**Digital International Relations**

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The system of international affairs looks like a a field of confrontation between different realities that spill from the digital space to printed newspapers and TV amplifying a political consensus in the world order and damaging bilateral relations between states. The system of international relations has been adopted more or less to a new information revolution institutionalisating such new areas of activities as digital or data diplomacy; cyber security, and cyber diplomacy; and global internet governance. However, the digital transformations have stirred an array of problems depicted as a some sort of a digital anarchy in terms of unpredictable hack attacks, leaks, disclosures of sensitive information, and cyber-wars. The spread of big data analytics allow different stakeholders exploit synthetic media or widely known faked news, echo chambers or filter bubbles, and etc. eroding the traditional power and influence of states in world politics. The cracking down of the Internet into national clusters contributes to a new technological disintegration and boosts a new wave of malign activities. The functions of users’ filtration according to political preferences have empowered marginal groups cementing conditions for the existence of a fractured political reality in both local and global arena.

All these and other new challenges that change the diplomacy, foreign policy and world politics are heated not only by shifts in informational technologies but also by the phenomenon of *datafication* that implies a rapid growth of a number of digital footprints in the Internet and, more importantly, of hysterical applications of big data analytics for political purposes by numerous skilled users. The popular and widely discussed consequences of datafication can be named as reports of journalists about corruption schemes or information campaigns aimed at disparaging political leaders, or digital malign activities during in election campaigns [3]. All these actions are based on the analytics of data retrieved from social media or stolen by hackers that destabilize social life in different countries and stir a new set of tensions in bilateral relations between states.

The foreign policy and diplomacy of the states are compelled to respond all these challenges sending their official message through fractured audience, ambiguous behavior of users, and possible malign activities of adversaries. This respond requires for new practice of digital influence through political framing, special media campaigns, making vulnerable audience to be resilient. The digital anarchy and a lack of global norms and agreements between the traditional actors of the international system on the issues of cyberworld stimulates the digital disorders and revise a source of power in the system moving it from state-centric world to non-state actors including social media. For example, the social media giants are said to be the primary custodians of the norms connected to a responsible behavior and ethnics blockading unwanted politicians and media that, in turn, raises a question about their political power in the system of international relations.

Hence, the datafication offers new challenges for the functioning of the apparatus of diplomacy and foreign policy, namely: digital uncertainty, fractured reality, and political framing. These three will be analyzed in the chapter. The digital diplomacy [4;5] turns out to be a main receiving end of the datafication being a mediator between social media’s consumers and national security of a state working at all levels of diplomacy and foreign policy, including international organizations, ministries of foreign affairs, digital platforms for international broadcasting, and public diplomacy. Therefore, this chapter analyses this constituent part of the digital international relations, namely digital diplomacy, and the purpose of our study is to identify new opportunities and challenges for governmental digital diplomacy in the context of the datafication and its key elements, notably digital uncertainty, fragmentation, and framing.

Retrieving the data on the digital activities of the United States, Russia, and China from social media, the chapter will reveal how the digital diplomacy of these countries deals with digital uncertainty, fragmentation, and political framing in such countries as Afghanistan, Syria and Iran. The methods are social networks’ analytics, hashtag analysis, and semantic analysis. The big data has been retrived from Twitter platform through computational programming, and all specific approaches of accumulating and analysing of the data will be discussed in the following sections of the chapter.

The structure of this chapter is the following. The first and second parts discuss the issues of digital uncertainty, fragmentation, and political framing that determine a vector of the digital diplomacy and digital international relations. The third part presents the machine analysis and interpretations of its results referred to the cases, namely, the analysis of the digital diplomacy conducted by the United States, Russia, and China in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iran during the specific period of times. In conclusion, a discussion of the theoretical and applied findings will be suggested.

