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The UK digital diplomacy after the withdrawal from the EU: rebranding or innovative strategy?

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A chi non è arrivato fin qui.

*A chi non ha ancora superato le Colonne d'Ercole,
Gibilterra non è così lontana.*

Introduction

A fast digitisation of our daily lives and the evolution of contemporary technologies have strongly affected the power structures of politics, together with the participation of the people in the newsmaking and policy activities. In addition, because of its horizontal nature, digital media favours non-state-centric narratives, thus bringing state and non-state actors contending the very same publics. Hence, communication strategies and narratives have recently become public-centric.

Diplomacy is not exempted from these adjustments. Quite the opposite, given the centrality of communication in the diplomatic milieu, the political and rhetorical expertise remains central to the work of diplomatic agents, but their work is progressively matched with digital and data analysis skills that can advance their engagement purposes.

The present thesis will deal with the topic of digital diplomacy. This has a horizontal conception, which is meant to engage in a dialogue on equal foot between parties using social media platforms and digital technologies. The parties involved in such dialogic exercise are both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of a country, together with its diplomatic missions and posts all over the world, and the receiving audience. The latter is not limited to the community of the receiving state, rather it extends to the global public.

Digital diplomacy is often mistakenly intended as a superficial activity, since this dialogic exercise is carried out, by many, as a one-sided narrative of the tasks and activities finalised by the various diplomatic missions around the world. However, it should be centred on levelling the playing field between the sending and receiving counterparts. To this point, digital diplomacy entails a communicative strategy.

The first and more theoretical part of the thesis will be dedicated to analysing the evolution of diplomatic activities from club to network diplomacy. Thus, from an insular, elitarian and secret conduct of diplomatic tasks to a more dematerialised, physically distanced, yet tethered fashion. The objective of such practice is to create engagement as well as increasing, at the utmost possible level, the visibility to the targeted audience(s). As a consequence of strategic engagement, the state aims to generate influence by creating a receptive environment and by setting in motion a horizontal communication with the public. Twenty-first century public diplomacy entails a necessary inclusion of the global population in the diplomatic calculus.

For this reason, there is also a subversion of the paradigm that equates the MFA to a gatekeeper. This is due to the utter change in the information inflows and the urge for a prompt real-time answer to the context at stake.

Differently, the second chapter will deal with the definition of Digital Diplomacy, along with the reason why it is born and from which concepts it needs to be distinguished. In addition, an extensive analysis is carried out on the *loci* in which digital diplomacy is performed, that is on social media platforms. These are the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the Web 2.0, and as such, they can shape the performance of digital diplomacy. Because of their dual role, both as theatre and player in the practice, the last part of the chapter is devoted to retracing the hurdles that digital diplomatic activities outlast on their route, such as the functioning of the platforms (algorithms and echo chambers) and its users' behaviour (digital astroturfing and trolling).

Therefore, the final aim of the present research thesis is to delve deeper into the digital communication strategy set forth by the United Kingdom in the "Post-Brexit" era. Looking at the way in which the intertwining of digital skills and the impact of new communication techniques became part and parcel of the policy formation and by so doing it can foster and achieve the diplomatic objectives of a country.

As reported in the "Global Britain in a competitive age" (March 2021), which is the British Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, the concept of public engagement and the enhancement of the strategy capability are the utmost priorities in the reform process in the aftermath of Brexit. By so doing, the British foreign policy apparatus could hand-tailor the Integrated Review to said strategies, as well as receive evident feedback about the perception of the country's foreign policy by residents, IOs and any other willingly contributing organisation.

On its side, the UK has the advantage of talking the most spread language in the world, indeed they consider themselves as "A soft power superpower" (one of the sections within the Integrated Review), yet their recent breakaway from the European Union makes it a difficult path towards the conservation of such distinguished position on a global scale.

Hence, the research question is whether the digital communication strategy put forward by the United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) has already had a

verifiable impact on the perception of Great Britain in the world. Moreover, the aim of the thesis is to understand how innovative that strategy is in terms of the narrative about the UK as “Global Britain” or it is simply an attempt to re-branding the UK in the light of the British Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, issued in March 2021.

CHAPTER 1

The evolution of diplomacy

It has always seemed to me the real art in this business is not so much moving information or guidance or policy five or 10,000 miles. That is an electronic problem. The real art is to move it the last three feet in face-to-face conversation.

Edward R. Murrow, ABC TV's "Issues and Answers," August 4, 1963

1.1 The evolution of diplomacy and the new media

Never before have we been so interconnected. Messages flow at the highest attainable speed, and with the incoming 5G infrastructures, the rate of downloading and transmission of information will keep on increasing.

Some may argue that modern diplomacy, intended as a peaceful tool through which to pursue the goals of foreign policy, is nothing but old diplomacy with some new features. Nonetheless, diplomacy has undoubtedly evolved into something new, especially since its objective remains unchanged, but the available tools and skills differ over time. Shoshana Zuboff described through the "horseless carriage syndrome", the sudden encounter of something unprecedented, for instance the appearance of a horseless carriage, i.e. the automobile, and the consequent reaction whereby people cannot help but using older schemes for newer elements and notions¹. On a similar vein, people confronted with "the unprecedented" digital diplomacy cannot help but fall into common knowledge.

Digital diplomacy takes place, so to speak, on social media, which willing or not are touching closely and altering the world and people's daily lives. It is sufficient to have a glance at the statistics of the most used social media worldwide to visually grasp the reach that these platforms have.^{2,3}

¹ Zuboff, Shoshana. *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power: Barack Obama's books of 2019*. Profile books, 2019, p. 12.

² For World population UN DESA. (June 17, 2019). Forecast about the development of the world population from 2015 to 2100 (in billions) [Graph]. In *Statista*. Retrieved November 03, 2021, from <https://bit.ly/3rspUPF>.

³ We Are Social, & Hootsuite, & DataReportal. (July 21, 2021). Most popular social networks worldwide as of July 2021, ranked by number of active users (in millions) [Graph]. In *Statista*. Retrieved November 03, 2021, from <https://bit.ly/3fwVfv1>.

Table 1**Essential headline data for social platforms use on a global scale**

SOCIAL NETWORK	NUMBER OF ACTIVE USERS (in millions)
World population	7,750
Facebook	2,853
YouTube	2,291
WhatsApp	2,000
Instagram	1,386
Weixin/WeChat	1,242
TikTok	732
Telegram	550
Twitter	397

The scope of the present thesis is not to delve deeper into these statistics, even though they represent a fundamental point of departure for the work we have ahead. On a theoretical basis, nearly the entire world population can be encountered on a social medium (see table 1)⁴. Yet, as it would be clearer in the further sections, outreaching all of these virtual people does not imply an uncomplicated engagement. If we consider the saying that the future is built upon the past, then it is necessary to trace the steps back into the origins of communication services, in particular how these developments were usefully employed in daily diplomatic practice.

For our academic purposes, the carrier pigeons as designated means of messages, letters and missives transportation will be skipped, therefore the journey starts with the arrival of the telegraph as the first medium to reach others in a digital fashion. The telegraph significantly changed the diplomatic paradigm and its *modus operandi*. As instructions from the centre to the periphery could flow faster than ever before, yet at a limited length in terms of characters, the telegraph was perfectly suited to warfare. During the 19th century, Britain had a superior

⁴ According to the statistics provided by wearesocial.com, in January 2020 the number of people active social users reached 3,80 billions, revealing a penetration of 49%. For further info, see “Digital 2020: Global Digital Overview.” *We Are Social Global*, 5 Oct. 2021, <https://bit.ly/3FDgkhS>.

communication sector (it probably still does), also because two English men, Charles Wheatstone and William Fothergill Cooke, were the ones to set up the first public telegraph line⁵. In the diplomatic milieu, it became part and parcel of the post, as British diplomats had direct lines available both at their residence and holiday homes⁶.

Although the invention and eventual use of telegraph represented a revolutionary moment in diplomacy, since it delinked the physical sphere with its burdensome communication hampered by lengthy travel from the temporal sphere, it seemed to be “the end of diplomacy”, as Lord Palmerston exclaimed after having received the first telegraph⁷.

On an even more disapproving standpoint, according to Nickles, the communication via telegraph did not uniformly accelerate the communication sector, in fact it varied from country to country. For instance, the Russian Tsar Nicolas I was suspicious about this technological and democratising novelty, indeed he deemed the telegraph as too “subversive”⁸, because of the spread of information to many.

On another side, it enabled higher grounds of supervision by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) over their subordinates. It obliged diplomats to report to the core offices of foreign policy, thereby reducing their individual initiative. Furthermore, Nickles maintains that the telegraph set the watershed in the crisis and non-crisis management. In the age *ante* telegraph, diplomats were provided guidelines from which there could be some margins of manoeuvre and leeway in non-crisis periods, therefore the duration of a crisis depended on the time it took to exchange information from core to periphery, and vice versa. Differently, as the telegraph was integrally introduced in the work, it also reduced the average duration of crises by accelerating the tempo of diplomacy⁹, but also because of the public opinion’s pressure to intervene. At last, as news became more available to a larger public (in democratic countries), people started being part of the diplomatic events.

⁵ Solymar, Laszlo. "The effect of the telegraph on law and order, war, diplomacy, and power politics." *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 25.3 (2000): 203-210.

⁶ *ibidem*

⁷ Ramaprasad, Jyotika. "Media diplomacy: In search of a definition." *Gazette* (Leiden, Netherlands) 31.1 (1983): 69-78.

