MFAs in our sample. We offer three explanations for these findings. First, we suggest that MFAs targeted domestic Facebook users given a desire to build a domestic constituency. In a globalized world, marked by the involvement of many ministries in a nation's foreign affairs, MFAs' remit within governments continuously narrow, as do their budgets (Hocking & Melissen, 2015). COVID-19 presented diplomats with an opportunity to demonstrate their importance and contribution to the nation. This was evident in posts that highlighted consular success stories.

Additionally, MFAs may have targeted domestic Facebook users to help them make sense of an unfamiliar world marked by face masks and fear for family members. As citizens sought to decipher this new world and acquire information on national efforts to manage the crisis, MFAs posted information that was relevant to the national citizenry. This assertion is in line with previous studies that argue that MFAs migrated to social media to narrate events and frame national policies (Hayden, 2012; Manor & Crilley, 2018).

Last, we contend that, over time, citizens became accustomed to the COVID-19 world and acquired more knowledge about the pandemic. Thus, as levels of uncertainty subsided among the national citizenry, MFAs returned to targeting foreign populations shifting from the local to the global.

When targeting local Facebook users, MFAs dealt with more than just consular issues. They also dealt with international collaborations and foreign relations, although these were framed in a way that would be relevant to citizens (e.g., international collaboration in search of a vaccine saves resources and time). Thus, we found that MFAs went beyond being mere "service provider" and helped their citizens understand international relations during a novel crisis. This lends some credence to our assertion that MFAs sought to help citizens make sense of an unprecedented crisis. That national COVID-19 rates did not impact MFAs'

² The models did not indicate differences between the studied countries.

local orientation may be explained by the idea that COVID-19 was a threat even to nations that had few cases given that fear of the pandemic could easily cross national borders. These results validated our first two research hypotheses.

Our second research question explored the content published by MFAs when targeting domestic Facebook users. Although there was a decrease in COVID-19 posts over time, there was an increase in posts dealing with international collaborations and foreign aid. We maintain that these posts were used to position the state as part of a global community. This issue became more salient once it became clear that no nation could stem the pandemic on its own. Though MFAs routinely comment on international collaborations and foreign aid on social media, during COVID-19, such posts were targeted at domestic Facebook followers. We find that, as is the case when communicating with foreign populations, MFAs sought to shape domestic audiences' understanding of world events (Manor, 2019).

The decrease in posts highlighting how each nation dealt with COVID-19 may have stemmed from government policies that became uniform over time, with most countries implementing similar measures (e.g., remote work). The differences in issue salience across time are in line with previous studies suggesting that diplomats use social media to frame crisis and world events as they unfold (Seib, 2012). As the reality of COVID-19 changed, so did MFAs' Facebook posts.

We found that local posts received higher engagement rates over time, while there was a decrease in engagement with COVID-19 posts. These findings are important for two reasons. First, they suggest that there was an audience that valued domestic posts or, in other words, that MFAs do, in fact, attract domestic followers on social media and not just foreign populations. This is in line with previous studies suggesting that digitalization has a deterritorializing affect as MFAs attract both local and foreign followers (Bernal, 2014). Notably, engagement rates were correlated with COVID-19 cases, which strengthen our assertion that citizens turned to MFA Facebook pages to make sense of a rapidly escalating crisis. These results partially validated our third research hypothesis.

The results of this study have important theoretical implications. The study offers a methodological guide for scholars seeking to understand the emergence of domestic digital diplomacy. By focusing on a time of acute crisis and conducting content and engagement analysis of social media content, the study was able to capture how and when diplomats address the national citizenry. An important question is whether diplomats interact with national citizens during other forms of crises that are also marked by uncertainty (e.g., war, political turmoil). From a foreign policy perspective, the study suggests that diplomats can now help shape citizens' perceptions of world events. Thus, diplomats are transformed into important societal actors alongside journalists. Diplomats' new societal role demands further attention from scholars.

Few studies to date have demonstrated how domestic digital diplomacy is practiced *de facto*. Our study addresses this lacuna, finding that, not only do MFAs target their national citizenry on social media but also that they find a receptive audience online. Although the case study of COVID-19 is unique, it is possible that MFAs routinely target their citizens as digital technologies blur the distinction between the local and the global. Future studies should examine domestic digital diplomacy in times of relative calm, while identifying the issues diplomats address and whether citizens do visit MFA social media sites on a regular basis.

Finally, it is important to note one limitation of the current study. Because of Facebook's privacy settings, the study was unable to identify what percentage of MFA followers are national citizens. In future studies, scholars may seek to identify an MFA's domestic following by qualitatively evaluating samples of followers while noting their location.

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Appendix 1—Codebook for Thematic Analysis (Covid-19 Themes).

Theme	Example
International Collaboration	Joint, international efforts to combat COVID 19. E.g., German MFA calling for European wide collaboration on fighting the pandemic.
The Way Their Country Deals with the Pandemic	Information on national health efforts to combat COVID-19 or testimonials from diplomats on how different countries are using different approaches to combat the pandemic.
Foreign Aid	How one nation helps another face Covid19. E.g., the EU sending humanitarian aid to countries in Africa lacking in medical equipment.
Medical Information	Public health messages dealing with ways to avoid COVID-19. (e.g., video on the need to wash hands several times a day).
Information Pertaining to Vaccines	Information relating to the development and dissemination of vaccines. (e.g., German MFA announcing a commitment to 'fair and equitable' development of COVID-19 vaccines).