**Digital Diplomacy in the Context of Uncertainty and Fragmentation**

Under the pressure of the datafication, the digital diplomacy as a separate institution at ministries of foreign affairs of various countries established since the 2010s, is currently referred as the data diplomacy or data-driven diplomacy. Recently, the data diplomacy is understood as a diplomacy that applies big data analytics. This new diplomatic instrument has been integrated in the foreign policy and diplomacy of the United States, Russia, European countries, China, Iran, and others. While the digital diplomacy of the period of 2010s was *a linear dissemination* of information through social media and was a part of public diplomacy, then the data diplomacy of the period of 2020s is the so called *algorithmic diplomacy* that allows the stakeholders to filter a target audience, to build effective information campaigns, to search and detect sources of unfavorable information.

In the 2010s the linear digital diplomacy choreographed by ministries for foreign affairs and special departments being the main part of a general digital transformation, and, thus, diplomats tried to influence the Internet audience in other countries, informing them about events, setting an agenda, and giving a response to any negative statements. The discussions among experts on the IR Studies focused at that time on the digitalization of the foreign policy apparatus, and the question of how to engage the target audience in a political agenda was primarily discussed. The most of studies and expert reports proclaimed the thesis that the digital diplomacy of states can be effective mobilizing technologies and deterring the actions of radical groups in the cyberworld. A popular field of studies were Twitter revolutions, cyber activism, and other relevant issues associated with the development of the digital ecosystem; The main objects of those studies were governments and states as the traditional actors of the international relations system including the United States, Russia, European countries, China, and Iran. [6;7;8;9;10;11].

Later, a huge number of actors and algorithms for promoting information were introduced to social media’s platforms that revised the digital diplomacy. The latter has been pushed to be only a player among millions of users in social media that shifted its strategies to the ideas that governmental digital diplomacy was needed of the help of influential bloggers or users (influencers), who would promote special slogans, messages, and, hence, change the mind of their followers. This approach seemed to be a more effective device for promotion of a position of a state and for containment of messages coming from various rivals later called as adversaries, than the linear dissemination of information [12]. The idea of ​​algorithms for filtering of users and targeted dissemination of messages have been introduced to a foreign policy and revised it to be more and more digital and dependable on information taking from social media and secret sources. New projects began circulating aimed at deterring of radical propaganda, affecting small clusters and groups in the Internet. The scholarship on the digital studies focused on more applicable methods for effective messaging, including, for example, visual images, nostalgia, or sarcasm used in daily digital practice to discredit opponents or draw the attention of the audience to alternative views [13;14; fifteen][11].

That stage of the digital diplomacy has been swept away by datafication in the period of 2018–2022 or, rather, by rapid and uncontrolled access of various actors to the technologies of artificial intelligence, deep-fakes, synthetic media, etc. that allow the stakeholders to make an information surge and, consequently, impact on target audience. Digital diplomats recognized that it was no longer possible to build a digital information campaign or to influence target audiences without crafting codes and algorithms to reach the audiences or to build a resilience diplomacy.

The evolution of digital diplomacy during the 2010s––2020s illustrates a digital vector in international relations, including unfolding discussions about authority, influence, and revisions in a balance of power [17;18;19;20;21;22].

The datafication stirred unexpected events making the digital diplomacy to react to them that can be reviewed through different concepts including the concept of cyber power. The concept of *cyber power* can be introduced to measure the influence of an actor in world politics. The cyber power defined in the chapter as an ability of a state to impose influence through digital technologies diminishing or strengthening the positions of countries on the map of world politics [23]. The cyber diplomacy of rising powers including, for example, Brazil or China, can change regional and global balance of power. Or, declarations about an alliance for future Internet articulated by the Biden Administration during 2021–2022 could build new digital walls and make a new technological breaches with some countries [24]. The latest bill on the appropriations for foreign operations includes some articles on digital deterrence and anticensorship policy against Russia and China. Moreover, the establishment of new apparatus as the Bureau of Cyber Diplomacy and Digital Policy at the U.S. Department of State and similar agencies in other countries would stir new waves of digital deterrence. Hence, the traditional actors of would politics intent to empower their control over clusters in the cyberworld drawing a new line of the confrontation between them measured by technological resources. The datafication leads to the division of the Internet and the introduction of a new epoch in international relations and foreign policy in terms of the splinternet. The pessimistic scenario about the division implies the emergence of greater fragmentation in nets and the contestation of digital realities, as, for example, occurred around the war in Ukraine, when fakes have been created and announced as a fait accompli while not being a reality.[[1]](#footnote-1) The digital international relations has therefore are functioning among following challenges, namely: digital uncertainty and fractured reality.