⁸ Kurbalija, Jovan. 2013. Ten parallels between the telegraph and the Internet in international politics. Diplo Blog. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3A8Pq0d>. Accessed on the 10th of February

⁹ Nickles, David Paull. *Under the wire*. Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 79-85.

Later, the telephone dethroned the telegraph as the preferred means of communication. The former allowed for a transposition of the spoken word from face-to-face meetings to long distance calls. Of course, it could not replace in presence conversations, nor allowed for a mass communication, yet the communicator and the recipient had a direct space where discussions could be more detailed, and it reduced the timeframe between decision-making and implementation of a policy or directive.

The most important example of “telephone diplomacy” is found in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, in the midst of the Cold War, where the US and Soviet superpowers realised that in order to prevent the escalation into a global warfare, a hotline between Washington and Moscow had to be established. This specific “crisis made it evident that secure, reliable and swift communications were vital”¹⁰. For this reason, the next year the United States and the Soviet Union signed a *Memorandum of Understanding regarding the establishment of a direct communication link*, which was followed by the installation of a hotline in August 1963. Nonetheless, the first prototypes of hotlines did not prevent any grounds of misunderstanding and miscalculation. On this matter, Egilsson asserted that telephone diplomacy could represent a double-edged sword in communications with adversaries, since translators were on call 24 hours a day and needed to be competent and reliable under pressure¹¹ for the sake of a prompt emergency resolution.

The advent of the radio eventually introduced the public's influence in diplomatic affairs. By this it is not meant that every citizen could intervene into the decision-making of a given country, rather that people were indirect witnesses of events abroad, especially after the arrival of televisions. In some peculiar instances, even events coming from other galaxies started having an impact on people's everyday lives as in the case that upset the USA, through the dramatisation of a play by Orson Welles, which was confused with a true incoming alien invasion happening¹².

Through its medium and long wave broadcasts, the radio was able to make the world smaller

¹⁰ Egilsson, Haraldur Þór. *The Origins, Use and Development of Hot Line Diplomacy*. Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2003, p. 3.

¹¹ *ibidem*, p. 4-6

¹² Although the radio speakers informed the public beforehand, they could do very little to prevent the havoc generated in the following hours, as the New York Times's first page reported. Available at: <https://nyti.ms/33JiW0G>. Accessed on the 10th of February

and the knowledge wider. It is not by accident that “diplomats’ role as *sole* interpreters of world events was altered”¹³ because it often clashed with the reports and descriptions of radio and television live broadcasts. To this point, although distant, the power of images is capable of touching foreign citizens but also their decision-makers. As a last resort, because of the so-called “CNN effect”, foreign countries could be triggered by the power of distant images, thus initiating a humanitarian or military intervention¹⁴.

As we entered the global communication era, some new tools falling under the category of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have radically changed the playing field. At the tip of our fingers, using the Internet and surfing the World Wide Web, mobile phones have proliferated in our daily lives through instant messaging.

However, before social media platforms, the email constituted an authentic gamechanger in the diplomatic landscape as well. The first example was a brief email exchange¹⁵ in 1998 between heads of state: the Swedish Prime Minister, Carl Bildt, and the President of the United States of America, Bill Clinton. Some months later, Bill Clinton also set an unprecedented milestone by sending his very first email into space to John Glenn¹⁶, a US astronaut and Senator on board of the space shuttle Discovery. In 2010, Carl Bildt wrote about internet freedom and inferred that his exchange with the US President was a ground-breaking occasion in a revolutionised world¹⁷. The revolution he touched upon was the end of the Cold War, and, in particular, of the control of fax machines and phone directory by the Soviet Union communist regime and its bloc¹⁸.

According to Sandre, this email exchange between the two leaders “focused in part on how the Internet was changing the political and foreign policy arena and communications around the

¹³ Seib, Philip. *The future of diplomacy*. John Wiley & Sons, 2016, *emphasis added*.

¹⁴ Robinson, Piers. "The CNN effect: can the news media drive foreign policy?." *Review of international studies* 25.2 (1999): 301-309.

¹⁵ The framed copy of the first e-mail exchange between a U.S. President and a foreign head of government. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3GzxWwu>. Accessed on the 10th of February

¹⁶ Photo of Bill Clinton writing his first email to John Glenn. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3rpmspa>. Accessed on the 10th of February

¹⁷ Bildt, Carl. "Tear down these walls against Internet freedom." *Washington Post* (2010). Available at: <https://wapo.st/3I9rYTj>. Accessed on the 10th of February

¹⁸ Such authority control of mails or any other correspondence with Western Germany was conducted by the Stasi, as it is displayed in the movie “*Das Leben der Anderen*” by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006.

world”¹⁹. He also added that thanks to these new technological and digital tools, diplomacy was changing at a fast pace. On these grounds, Seib is impressed with the pervasiveness of mobile technology, by defining the Internet as the most transformative phenomenon, ever since the movable-type printing press invented by Gutenberg in the fifteenth century²⁰.

The advent of the Internet could not only allow the email functioning, but rather it is intended as a means of communication that enables the publication, exchange, and storage of information²¹. Thus, it definitely changed the rules of the game. In this regard, Westcott suggests three main changes determined by the Internet in the international relations realm²²:

1. *It allowed a propagation of ideas to an ever-growing number of voices and audiences.*

As stated by Philips, the coordinator of International Information programs of the US Department of State, “when you think about communication you have to think in terms of amplification of your message. Technology is changing how and where people get information”²³.

2. *It accelerated and freed the dissemination of information.*

On this point, it is important to stress the concept of digital disintermediation, which especially in the newsmaking market has led to the elimination of intermediaries between newsmaking actors (e.g. journalists and newspapers) and the audiences. By doing so, the supply of news and the demand by consumers and recipients directly meet on the Internet without further filter, thereby making diplomatic reports redundant.

In addition, this supply chain of news does not consider the consequences and handling of such information, among which fabrications can often be found. This represents one of the critical points in the information age, not only for a diplomat. Among others, as Jönsson and Hall maintain, “whereas diplomats during most of history had a virtual monopoly on the supply of information from foreign polities, they today face competition not only from the intelligence community but also from the media”²⁴. The presence of real-time coverage through social

¹⁹ *ibidem* 13, p. XIX.

²⁰ *ibidem* 13

²¹ Westcott, Nicholas. "Digital diplomacy: The impact of the internet on international relations." (2008).

²² *ibidem*

²³ Sandre, Andreas. *Digital diplomacy: Conversations on innovation in foreign policy*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, p. 47.

²⁴ Jönsson, Christer, and Martin Hall. *Essence of diplomacy*. Springer, 2005, p. 74.

media by common citizens is both capable of informing people about the events and their whereabouts, and consequently igniting some unforeseen events. For instance, both during the 2009 protests in Iran also called “Twitter revolution”, and the event that initiated the Tunisian spring, when a street merchant set himself on fire, the local population kept the momentum of the protests going with a simple yet powerful tool: mobile phones.

The use of social media to spread information between citizens does complicate a diplomat’s work, since it undermines their credibility. Furthermore, it changes the paradigm for a diplomat from an exclusive to a late-on-news scenario, since most of today’s news no longer come from national intelligence services but rather from radio, television and newspapers.

3. [The Internet] *enables traditional diplomatic services to be delivered faster and more cost-effectively, both to one's own citizens and government, and to those of other countries.*

The two aforementioned points underline the power of ideas and the networks carrying the former.

According to Social Network Analysis (SNA), a network is a collection of entities, also called nodes, which are interconnected with links. Despite not being a formal theory, but rather a broad strategy for investigating social structures, SNA ponders the intensity and the way in which interactions in between the nodes occurs²⁵. From this point of view, the Internet represents a social network of an unprecedented scale, which theoretically encompasses connections with every possible node.

As we will see in the second chapter, this transformation happens concomitantly with the entry into the game of nonstate actors, thereby providing voice and platform of dissent, as well as participation to a growing number of formerly excluded people and communities.

From Club to Network Diplomacy

Diplomacy is undergoing a process of transformation but still maintaining some traditional features and practices. The introduction of the Internet and its related democratising tools have levelled the diplomatic playing field, thereby commencing an unprecedented change from club

²⁵ Otte, Evelien, and Ronald Rousseau. "Social network analysis: a powerful strategy, also for the information sciences." *Journal of information Science* 28.6 (2002): 441-453.

to network diplomacy. Notwithstanding this, it is fundamental to stress that this new strand of diplomacy has not entirely replaced face-to-face, *in camera* meetings as well as formal lunches and dinners. Indeed, some newly emerging countries, whose diplomatic service has recently surfaced, are sticking to the abovementioned old practices during formal and informal meetings. Yet, according to the Chilean diplomat Heine, in order to be effective in their job, diplomats must practice network diplomacy in the 21st century²⁶.

The shift from club to network diplomacy has not only quantitative effects, rather qualitative. The club model of diplomacy is made up of elite, male and disdainful of anyone outside their cycle. Nowadays, these three characteristics are either slightly eroded or no longer found in some geographically unevenly distributed countries.

Starting from the last point of the club diplomacy's definition, interpersonal relations are not only restricted to diplomatic peers or delegates of nation-states, but rather the evolution and consequent fragmentation of the international governance, which is no longer encircled in bounded territories as provided by the Westphalian order, has paved the way for the entry into the game of a plethora of non-state actors (as we will see later). Traditional, or "Westphalian diplomacy" perfectly fit into the realist paradigm, where the states had to safeguard their national interests. However, in a more interconnected world, national interest as an "all-purpose guiding principle" can no longer exist, and it is therefore replaced by the concept of balance of interests. In such an abundance of hurdles deriving from globalisation, diplomats must find a way to overcome them and renew their practice. Diplomacy underwent a horizontal expansion with regards the issues dealt by its practitioners. Indeed, in the daily agenda of a diplomat, it is as likely to have a meeting with businessmen and women talking about Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), exchanges of goods, or with activists addressing global public goods (see for instance climate change), as it is likely to look up news in the morning. All this to maintain that the work of a Foreign Service officer, be it at home or abroad, is no longer inscribed to the national boundaries, especially when global issues cannot but be solved in cooperation with others.

Second, women's equal participation and leadership in political and public life is now part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030. After years of activism, women started being

²⁶ Heine, Jorge. "From club to network diplomacy." *The Oxford handbook of modern diplomacy*. 2016, p. 10

recognised as a *conditio sine qua non* in addressing societal problems. Indeed, the adoption of the landmark resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on 31 October 2000 called for women and girls' protection from conflict-related sexual violence in conflict scenarios and urged for the involvement of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peacebuilding and negotiation frameworks. Yet, on these grounds, there is still a substantial gap to reduce the so-called "hegemonic masculinity", where a lack of heterosociality covers with concrete the male presence in negotiating and diplomatic settings²⁷. In addition, in non-secular countries, women's presence is either oftentimes relegated to less prestigious assignments or excluded altogether from the workplace and workforce²⁸.

Notwithstanding this, the diplomatic practice has realised that in order to put into practice an equal representation of women, they must perform top positions. In recent times, this social enhancement was witnessed with the appointment of the American Stephanie Williams as Acting Special Representative and Head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya²⁹ in 2020 and before that, Catherine Ashton (in 2009) and her successor Federica Mogherini (in 2013) worked as High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP). Nevertheless, during Mogherini's mandate, the nine European External Service Action (EEAS) Special Envoys were men. In 2019, still in the field of the European Union, Ursula von der Leyen was appointed President of the European Commission, which represents the EU abroad, together with the HR/VP and the President of the European Council. Even though von der Leyen covers an elective and political office, since she was elected by the European Parliament, she is the first woman covering that position.

Moreover, the presence of women at lower ranks in the Foreign Affairs Ministries' organisational chart is non-homogeneous and scattered, therefore showing representational inequalities. This situation is accentuated at the negotiation level, where the presence of women at the discussing table is solely relegated to "soft" humanitarian spheres of foreign policy. Consequently, women's accounts and perspectives in decisional processes are excluded. This exacerbates the old club model features, and in some cases, for instance within peacebuilding

²⁷ Towns, A., and Karin Aggestam. *Gendering Diplomacy and International Negotiation*. Vol. 210. Cham, Suiza: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

²⁸ For instance, women in some conservative Muslim countries are exempted from work for religious reasons.

²⁹ Available at: <https://bit.ly/3IgfVni>. Accessed on the 10th of February

scenarios, it does not include women's issues in the society at stake, notwithstanding that some studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between women participation in negotiating and peacebuilding processes and durability of the outcome and peace ^{30,31}.

Hence, network diplomacy represents a more dynamic, flatter and less hierarchical mode of conducting diplomacy with respect to classical or cabinet diplomacy. In such a post-Westphalian scenario, where the shifting conception of national sovereignty and a complex interdependence are springing before our eyes, diplomacy cannot do anything but be empowered by radically changing the context, tools, actors, and the domain of trade³². This does not imply a complete detachment from the club model of diplomacy, but rather both "club and network models of diplomacy represent different forms of the same practice"³³. While club diplomacy envisaged an insular, elitarian and secret conduct of diplomatic tasks, the network model has veered to a more dematerialised, physically distanced, yet tethered fashion. The latter does not have as main purpose the signing of agreements in secret chambers, on the contrary the network model provides grounds of transparency and accountability. Indeed, the democratisation of the news in the information age, which takes a variety of forms, such as the live coverage of events by everyday people strolling on the streets, allows for an immediate grasp of the events abroad, or even the prompt effects of the decisions of their leaders. Thus, nowadays not only people want to be informed, rather they actively yield the right to be accounted for.

To this point, a network diplomat working through the webs must be able to communicate complex issues in the most accessible, fashionable, and resharable way. Communicative skills are fundamental in the engagement activity across networks. This feedback communication takes place both written and oral, for instance through press conferences or through the publication of the minutes of the multi- and bilateral meetings.

Network diplomacy goes beyond the normative duties of diplomats to represent, protect,

³⁰ Krause, Jana, Werner Krause, and Piia Bränfors. "Women's participation in peace negotiations and the durability of peace." *International Interactions* 44.6 (2018): 985-1016.

³¹ Nilsson, Desirée. "Anchoring the peace: Civil society actors in peace accords and durable peace." *International Interactions* 38.2 (2012): 243-266.

³² Cooper, Andrew F., Jorge Heine, and Ramesh Thakur, eds. *The Oxford handbook of modern diplomacy*. OUP Oxford, 2013, p. 20-25

³³ *ibidem*

negotiate, report and promote, as provided by article 3 of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations in 1961³⁴. Its integral task is the projection of the diplomat's country into the host nation.

Table 2
Club versus Network Diplomacy

	Number of players	Structure	Form	Transparency	Main purpose
Club Diplomacy	Few	Hierarchical	Mostly written	Low	Sign agreements
Network Diplomacy	Many	Flatter	Written and oral	High	Increase bilateral flows

Source: Heine, Jorge. "On the manner of practising the new diplomacy." *Global Governance and Diplomacy*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2008. 271-287.

³⁴ Article 3 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, 1961.

1.2. Diplomacy as communication

Soft Power

Since the end of the Second World War, countries have been trying to achieve foreign policy as well as diplomatic objectives without resorting neither to violent nor military means, thereby slavishly following article 2 paragraph 4 of the United Nations Charter³⁵. In this context, as the use of violence and conflicts plummeted from the end of the Cold War onwards, American political scientist Joseph Nye introduced the concept of “soft power” in 1990. He maintained that “soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” (2004)³⁶.” He also adds that whenever one state is able to obtain something from others by smoothly moving into their direction rather than by using the carrots and sticks, then soft power has worked. In this case, carrots metaphorically represent some inducements, while sticks are threats. Both represent typical capabilities and tools of the mainstream realist international relations theory, and they are included in the so-called *hard power*.

Hard power is characterised by the presence and employability of physical assets (see military ones) in the conduct of international relations. The use or threat thereof coerces other actors to move accordingly. On the other hand, soft power is best exemplified by a country that, using the way it is perceived abroad to its advantage, can shape, influence, and eventually achieve a given goal on foreign policy grounds. Therefore, the concept of soft power is a centripetal force, which propagates from a country to another, it is a force of attraction. It refers to the idea of persuading and co-opting others in the international arena. Indeed, from a performative standpoint, soft power is enhanced when one’s policies are deemed as legitimate as they are.

Of course, other countries do not look at a country’s image as sacred, but rather it is found in an endearment of other nations, which might end up following their policies suit. Nevertheless, in 2003, still Nye developed the term “smart power” to counter the widespread misperception that soft power could produce effective foreign policy all by itself.³⁷

While analysing American power as a whole, Nye realised that it could not solely be grounded

³⁵ Article 2 UN Charter, par. 4: “All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations”.

³⁶ Nye, Joseph S. 2004. Soft power and American foreign policy. *Political Science Quarterly* 119 (2), 256.

³⁷ Nye, Joseph S. "Get smart: Combining hard and soft power." *Foreign affairs* (2009): 160-163.

on its strengths but also on its limits. To this point, he clarified that in those years, the international relations realm was divided in a three-dimensional chess game³⁸. At the military level, hence the hard power one, the US was witnessing a period of unipolarity. In a different manner, multipolarity prevailed over international economic relations, finally at the bottom level, the one of transnational relations such as climate change, pandemics or terrorism, chaos was in force, since power was diffused to nonstate actors, too.

Soft power alters social contexts, hence it could be considered a meta-power, which according to Hall “refers to the shaping of social relationships, social structures, and situations by altering the matrix of possibilities and orientations within which social action occurs”³⁹. For this reason, soft power is often associated with agenda control, because the formal agenda is established by a state, which can mould the others’ interests and preferences through the effectiveness of its soft power.

Although soft power has brought to light a brand-new understanding of the conception of power, it has some similarities with the Gramscian approach to “cultural hegemony”. Within his prison writings during the Fascist regime, Antonio Gramsci identified a process of systemic domination, under an unequivocally neo-Marxist lens, which is exercised by dominant classes over subaltern ones. This process was set in motion through two main engines⁴⁰: first, a spontaneous consent by the masses, which is the result of long-standing prestige and superstructure created by the dominant group; second, the order restoration legally imposed by the state through coercive power.

Hence, cultural hegemony would be very akin to Nye’s smart power if it were not about the dialectical exercise between dominant and dominated, and then consequent economic exploitation of the former over the latter.

To conclude, despite its non-overlapping nature with diplomacy, the concept of soft power is ground-breaking in measuring the actual strength of a country. However, soft power entails a centripetal force that stems from the image of a country, whereas diplomacy is a proactive

³⁸ *ibidem*, p. 162

³⁹ Hall, Peter M. "Meta-power, social organization, and the shaping of social action." *Symbolic Interaction* 20.4 (1997): 397-418.

⁴⁰ Hoare, Quintin, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. *Selections from prison notebooks*. Lawrence & Wishart, 2005, p.145.

activity.