*Digital uncertainty* implies that any information moving through social networks might change unexpectedly a behavior of individuals, social groups, or a foreign policy of a state; and, messaging of official channels of digital diplomacy can be undermined by a more effective information campaign of non-state actors, including bloggers, journalists, cyber dissidents, and etc. *A fractured reality* implies the existence of millions of cybergroups and audiences with their owned constructed knowledge of reality, politics, and attitudes.

The datafication is the context of spreading of fragmented information, reality, and, hence, world politics that creates millions of competing interpretations, both in narrative and visual messages. Stakeholders (owners) of political realities influence a perception of world politics by millions of passive followers [25]. The users exist inside of the boundaries of their cyber communities, filter bubbles, and echo chambers making personalised information campaigns.[[2]](#footnote-2) For example, digital actions by specific groups during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections or by opposition groups in Belarus or Sudan were effective for the reason of the skillful mobilization of fractured communities around emotional hashtags [26;27]. It is not new but must be indicated again that the fragmentation of any society or a state into user groups according to their values, beliefs, and way of thinking in the cyberspace leads to a political polarization that can to reduce trust and break down a political consensus.[[3]](#footnote-3) On the other side, the fragmented digital realities allow the digital diplomacy to shape a political agenda in social media and to restrain information campaigns of other states or non-governmental actors, promoting their own messages and delegitimizing the actions of adversaries. According to the recent studies, some states and diplomats took advantage of this new fragmented reality to gain their foreign policy problems. Some researchers rank Russia among the states who exploited fractured groups in its digital diplomacy and made impact on values and behavior of citizens in different countries [25]. The unresolved problem is that provocative posts and news are generated not only by users or digital diplomats, but also by algorithms creating so called synthetic faked content. And, the detection of the synthetic content requires for highly technological machine analysis procedures including the AI making different countries to be vulnerable for malign campaigns.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The dilemmas notably the digital uncertainty and fragmentation can be overcome by offensive digital diplomacy in terms of application of the methods of political framing. The *political framing* implies the inclusion of elements of values, agenda, and political culture empowering the wanted attitudes to events among users. The frames explain also the meanings of events and disseminate a motivating context among users.[[5]](#footnote-5) Different studies and our own analysis demonstrated below give evidence that the policy of the political framing could be an driver for shaping an agenda and revising a behavior of groups in social media platforms.

State-sponsored platforms of international broadcasting or digital diplomacy operate in an environment of unexpected and unpredictable competition with not only with other states but, in most cases, with bloggers, media outlets that can undermine efforts of a governmental information machine at any moment. The linear digital diplomacy cannot deal effectively with these challenges because it disseminated information without taking into consideration preferences of a target audience and a power of local bloggers or the media. A good example is the situation in Venezuela in 2019, when the channels of the U.S. international broadcasting, having been popular before in Venezuela, have lost their audience due to a sharp rise in a number and popularity of local bloggers, mass-media, and digital activity of citizens [20]. The international broadcasting of the United States as well of Russia, and China have been unexpectedly blown out from the local mass media market in the context of digital transformation unfolded in Venezuela. So, in order to make a message go through and to reach the audience were to exploit other approaches in terms of algorithmic diplomacy. This type of diplomacy involves emotions, tone, and various new practices to promote a desired narrative or information in order to compete with the information disseminated by local media, journalists and other actors [28;29]. The skillful application of keywords and tones in posts or tweets contributes to the paving a path of a message through of an array of disparate audiences, echo chambers, filter bubbles that together make up a fragmented digital reality.

In order to understand these phenomena namely the digital uncertainty, the fragmentation, and the framing, we have applied the big data analytics that, consequently, has given to us new empirical facts about how datafication diminishes the impact of government-sponsored digital diplomacy and, at the same time, boosts new opportunities for making the digital diplomacy be more effective.