Public Diplomacy

Despite its older creation⁴¹, the concept of public diplomacy (PD from hereinafter) was vaguely employed during the Cold War but to drive the public to pick a side between the two rival powers (i.e. USA and Soviet Union). Nevertheless, it is not possible to argue that soft power smoothed the path of PD, since the former was conceptually formed thirty-five years later than the latter. The term “public diplomacy” was originally coined in 1965 by American scholar Edmund Gullion, who defined it as a set of tools used by governments to cultivate public opinion in other countries and influence “public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies”⁴².

Having its eventual outbreak in the aftermath of the Cold War, PD has drawn special attention in diplomatic and social studies, hence becoming a multidisciplinary field of study. Discussions, blogs and that abounded. Indeed, among the diplomatic practitioners to the “Old School” critics of PD deem it as an interference to the “real job”, as well as a largely overrated or misunderstood activity⁴³. As we have seen in the previous sections, this critique adds to the list of Westphalian diplomacy, according to which the public can only play a peripheral role, since diplomatic communication ought to focus solely on its equals in rank. Hence, traditionalist authors do not envisage this “societised” form of diplomacy, given the exchanges occurring between the country's emissaries and someone other than its peers.

Still within the framework of Old School PD, Berridge bluntly puts that public diplomacy *was* nothing but mere propaganda⁴⁴. In his view, propaganda was submitted to a rebranding mechanism apt to make it more urbane. Moreover, in the making of public diplomacy, foreign ministries play their pivotal role in the strategic arrangement. The embassies, and in particular the work of an embassy's public diplomacy or communication section⁴⁵, together with the

⁴¹ Its very first use is dated back to 1856 in a piece from the *London Times*.

⁴² Cull, Nicholas J. "Public diplomacy before Gullion: The evolution of a phrase." *Routledge handbook of public diplomacy*. Routledge, 2008. 39-43.

⁴³ Melissen, Jan. "Public diplomacy." in Cooper, Andrew F., Jorge Heine, and Ramesh Thakur, eds. *The Oxford handbook of modern diplomacy*. OUP Oxford, 2013.

⁴⁴ Berridge, Geoff R. *Diplomacy: theory and practice*. Springer, 2015, p. 200.

⁴⁵ Their meaning is not the same, however the naming is often found either under the communication or public diplomacy section. For instance, the dedicated United States Information Agency (USIA) oversaw public diplomacy during the course of the whole Cold War under the motto “tell America's story to the world”.

cultural institutions (such as the British Council in the UK or the Goethe Institut in Germany) is fundamental, let alone frenetic, given the unexpected flow of information and unfolding of events. Berridge underlines that the role of this section is to “work the media”, trying to influence (read manipulate) the newspapers and television broadcasts in the making of news. In so doing, the objective is to reroute the targeted public. Of course, this happens through constant work and collaboration with local media partners in order to avoid any alleged interference in the affairs of foreign entities. In the same book, the author provides the example of the British Embassy in Istanbul. Despite the latter’s fall as capital city of Turkey in 1923, the British institution was reluctant to move its “information office” to Ankara, because of the actual presence of press and communication industries *in loco*.

This British-Turkish example was, however, premonitory of what was a later to come shift, or better to say decentralisation of expertise and information from the headquarters of a country’s MFA to their local representatives. Over time, the MFAs have lost their “gatekeeping” function, through which they used to gather and understand information and eventually translate it into policy for its global institutional network. Therefore, the MFA lost its uniqueness as knowledge-based organisation. Furthermore, this is no longer possible, first, because of the rate of the pace at which information and news are bouncing in the troposphere. The Internet and the real-time communication media have revolutionised the news transmission, which are not diffused through short wave radio or newspapers in the local language; second, the superior knowledge of local representatives on how to dialogue with the hosting population, and thirdly by drawing the public into the diplomatic equation, the number of non-state entities and international actors (such as IOs, NGOs) has dramatically increased⁴⁶. At last, PD grew out of necessity and as a reaction to the image deterioration, therefore there was very little eagerness to reach out and engage with other publics.

This evolution is now labelled “New Public Diplomacy” (NPD) or “twenty-first-century public diplomacy” and it goes beyond the objectives of propaganda. In the aftermath of 9/11, when the USA were concerned with recovering their image and projecting a still secure image of their country abroad, this “newness” paved the way for what was coming next. Melissen claims PD entailed an old-fashioned idea, the one of vertically projecting the image of a country and its

⁴⁶ Sotiriou, Sabrina. "Digital diplomacy: Between promises and reality." in *Digital Diplomacy*. Routledge, 2015. 47-65.

brand, while in the case of NPD, with the entry into the game of non-state and non-official actors, governments start perceiving public diplomacy more as a form of diplomatic engagement⁴⁷.

However, in its taxonomy, PD differs from soft power on three significant dimensions. First, it is endowed with a vertical projection over the designated publics, but in a more pro-active way towards the public. Therefore, there is a shift from centripetal (belonging to soft power) to vertical forces, which aim to establish long-term relationships with the designated publics.

In addition, because of its proactive dimension, PD could serve as a strategic task of perception management of a country, which is the second aspect. The perception management is carried out, not only to create respectful relationships, rather to influence and mould the image that a general public or targeted groups have of it, often trying to change their mind in post-crisis situations. Due to this perception, an actor's decisions and actions disentangle. For instance, some Eastern European countries have activated PD for self-branding purposes, with the goal of looking more kindred to the international organisations (such as the European Union and NATO) they wanted to access.

Last, PD acknowledges the cultural aspects of a recipient nation and tends to tailor its activities accordingly. That is the reason why PD does not encompass a unique strategic communication, but changes on a case-to-case basis. Hence, "public diplomacy can be understood as the strategy by which soft power can be most efficiently maximised"⁴⁸.

Furthermore, Nicholas Cull's paper "*Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories*" provides five elements of PD: listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy and international broadcasting⁴⁹.

Listening is the quintessential element to having two-way communication. In a simplistic view, if one does not listen, then it becomes merely a monologue. Therefore, diplomatic practitioners ought to gather information and data about a target audience, before converting to the best practice to set in motion. Oftentimes this is not followed at all, as the US did in the immediate

⁴⁷ see 44, p. 451.

⁴⁸ ibidem 46, p.50

⁴⁹ Cull, Nicholas J. "Public diplomacy: Taxonomies and histories." *The annals of the American academy of political and social science* 616.1 (2008): 31-54.

aftermath of 9/11. Zaharna maintains in her book *“Battles to Bridges: U.S. Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy after 9/11”* that although the US administration professed an urge for listening and dialogue, it had pursued, in a period of crisis, nothing but unidirectional and self-promotional messages about itself being the beacon of democracy⁵⁰. This instance occurred to a specific phase of American Public diplomacy, which is the “crisis public diplomacy”. In a period of crisis, communication and especially listening must be multifold and simultaneous, even though it is burdensome to keep up with all the issues at stake in such a limited available amount of time. The practice of listening also involves the necessity to delineate a target audience and once a policy is implemented it is later possible to receive feedback.

The aforementioned instance of the British embassy in Istanbul “working the media” is a clear example of the second element of PD, i.e. advocacy. Yet, it is not the only one. Generally speaking, advocacy is defined as a communicative attempt by an actor in the international realm to actively promote a particular policy, idea or his general interests to the minds of a larger foreign public. Therefore, it may include press relations as well as informational work. Nonetheless, Cull maintains that a careful selection of the audience and its messengers must be done to adopt a successful advocacy campaign.

Moreover, practising cultural diplomacy implies an outward attempt to promote the customs and culture of a country abroad. This strategy can be implemented through the infrastructural assets of a country distributed all over the world, i.e. the cultural institutions and centres. The latter’s task is to stimulate activities where the language, art or any other aspect of cultural diplomacy could build connections with foreign publics and strengthen its image, and in turn a country’s influence. Usually, these cultural organisations are established in locations that the arms of the state cannot reach, since it would lack credibility, which is the *conditio sine qua non* of an effective PD strategy.

The fourth element to be scrutinised is exchange diplomacy, which by definition occurs when an international actor sends its citizens overseas or abroad, and in turn hosts citizens coming from another country, for a period of study or acculturation. Its existence is found in the daily

⁵⁰ Zaharna, Rhonda S. *Battles to bridges: US strategic communication and public diplomacy after 9/11*. Springer, 2010, p. 62.

experience in the European universities. Thanks to the funds earmarked by the European Commission, programs such as Erasmus (for students) and Erasmus + (the working format of the former) symbolise two of the most effective examples of exchange diplomacy. Their goal is to generate awareness on the hosting country, share mutual knowledge, but especially to proselytise about what being a European citizen means. Finally, mutuality is an indispensable component in order to turn this policy into a structured exchange relationship.

Last but not least, international broadcasting represents an attempt of an actor to engage with foreign publics through technological media, be they Internet, television, radio or any other digital tools allowing long-distance communication. During World War II, the BBC World Service reported the scourge of the conflict with its objective, and above all credible, description of news from the front. In addition, it let the US correspondents exploit British radio infrastructures to bring the war into the living rooms of America, as Edward Murrow did⁵¹.

⁵¹ *ibidem* 13, p. 16

CHAPTER 2

Public engagement in the digital age

One can survive everything nowadays, except death, and live down anything except a good reputation.

Oscar Wilde in “A Woman of No Importance”, Lord Illingworth, Act 1.

2.1. Defining Digital Diplomacy

As stated above, there have been several digital transformations (such as the daily use of ICTs and the flourishing of a new media ecology) that have led to how diplomacy is currently conducted. However, the principal driver was the imminent need to counter the “Grand Narrative” of the terrorist organisation al-Qaeda. Apart from the military operations, Hallams asserts that the US were involved in a de-branding strategy of their narrative, trying to offset the schemes al-Qaeda had constructed with the global audience⁵². More importantly, the US strategy was meant to unhinge what Nye defines as an “imagined community”, which is capable to resist and thrive even if physically challenged.

The birth of the term digital diplomacy can be traced back to 2007. One year earlier, the US Department of State, under the guidance of Condoleezza Rice, formed the digital outreach team to counter the mounting misinformation about US policies and above all to directly engage with the Muslim world. While in 2002, the same US agency created an e-diplomacy taskforce, ten years later, the number of people involved in digital diplomacy in Washington reached 150 people.

The term “digital diplomacy” is used as a twine of technology with the practice of diplomacy. Oftentimes, it is found under hyphenated concepts such as “e-diplomacy”, “cyber-diplomacy” or “real-time diplomacy”. Other times, the proffered terms are referenced to the specific influence that digital tools have on diplomacy, for instance “Twiplomacy”, which implies an involvement of the social media Twitter, or to narrow concepts, such as “Public Diplomacy 2.0”. Yet, these concepts encompass a limited portion of the overarching scope that digital

⁵² Hallams, Ellen. "Digital diplomacy: the internet, the battle for ideas & US foreign policy." *CEU Political Science Journal* 04 (2010): 538-574.

diplomacy has. Hanson agrees to this point and maintains that public diplomacy misses much of the power and capacity that ICTs entail⁵³. Of course, there is not a single agreed-upon definition of digital diplomacy. Therefore, for the sake of the present document, the definitional framework provided by Manor and Segev will be adopted: digital diplomacy refers to “the growing use of social media platforms by a country in order to achieve its foreign policy goals and proactively manages its image and reputation”⁵⁴.

At this point, in the attempt to explain what digital diplomacy is, it is equally important to set boundaries between the two abovementioned concepts of soft power and public diplomacy. As shown in Figure 1, digital diplomacy differentiates itself from the two on several grounds. First of all, it has a horizontal conception, which implies that the dialogue is initiated on an equal foot between parties using the ICT and its platforms. Therefore, as the international order switches from a Westphalian approach (where *governments* are the only component in place) to a horizontal and non-hierarchical *governance*, digital diplomacy also seems to follow this shift. Differently, soft power takes advantage of the centripetal force (from periphery to core) of its non-material assets, whereas public diplomacy is like a vector which is endowed with a vertical direction pointing to the public.

Furthermore, the advent of digital diplomacy has changed another portion of the diplomatic paradigm, namely the one of considering *the other* not as a mere object, but rather a subject to engage with. Soft power and public diplomacy lack the predisposition to transparency and accountability which are intrinsic to digital diplomacy. Such accountability is not limited to the relevant MFA, but rather to the engaged digital publics. For what concerns the MFAs, digital diplomacy allows “to listen to the concerns and interests of local populations in a far more cost-effective way than opinion polling”⁵⁵. Without dialogue, it would be impossible to properly engage with the target audience.

⁵³ Hanson, Fergus. *Baked in and wired: eDiplomacy@ State*. Foreign Policy at Brookings, 2012.

⁵⁴ Manor, Ilan, and Elad Segev. "America's selfie: How the US portrays itself on its social media accounts." *Digital Diplomacy*. Routledge, 2015. 103-122.

⁵⁵ *ibidem* 53

Figure 1

Diplomacy *as* communication

Diplomacy *as* communication

Soft power (centripetal)

- Soft power is the ability to attract and co-opt, rather than coerce (contrast hard power).
- Shaping the preferences of others through appeal and attraction.
- Concept of «egemony» (Gramsci)

Public diplomacy (vertical)

- Pro-active interaction with the public(s)
- «Perception management»
- Cultural aspects

Digital diplomacy (horizontal)

- Predisposition to transparency
- Accountability
- Engagement

Source: Ferrara, Pasquale. "New approaches in diplomacy". Diplomacy and Negotiation, 2021, Luiss Guido Carli University, Rome. PowerPoint presentation.

The parties involved in such a dialogic exercise are both the MFAs of a country, together with its diplomatic missions and posts all over the world, and the receiving audience. The latter is not circumscribed to the community of the receiving state, rather it extends also to the global public. At this point, a doubt may arise about whether public diplomacy and digital diplomacy overlap. Given that the latter stems from the former, the two coincide in terms of outreach and listening, yet the ways and means through which they operate are clearly dissimilar.

Digital diplomacy aims at interacting and engaging with foreign publics, thus abandoning the top-down approach pertaining to public diplomacy. As a matter of fact, it holds more similarities with the aforementioned concept of NPD. By doing so, MFAs and their followers create a long-lasting relationship as well as brand loyalty.

Hence, digital diplomacy can also be linked to the branding aspect of a nation, by portraying one's personal image outwards or managing the consistency and narrative of its brand. Nonetheless, embracing a more critical vein, as explained later on through the concept of nation branding, this practice usually fails to consider some fundamental facets of today's multidimensional, plural, and complex societies.

In this larger scheme, with the overabundance of players, the non-governmental actors cannot but be included. Non-state actors have assumed roles that previously belonged solely to the states. For this reason, traditional actors, such as states, and new non-governmental players (such as NGOs, religious groups, social movements, corporations) work in coordination with one another, and at the same time on parallel tracks, in order to create alliances in such networked diplomacy. Despite being two different entities, in this soft power competition, both actors have communication strategies that are public-centric, thus they meet halfway in terms of engagement objectives.

Oftentimes, digital diplomacy is deemed as one-dimensional and one-sided discipline, because of the widespread self-referential narratives found on MFAs' and diplomats' social media. For instance, many diplomatic practitioners have been convinced that posting a daily recap of their representative's agenda, news releases or writing concise tweets, would be sufficient to ensure an effective form of communication. Rather, digital diplomacy should be tailored to level the playing field between the sending and receiving counterparts, resulting in a two-way symmetrical communication, and leaving room for an exchange of views, indeed a dialogical engagement. To this point, digital diplomacy entails a communicative strategy that goes beyond a simple informational task.

Holding a different view, Seib maintains that the term digital diplomacy is misleading, and it is used by professionals solely because it is fashionable. Despite its harsh criticism, he has a point in stating that technology is inherently soulless, since it is the use that we make of it that can substantively change our lives⁵⁶. Hence, in this case, technology could be used to change the effectiveness of a country's foreign policy. Foreign policy is a political activity, and it is composed of the goals and the relations that a state has in the international scenario with other states.

Under traditional forms of diplomacy, to give its view on a topic or an update on a crisis situation, a state would have issued a written statement and then passed it to the media, or broadcasted a speech on national television, so that the news had a larger echo. Nowadays, the speeches are directly posted on the government's official websites and social media accounts. Once it is on the Internet, it is theoretically visible to everyone.

⁵⁶ *ibidem* 13

Thus, the advent of digital diplomacy has changed another portion of the diplomatic paradigm, namely the one of considering *the other* not as a mere object, but rather a subject with whom to engage with. Digital diplomacy has a predisposition to transparency and accountability. Such accountability is not limited solely to the relevant MFA, but rather to the engaged digital publics. For what concerns the MFAs, digital diplomacy allows “to listen to the concerns and interests of local populations in a far more cost-effective way than opinion polling”⁵⁷. Nevertheless, measuring the impact of digital diplomacy is to be carried out and interpreted, yet it is not an easy task.

In conclusion, it is possible to argue that digital diplomacy is proving to be a gamechanger in the institutional settings and practices of diplomacy. Yet, as Amanda Clarke wonders⁵⁸, there is nothing to do but to delve deeper into the extent of such change. By following the schema provided by Hall of first-, second-, and third-order policy change⁵⁹, Clarke maintains that digital diplomacy represents a third-order policy change. The latter produces the highest attainable degree of change, which is defined as a change to the normative and ontological worldview of policymakers.

In addition, such a vigorous change does not unfold automatically, but rather it is triggered by external threats, as it is the case of non-state actors entering the game and draining the essential gatekeeping function of MFAs, as well as by the disruption ensuing critical junctures, i.e. the advent of the Internet and social media has led to a process of digitalisation of the ministries. As a consequence, digital diplomacy has changed the orthodoxic way to conduct diplomatic operations, indeed the MFAs have abandoned the state-centric model preferring public-centric modalities apt to engage with the *others*, i.e. the world civil society.

⁵⁷ *ibidem* 53

⁵⁸ Clarke, Amanda. "Business as usual? An evaluation of British and Canadian digital diplomacy as policy change." *Digital Diplomacy*. Routledge, 2015. 125-140.

⁵⁹ Hall, P. A. 1993. "Policy Paradigms, Social Learning, and the State: The Case of Economic Policymaking in Britain." *Comparative Politics* 25(3): 275–296.

2.2. Platforms and challenges to Digital Diplomacy

The platformization of the web

Digital diplomacy represents a novelty in the conduct of diplomatic exercise. On one hand, it comes to the fore following a period of digital disintermediation, above all with respect to the knowledge and information sectors (as presented in the former chapter). As a consequence, that disintermediation expected unforeseen levels of transparency, which promised to be a democratic boon, as well as changing the codes of diplomacy.