**What We Know from Big Data Analysis?**

Three target countries were selected––Afghanistan, Syria, and Iran––to evaluate the approaches of the digital powers. They are embroiled in some crises, and the social media as Twitter was available as a platform for political discussions, and, more importantly, the digital diplomacy, and international broadcasting channels of the United States, Russia, and China tried to engage local users in agenda.

We have analysed government-sponsored official accounts of digital diplomacy and digital media accounts of the United states, Russia, and China. In order to understand how the digital diplomacy faces the phenomenon of datafication in terms of a variety of messages and realities coming from a million of private channels, it is necessary to rank the official channels of the United States, Russia, and China among the pool of influential participants of Twitter discussions on the issues of Afghanistan, Syria, and Iran. The ranking procedure will answer the question, if the governmental digital diplomacy’s tweets have an impact on users who were engaged in both global and local discussions. We have retrieved data from different periods of time, including tweets about Afghanistan from January of 2008 to December of 2018, about Syria from January 2010 to December 2017, and the case on Iran covers the period of January 2020. It is during these various periods of time, the digital diplomacy of the United States, Russia, and China were visibly mobilized to engage local publics and Twitter users, and, thus, attempting to promote their national political goals in the target countries. If the cases on Afghanistan and Syria reveal approaches for engagement policy in long-term prospective, then the case on Iran answers the question about the possibilities of the digital diplomacy to resolve short-term issues promoting a narrative, a frame, and an identity in a short period of time as the United States accomplished in Iran after assassination of Qasem Soleimani in January 2020.

The data applied in this analysis comprised so called big and small data. The big data involves a set of data retrieved from the Twitter platform and dissected them through machine methods. The small data has been take from different social media’s platforms and includes a limited number of posts or tweets received both manually or by machine. Expanding a discussion about the data in the studies of international relations we argue that it is possible to apply both small and big data, but the analysis of limited number of tweets or posts and further interpretation of big data analysis should be done taking into account specifics of a political and sociocultural context in which digital actions take place [30]. [17]. Moreover, it must be noted that the most perfect and evidence-based methods include the following: *hashtag tracking, network analysis, sentiment analysis, and topic modeling*. The hashtag analysis provides an answer to the question of how a discussion on a certain topic is developing, whose posts are most effective, and which bloggers and users get the most popularity among followers taking a label as *influencers*. The *network analysis* reveals the relationships between key bloggers, international broadcast channels, and other stakeholders that build informational discourse, noise, and context around a particular issue. *The sentiment analysis* of a text evaluates a reaction of users to proposed topics or information campaigns that helps to identify users and their political position [17;20]. Whereas the sentiment analysis is done to determine a tone or attitude of posts, *the topic modeling* is applied to determine key themes of attraction. In other words, the topic modeling correlates topics and online statements. Using big data analytics, experts can answer questions about the effectiveness of digital diplomacy and engagement policies.

In order to evaluate the digital diplomacy of three countries, we have used a *hashtag analysis*. This type of the inquiry involves a programming of all tweets or posts with a particular hashtag. Using a machine algorithms, we have retrieved all available tweets containing a specific hashtag in English, Arabic, Dari, Pashto, and Farsi (Twitter Advanced Search webpage). The Python programming language and the SQL query in the “Postgresql” database have allowed us to classify the most *influential* tweets and accounts including official diplomatic accounts, international broadcasters, various media platforms, popular local bloggers, local organizations, and etc. The analysis of a geographical location of bloggers, media, and other participants allow us to consider about the impact of local or internationally-appraised bloggers and media on attitudes and behavior of users in Afghanistan or Syria. For Iran, *a sentiment analysis* of posts and tweets was done, and, unlike previous cases, the analysis was based on a limited number of data referred in the scholarship as small data. Finally, a content analysis was applied and a tone of key lexical units has been measured that give us new findings of how digital diplomacy are being developed. The results of our analysis fortified the answer to broader questions about the digital IR and digitalisation, notably, if the governmental-sponsored digital diplomacy in terms of its official accounts and international broadcasting channels has an impact on the community of cyber-users? Or, groups, bloggers, and other various non-state entities have more influence limiting the dissemination of posts initiated by official channels.