As provided by a study conducted by Šimunjak and Caliandro on diplomatic language and diplomacy as communication, they gathered many definitions that turn around the concepts of sending positive messages, that these should be ambiguous, in order to leave room for interpretation, and that scholars and practitioners alike agree on that fact that diplomatic communication is as important as what is left unsaid⁶⁰. To prove or debunk this thousand-year-old tradition, they carefully conducted a discourse and content analysis on more than 115,000 tweets posted by Donald Trump. The former president of the USA is widely known for his unconventional behaviour and style, so the research was meant to specifically evaluate his Twitter's diplomatic communication (i.e. Twiplomacy), where immediacy and *brevitas* take over the rest, given the peculiar feature of the site that is to write a real-time post within a limited number of characters⁶¹. As a result of an accurate skimming of Trump's tweets, from which only 91 were considered as pertaining to diplomatic communication with his peers, negotiators, and foreign ministers and ambassadors, the authors have concluded that, although the communication style and the sentiment of his tweets were negative and out of tune, the actors with whom he engaged did not leave the traditional courteous diplomatic code.

On another ground, digital diplomacy shifts the focus on the ever-increasing importance that private actors yield in determining the rules of the game, along with the presence and hospitality of political and diplomatic discourses on the platforms.

In late 2004, Tim O' Reilly popularised the definition of Web 2.0, that is "network as

⁶⁰ Šimunjak, Maja, and Alessandro Caliandro. "Twiplomacy in the age of Donald Trump: Is the diplomatic code changing?." *The Information Society* 35.1 (2019): 13-25.

⁶¹ Historically the limit was established at 140, since 2018 it has been raised to 280.

platform”⁶². From that moment onwards, the web was not a static digital place anymore, nor a medium where users could only publish information. Rather, as Anne Helmond puts it, the whole digital ecosystem underwent a process called “the platformization of the web”, which made platforms the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the web, and consequently entailed an expansion of social media platforms into other spaces online⁶³. Basically, this is the dual logic underlying the platformization of the web.

From an infrastructural point of view, the societal webs through which we are moving are the ones of platform society. For definitional purposes, by (online) platform is meant “a programmable digital architecture designed to organise interactions between users - not just end users but also corporate entities and public bodies”⁶⁴. However, as Gillespie⁶⁵ put forward, the term “platform” used to be entailed in four different categories, whose descriptive term for digital media intermediaries is not wholly represented, yet dependent on.

- First, it has a *computational* meaning, that is an infrastructure to build applications on. The representation *par excellence* of this is the Chinese super-app, WeChat. It englobes a wide range of apps that interact one with the other, without the necessity for a user to ever exit or switch platforms.
- Then, it had a broader conceptual use, that is *architectural*, a level surface on which people or things can stand or perform specific activities.
- Third, a *figurative* usage, where the platform is intended as the foundation of an action or future development.
- Lastly, it is *political*, since it is a place from which to speak and be heard.

Furthermore, although this is not the appropriate time to delve deeper into computer science details, there is one consideration to make to understand the infrastructural mechanism underlying the platform society. Still, according to Helmond, platforms’ applications process data through interfaces called APIs (Application Programming Interfaces), which let users

⁶² O’Reilly, Tim. ‘Web 2.0: Compact Definition?’, 1 October 2005, O’Reilly Radar. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3GD0e9j>. Accessed on the 10th of February

⁶³ Helmond, Anne. "The platformization of the web: Making web data platform ready." *Social media+ society* 1.2 (2015).

⁶⁴ Van Dijck, José, Thomas Poell, and Martijn De Waal. *The platform society: Public values in a connective world*. Oxford University Press, 2018, p.4.

⁶⁵ Gillespie, Tarleton. "The politics of ‘platforms’." *New media & society* 12.3 (2010): 347-364.

interact with services of a separate program, application or website, and above all paves the way to make data platform ready⁶⁶. Hence, if data is ready, it cannot be called “raw data”. Indeed, Lisa Gitelman formulated the maxim that “raw data is an oxymoron”⁶⁷, because data is *pre*-configured and then read on a real-time basis by another fundamental component: algorithms.

As Gillespie puts it, algorithms have an inert fashion, therefore it is important to understand to which database they are wedded, otherwise the algorithm would not be ready. Algorithms are “encoded procedures for transforming input data into a desired output, based on specified calculations”⁶⁸. Algorithmical calculations are made on every click and every query, also considering the time spent on a page or before an image is computed. In the current digital society, before such a content overload to which we all are exposed, controlling the content to be shown means controlling the information and knowledge. Therefore, adapting the Orwellian adage, who controls the algorithm, controls the information. Indeed, as metaphorically shown in the “The Social Dilemma” documentary produced by Netflix⁶⁹, two people standing behind a wide screen, representing the mechanical mind of the social media algorithms, handpick the content to be shown to a teenage user. As for him, also digital users’ fate and destiny is determined by long strings of coding full of hypotheses and conditions, together with trillions of bits of information that supposedly meet the criteria of the user at stake.

Moving to real-life examples, social movements developing at the beginning of last decade know well how platform mechanisms can affect their fortune. For instance, the #Occupy protests in New York and Boston, while gaining momentum in the streets, did not have their face on the current front page, i.e. being in the Trending Topics. To this matter, Malcolm Gladwell, hypercritic of social media based activism, would argue that revolutions do not occur via a tweet⁷⁰. Nevertheless, the reason lying under this dysfunctional treatment does not relate to editorial censorship by Twitter, but rather to the algorithmical functioning that organises user content. The frequency of hashtags and keywords is a fundamental component to appear in the

⁶⁶ *ibidem* 62

⁶⁷ Gitelman, Lisa, ed. *Raw data is an oxymoron*. MIT press, 2013.

⁶⁸ Gillespie, Tarleton. "The relevance of algorithms." *Media technologies: Essays on communication, materiality, and society* 167.2014 (2014).

⁶⁹ Started as a mail-based rental business, Netflix developed into a over-the-top streaming platform, which means it directly provides its services via the Internet. Today, it is the world’s leading subscription streaming platform. Part of its original content managed to win relevant prizes in the film industry.

⁷⁰ Gladwell, Malcolm. "Small change." *The New Yorker* 4.2010 (2010): 42-49.

trending topics, but more importantly it depends on the sudden skyrocketing resonance that such topics have.

It is in this context that platforms strive to obtain economies of scale and shape every aspect of social life. As van Dijck et al. indicate, there are three main functioning mechanisms within the framework of platforms that have repercussions in the society: datafication, commodification and selection⁷¹.

Datafication identifies the ability of networked platforms to capture a great variety of data from end users' activities. As stated above, the amount of data gathered through these processes has never been quantified before, nor has it ever been so heterogeneous in nature. Consequently, platforms have become data firms, too. Being endowed with predictive and real-time analytics, they are able to deliver targeted advertising and services in many economic sectors.

Commodification implies the possibility to transform online and offline objects, content, activities and ideas into tradable commodities, which can be also sold and valued outside the platform ecosystem and not only in the form of money, but also in terms of attention and data. Finally, the former two mechanisms steer user interaction and engagement with online content through the selection mechanism. The editorial processes of selection of news and stories belonging to the "old media" are here supplanted by user-driven and algorithm-driven selection.

Although it seems impossible to determine how platforms' algorithms work, the complaint filed by the former Facebook civic integrity data scientist, Frances Haugen, shed some light on it, at least regarding Facebook platform. On the basis of some insider's documents, secretly copied by the whistleblower, Haugen asserted that the company (recently rebranded into Meta) knowingly disregarded part of the content contained within two of its platforms (i.e. Facebook and Instagram) are harmful for society. The principal claim purported by Haugen⁷² was that the polarising and angry political content gets more reach and distribution, which in turn entices users to engage with the platform, and theoretically with other users, reinforcing the abovementioned three-fold mechanism underlying platform infrastructure and economic structure. It is important to stress that her resignation came some months after the US Capitol riot on 6th January 2021, where hundreds of people gathered online and then decided to storm

⁷¹ Ibidem 63, p. 31-47

⁷² 60 Minutes. "Facebook Whistleblower Frances Haugen: The 60 Minutes Interview", Youtube Video, 4th October 2021. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3KhRKqz>. Accessed on the 10th of February

the US Congress in protest to alleged presidential election fraud.

In addition, this is partly due to the fact that the Facebook algorithm change in 2018 has also changed the way in which political and digital communication is conducted, therefore leading to ever-polarising, let alone extreme party positions and content. In turn, this dynamic leads to further implications at the societal level, that is harming teenagers' mental and physical health when exposed to pernicious material on Instagram.

For this reason, big platforms demand higher attention and sometimes economic leeway for the facilitation of social interactions and connections they bring in. However, they wish to become invisible when the conversation is about accepting their responsibility in terms of intervening in affairs or content posted by users that are potentially detrimental to collective safety. It is a *divide et impera* strategy, according to which polarised groups fight one another, while the ruler, that is in this scenario tech platforms, can reap the benefits of it while remaining uncontested and unchallenged.

In the framework of the present work, it can be assessed that platforms play a dual role in a simultaneous and often overlapping manner, in the practice of digital diplomacy. First, they operate as an intermediary, that is as a theatre of digital diplomatic activities and marketplace. Concurrently, they are recognised (yet so unaware of it) as being a subject itself of digital diplomacy. Because of the politics of global business, the recent entry into the international settings of non-state actors welcomed multinational corporations (MNCs) and other non-governmental actors was compelling, yet not unproblematic. Platforms are wielding new forms of power that were traditionally comprised within state jurisdiction: from the ability to combine and use data, together with online traffic management, content surveillance and the capacity to coordinate relations with other relevant actors. Therefore, social media platforms are not only "markets", but also social infrastructures, within which international actors experiment new methods and languages apt to intervene in the users' digital experience and conversations, but above all trying to achieve the ultimate goal of community building.

Hurdles to Digital diplomacy

While the previous section explained the infrastructural and economic model, together with the affordances underlying the functioning of platforms, the present one is devoted to the

presentation of some hurdles that diplomatic practitioners might encounter in the practice of digital diplomacy activities.

As explained above, the Web 2.0. has put forward a dynamic process of social interactions by connecting distanced people through the simple use of technological devices. Diplomatic practitioners took the chance to engage in real-time disaster updates, informing the audience about consular issues, and above all providing their perspective on specific issues. Along with this, Web 2.0. has driven the costs of joining activists' groups to zero. Activism has always been, and probably will always be, about people. However, according to American sociologist Evgheni Morozov, it has given false hope to digital activists and cyber-enthusiasts. His criticisms are based on what is generally defined as "slacktivism", that is a type of activism relying on low-cost and low-effort activities in support of a social change.

The immediacy of the Web leaves online end users the conviction that pushing a "like" button, copy-pasting a support message, or even sharing a petition is enough. The reason why they choose to support specific campaigns might be psychological, because users believe it is crucial to be seen by their "friends" as participating in the same causes. Gladwell maintained that historically effective movements were more successful when based on personal connections⁷³. Hence, on a friend-to-friend transmission of information, people used to gather into public squares, participate to sit-ins and in worst-case scenarios were even pushed to join terrorist groups (as it happened with the Red Brigades in Italy). Differently, the writer underlines how digital activism is built around weak ties and that many of one's Facebook friends are often nothing more than acquaintances or even people they never met.

One instance that proves slacktivism wrong is represented by the large-scale protests organised against the Revolutionary Armed Forces in Columbia (FARC). Launched by Oscar Morales, a Colombian computer technician, the Facebook group called No Más FARC (No More FARC) was able to mobilise thousands of protesters in a few weeks and ultimately led to the 4th February 2008 march, which was the world's largest protest against a terrorist organisation ever. A more contingent example is the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Their mission started in 2013, in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer, but only in 2020 came globally to the surface. Similarly to the inception of the Tunisian spring, through the video of

⁷³ *ibidem* 70

the assassination of a black American citizen, George Floyd, by a white police officer, together with the grievances exacerbated by the outbreak of Covid-19, the organisation was able to set in motion a protest having a world-wide resonance. Digital platforms thus had a fundamental role in the spreading of information about sit-ins, marches and other rallying events. At the end of the day, although the protests did not achieve the ultimate goal of solving systemic discrimination against the Black communities by the state and vigilantes, in the short-term they spread awareness on this century-long issue.

As Shirky emphasised, the critique to slacktivism “is correct, but not central to the question of social media's power; the fact that barely committed actors cannot click their way to a better world does not mean that committed actors cannot use social media effectively⁷⁴”.

Echo chambers, filter bubbles, digital astroturfing and trolling

Furthermore, there are some concepts that influence the reception, or better to say the appearance of one's posts on the platforms' news feed. As presented in the previous chapter in regard to network diplomacy, following SNA theory every single node could theoretically reach and engage with one another. On that account, echo chambers interfere and interrupt the digital activity. Yet, before dealing with echo chambers it is necessary to draw a fine line between them and filter bubbles.

For the sake of clarity, by filter bubble is intended here the mechanism through which algorithms amplify ideological segregation by automatically recommending personalised content an user is likely to agree with⁷⁵. Basically, echo chambers create these “social bubbles”, hence they are the upshot of filter bubbles, where only people thinking alike are part and parcel of it. Such a concept is the exact opposite of the primordial objectives of the Internet, which promised free access to a vast array of information. Today, in a Web 2.0. world, it is possible to come into contact with swarms of information to share, comment and like on platforms. However, echo chambers are a social (and digital) construct within which the exposition to conforming ideas, facts and opinions is increased. Indeed, drawing from the work of Cass Sunstein, a pioneering analyst of echo chambers and political polarisation⁷⁶, R. Kelly Garrett

⁷⁴ Shirky, Clay. "The political power of social media: Technology, the public sphere, and political change." *Foreign affairs* (2011): 28-41.

⁷⁵ Pariser, Eli. *The filter bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you*. Penguin UK, 2011.

⁷⁶ Sunstein, Cass R. *Republic. com*. Princeton University Press, 2001.

conducted a study on the online behaviour of 727 subjects. Over a six-week period of online tracking, he assessed that users were more likely to make use of and look at information that reinforced their opinion, and tended to spend more time reading it⁷⁷.

From a diplomatic standpoint, “the very existence of echo chambers digitally limits diplomats’ ability to reach and interact with online publics who are encapsulated in a dome of ignorance and homogeneity”⁷⁸. Echo chambers thus lead to users’ entrenchment, thereby posing a serious threat to the achievement of a nation’s communication strategy, that is to engage with audiences, let alone hinder the development of digital diplomatic activities as a whole.

Different is the case when, in the making of digital diplomatic activities, hurdles are posed by other peers, i.e. diplomatic practitioners or international actors, as in the cases of digital astroturfing and trolling.

Regarding the first, the all-encompassing definition that Kovic et al. propose is that astroturfing is “a form of manufactured, deceptive and strategic top-down activity on the Internet initiated by political actors that mimics bottom-up activity by autonomous individuals”⁷⁹. Its name comes from an artificial grass produced by an American company, which makes the resemblance to real grass uncanny. Nevertheless, in order to understand the meaning of the word, it is crucial to get the antinomy of the compound word. Turf is a fake grass, in the same way astroturfing entails fake *grassroots* activities apparently coming from a superficial point, while they are designed from the top, thus comes the word “astro”.

To put it in simple terms, “political actors can create online activity that seems like authentic activity by regular citizens, when it is, in reality, anything but”⁸⁰. Such an activity is a strategy to attack specific targets (be it the larger public or small and medium groups), but above all poses a threat to the freeing and people-centric aspect of the web, as it was hoped for right after the advent of the Internet.

Notwithstanding, digital astroturfing cannot be mistaken with trolling, which is instead best

⁷⁷ Garrett, R. Kelly. "Echo chambers online?: Politically motivated selective exposure among Internet news users." *Journal of computer-mediated communication* 14.2 (2009): 265-285.

⁷⁸ Manor, Ilan. *The digitalization of public diplomacy*. New York: Springer International Publishing, 2019, p.136.

⁷⁹ Kovic, Marko, et al. "Digital astroturfing in politics: Definition, typology, and countermeasures." *Studies in Communication Sciences* 18.1 (2018): 69-85.

⁸⁰ *ibidem*.

understood as malicious and deceptive online behaviour conducted by individuals who engage in the activity of trolling out of their own volition. The intrinsic difference between the two concepts, although both are deceptive in nature, lies in the origin. In the two cases, the individuals yield their agency, but the mind of digital astroturfing stems from political actors, who manufacture these activities with the intent of attacking someone or something.

A practical instance summarising these elements is the one of the “50 Cents Army”, which is a group of salaried freelancers paid by the Chinese Communist party to moderate (read censor) public opinion on Chinese social media, especially Weibo. The amount of money earned per every post or comment in defence of the government was equal to 5 yuan, from this comes their name “50 Cents Army”. They are positioned in the grey area between paid supporters and digital astroturfers. For sure, 50-centers do not fall in the category of trolls, since they spend their time accurately answering to non-conforming views to the government’s stance as a way to finetune and redirect public opinion. They represent a positive distraction from the conversation on controversial issues and above all reinforce the ideological common denominator and national narratives within the population. Sometimes, in the *mise en œuvre* of astroturfers, not only individuals, but also bots are employed. The term “bot” is an abbreviation of robots, and as such they perform highly repetitive tasks, but they are shaped in order to function in the most humanly possible manner. Notwithstanding this, most often they are easily recognised because of the unidirectionality of their spamming traffic and the fact that they cannot intelligently interact with other users⁸¹.

Ultimately, there is another threat posed by platforms as international actors in the digital diplomacy arena. Although the “digital world” has blurred boundaries, because its girth and width are unknown, yet ever expanding in size and weight, platforms are to modify the real humanly created boundaries and fences of states. This means that states do not engage in digital diplomacy on Google or any other search engines, nevertheless the digital space which they have to navigate is influencing the world “out there”, so it has geopolitical implications. In other words, even though users gaze and scroll at the same interface, the content they have before their eyes is not identical both for the echo chamber effect, but also due to the geographical transformations which are digitally manufactured.

⁸¹ Zhang, Jerry, Darrell Carpenter, and Myung Ko. "Online astroturfing: A theoretical perspective." (2013).

Platforms put mapping services and cartographs at everyone's disposal, but occasionally intervene in a direct manner or give users the possibility to modify and personalise them, therefore bypassing their intrinsic responsibility, blending it under transparency reasons. Yet, consistent access to the same maps is not allowed to every user. For instance, on the ongoing conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, in particular over the disputed Crimean territories, Google Maps and Apple Maps have been showing different results from different places. By doing so, the two mapping platforms took a partial stand by avoiding to put the dotted lines signalling the borders, but above all they allowed for a geographical research discrepancy. In fact, when searching for Crimea in Russia it appears that the territory belongs to the latter, while if you check from other places the area is not bestowed to any state.⁸²

All this to say that we are living in a digital era, which is pervaded by chaos. Not by accident a private actor, having the extent and shape of a multinational corporation, is able to influence and accommodate (read adjust) the physical spaces to its most economically convenient candidate, implying a geopolitical change. For this reason, moving in this plethora of obstacles is difficult, yet practitioners cannot refrain from trying and supersede them.