The analysis of the data referred to the governmental digital diplomacy in the context of datafication, gives us the evidence that digital uncertainty, fragmentation, and the policy of framing are the key and cohesive components for the successful functioning of digital diplomacy. These challenges make it clear that the digital diplomacy of countries cannot be more effective than the cyber activity of individuals, bloggers, the media, or celebrities.

At any uncertain moment, a post or digital action can eliminate all the efforts of international broadcasting channels or digital diplomats aimed at engaging target audience or setting a national policy’s agenda. This uncertainty can be overcome with the help of everyday monitoring of the cyber-space for the growth of popularity of stakeholders that could lead to the partnership with them withing the governmental digital diplomacy. The case on Afghanistan is illustrative: During several years, an Afghan pro-Western blogger managed to win the attention of users disseminating positive posts about the coalition military and development projects.

Fragmentation is a more complicated dilemma of the cyberworld allowing informational bubbles be functioning inside social media’s groups and be creating a fractured digital reality and thus be vulnerable to fake news. This dilemma could be overcome by expanding a number of participants, hashtag diplomacy, filtering, and specific campaigns to detect sources of unwanted information. However, the case on Syria shows that it is not easy for digital diplomacy channels to change the traditions of ordinary users about sources of consuming the news.

Finally, the promoting of the policy through the framing is the most important driver for successful digital diplomacy in the epoch of datafication. Analysing U.S. digital diplomacy in Iran, we see that framing can reinforce the goals of the traditional diplomacy through setting of appropriate keywords and a tone of posts and hashtags.

The successful digital diplomacy is the algorithmic one and requires for the big data analytics to message and to deter unwanted information. Definitely, foreign policy’s priorities shift a scope of the digital diplomacy. The case of China shows that Syria was not its primary target in its international broadcasting or social media’s activities, and Chinese channels did not conduct wide information campaigns; however, Afghanistan was included in the priorities of the Beijing digital diplomacy.

All these challenges and methods work while norms and agreements on responsible behavior in cyberspace are absent, but unauthorized methods of obtaining sensitive data, strategic leaks, cyber-attacks, and etc. can affect attitudes and a behavior of users that, in turn, influence a real politics. The digital transformation of the system of international relations leads countries to introduce a new set of binding agreements that draw red lines and stipulate digital walls or, vise verse, maintain and reinforce an open digital world. However, in any case, such agreements would regulate state-to-state or state-to-entities relations in the main clusters of digital international relations, including data diplomacy; cyber security and cyber diplomacy; global Internet governance, and digital elections.

1. About the Ghost [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ([Fuller, S. Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game. London: Anthem, 2018. 207 p.]; [Castells, M. Communication Power. Oxford University Press, 2009. 571 p.]; [Lakoff, G. Political Mind: You Can’t Understand 21st-century Politics with an 18th-century Brain. N.Y.: Viking, 2008. 292 p.]; [Vaccari, C. Chadwick, A. Deepfakes and Disinformation: Exploring the Impact of Synthetic Political Video on Deception, Uncertainty, and Trust in News. Social Media + Society. January–March 2020. P. 1–13]. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. И себяж [Del Vicario, M., Vivaldo, G., Bessi, A., Zollo, F., Scala, A., Caldarelli, G., & Quattrociocchi, W. Echo Chambers: Emotional Contagion and Group Polarization on Facebook. Scientific Reports 6, 2016. N. Pag. Retrieved on 10.05.2022 from <https://www.nature.com/articles/srep37825>] [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. .[ Pennycook, G., Epstein, Z., Mosleh, M. et al. Shifting attention to accuracy can reduce misinformation online. Nature 592, 2021. P. 590–595. Retrieved on 10.05.2022 from <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-021-03344-2#citeas>] [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. .[Fillmore, C. J. Frame Semantics. Linguistics in the Morning Calm. Selected Papers from the Morning SICOL-1981. Ed. by Linguistic Society of Korea. Hanshin Publishing Company, 1982. P. 111-137.] [↑](#footnote-ref-5)