Diplomacy in the wake of Covid-19 pandemic

At a critical juncture where contemporary diplomacy faces the threat of the compression (sometimes suppression) of time and space in the current globalised and interconnected world, there is little room left for slow-paced and face-to-face diplomatic conversations. Therefore, digital diplomacy represents a proper way to cope with these disruptive processes. In fact, recent times have exacerbated the shift to digital diplomacy, both at the theoretical and at the practical level. Such a shift is even more palpable when considering the recent developments due to the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, where travel and in-person meetings have become cumbersome.

According to the trenchant voice of Pierre Vimont⁸³, the multilateral international system has failed to cope with such a crisis, whose magnitude is unprecedented and cannot be compared to the previous outbreaks such as SARS in 2003, H1N5 in 2008, and Ebola in 2014. Standing before any alternative, the sceptics of digital diplomacy struggled with this new kind of work

⁸² Coldewey, Devin. Apple and Google maps accommodate Russia's annexation of Crimea. Techcrunch, November 27, 2019. Available at: <https://tcrn.ch/3KkeKFm>. Accessed on the 10th of February

⁸³ Vimont, Pierre. Diplomacy during the quarantine: An opportunity for more agile craftsmanship. Carnegie Europe. 2 September, 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/34Zm3SK>. Accessed on the 10th of February

settings made up by smart devices and physically distanced conversations.

At the UN level, the Russian Federation has not agreed to virtual meetings in the framework of the UNSC. Core affairs have consequently been posed to a halt. Yet, in the shrewd view of the UN's special envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, practitioners have been thinking more carefully about how to perform their job, defining virtual encounters on platforms such as Webex, Zoom or Microsoft Teams as a seismic change⁸⁴. In addition, one need only to think that Virtual Reality (VR), that is a digital three-dimensional experience using computer generated or 360-degree real video footage, entered diplomats' decision-making process, to realise how technology and the digital world is impacting daily lives and diplomatic practice, too. According to Martin Waehlich, a UN officer leading innovation at the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, the pandemic has accelerated the process of adoption of this new technological medium, for instance allowing decision-makers to “eye-witness” the post-conflict situation, since VR gives users the impression of being with the boots on the ground. In his view, it is a new normal of briefing that could replace the ritual “Times new Roman, single-space, black-and-white block text”⁸⁵.

However, this new environment brought some feasible aspects in the practice of diplomatic activities such as better time management, increased networking activities between bilateral institutions on a digital arena and increasing productivity. Indeed, delegates do not have to undergo the incessant coming and going on planes to personally meet their peers on the other side of the globe, nor being secluded for several days for a global meeting. The global pandemic has thus brought two preeminent consequences to the diplomatic practice: first of all, with a reduced level of pollution due to the diminished number of flights, diplomats could reach the same number of peers, or perhaps even more than they used to; secondly, it has levelled the playing field among practitioners even more, given that during the quarantine, diplomats were all staying at their homes, therefore laying everyone on an equal footing and setting, too.

As a consequence, it is more than likely that diplomacy will go hybrid, foreseeing a blend of physical and digital meetings. This demonstrates the transformation that diplomacy is undergoing, especially since the onset of digital diplomacy. On this point, the latter seems to

⁸⁴ The zoom where it happens. (2021, May 1). *The Economist*, 439, 51-52,55.

⁸⁵ *ibidem*

be hale and hearty, in fact as the former US Secretary of State, John Kerry, argued “the term digital diplomacy is almost redundant, it is just diplomacy, period”⁸⁶. This means that it is here to stay, and that digital diplomacy might soon become the new normal.

2.3. Digital Diplomacy as public engagement

Before the definitional introduction of the term “digital diplomacy”, diplomatic activities envisaged the creation of ad hoc devices or dedicated websites, where diplomats and staffers of the US Secretary of State could interact while accessing digital material⁸⁷. Later, technological development led to online platforms, which were first used as clearcut activities display, and then evolved into complex confrontational settings.

Already in 2012, Philip Seib warned that “a challenge facing today’s diplomats is to find ways to blend speed with wisdom”⁸⁸ since the “cushion of time” to which they were accustomed to rely on had faded. Nowadays, states can easily post videos, tweets, graphic descriptions, or any other kind of digital content. Yet, just seconds after, the situation might spin out of control by not achieving the outcome they had striven for.

So, one of the leading principles that might guide us in the digital diplomacy journey, apart from the steady prudence already embedded among professionals, is the one of listening. To this point, media theorist Brian Solis seems to agree, since “one of the greatest lessons in social media is that everything begins with listening”. Moreover, he maintains that new media channels are rich with insight, but above all are interactive too. Interactivity is necessary because on the other side (the public one), people are demanding accountability, recognition, and eventual engagement.

Defining engagement

From the French “*en gage*” which means under pledge, the English noun deriving from it “engagement” does not fall far from the tree. Namely Merriam-Webster Dictionary⁸⁹ defines it

⁸⁶ Kerry, J. ‘Digital Diplomacy: adapting our diplomatic engagement’, DipNote, 6 May 2013. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3fxbSqn>. Accessed on the 10th of February

⁸⁷ Hanson, Fergus. *Revolution@ State: the spread of ediplomacy*. Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2012.

⁸⁸ Seib, Philip. *Real-time diplomacy: Politics and power in the social media era*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 87.

⁸⁹ “Engagement.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://bit.ly/3qGbY5B>. Accessed on the 10th of February

as a promise to marry, something that holds our attention, or emotional involvement or commitment. In the context of the present work, engagement is defined as a quintessential feature of dialogue. As Taylor and Kent⁹⁰ maintain, organisations must “engage in dialogue” to be ethical, because it mitigates power relationships, values and poses the recipient to the same level of the sender. In addition, the authors are sceptical of the use of finite words on Twitter, or in general that social media engagement represents a proper instance of dialogic interaction, since it lacks the synchronous condition of a conversation. Instead, Taylor and Kent maintain that dialogic engagement is a “two-way, relational, give-and-take between organisations and stakeholders/publics”.

In their view, social media engagement has regularly been understood and then put into practice as a one-way communication. This is probably linked to the fact that communicators are all primarily worried about the figures of engagement. Nonetheless, the number of followers on social media has little bearing on engagement, which is more about what Professor Anne Marie Slaughter defined as “a pivot to people”. Drawing the buzzword from the military and foreign policy strategy set in those same years during the Obama administration, i.e. a pivot to Asia, Slaughter praised the work done by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton when engaging with society’s people in addition to their governments⁹¹. As seen above, the US Department of State was a pioneer in engaging with the Muslim (and global) public out of the necessity of control over the perceived image of the nation. The scourge of 9/11 paved the way for a change in their global engagement, especially because of widespread misinformation both about the Muslim community and retaliative US policies.

Nine years later, Farah Pandith, an Indian-born Muslim woman, was appointed as the first US special representative to Muslim communities within the State Department. Her work consisted of engaging through social media platforms with over 1.4 billion people all over Africa, Asia and Commonwealth countries. The strategy was explained by Cohen and Ross⁹², two young leading members of the State Department’s policy planning staff. As they illustrate, in order to reach out in a meaningful way to Muslim communities, Pandith’s work needed to be paired

⁹⁰ Taylor, Maureen, and Michael L. Kent. "Dialogic engagement: Clarifying foundational concepts." *Journal of public relations research* 26.5 (2014): 384-398.

⁹¹ Slaughter, Anne-Marie. "Remarks, The Big Picture: beyond hot spots & crises in our interconnected world." *Penn St. JL & Int'l Aff.* 1 (2012): xv.

⁹² Lichtenstein, Jesse. (2010) “Digital Diplomacy.” The New York Times, July 16. Available at: <https://nyti.ms/33LPoiP>. Accessed on the 10th of February

with fitting technology. The identification of Muslim “influencers”, that is prominent public figures (e.g. imams or youth leaders), who could convey shared valuable messages to the corresponding communities online, was crucial. This was made possible by the diplomatic reaching out of the Department of State, which provided them with translated messages in Urdu, Swahili, Pashto, Arabic and other languages.

Appropriate language is one of the requirements in social media dialogic engagement with audiences. Directing specific messages in a personalised fashion implies propinquity as well as it stresses the control of horizontal communication, as a peer-to-peer one, although, in theory, it is on a government-to-peer basis. Former Ambassador of the USA to the Russian Federation Micheal McFaul had set up a specific plan when faced with the task of addressing audiences online. Specifically, through his multilingual and multiplatform social media strategy that amounts to a second shift, he used to blog when he deemed it necessary to delve deeper into a topic, tweet regularly and log on Facebook to converse with a community. For the most part, he wrote in Russian for those platform members that were open to listening, but occasionally switched to Latin alphabet in order to communicate with the general public⁹³.

Having thus far exclusively discussed how states engage with foreign audiences, we now need to turn our analysis to the domestic realm. Bjola and Manor refer to Domestic Digital Diplomacy (DDD) as the practice of a government using social media to build domestic support for its foreign policy⁹⁴. Their study is based on the adaptation from Putnam’s pre-social era work on the diplomatic “two-level game theory”⁹⁵ in negotiation settings. The two levels at stake are the international one (Level I), made up by foreign audiences and foreign negotiators, and the national one (Level II) made up of national interest groups and constituents. Negotiators spend as much time with a group as for the other. The entanglement between domestic politics and international relations stiffens, on one side the bi- and multilateral harmony is put into question, while on the other the acceptance “at home” (e.g. the two-thirds majority of the US Senate for international treaty ratification, domestic cleavages).

⁹³ *ibidem* 46; Freeland, Christa. (2012). “Statecraft via Twitter”. *Reuters*. Available at: <https://reut.rs/33S6pru>. Accessed on the 10th of February

⁹⁴ Bjola, Corneliu, and Ilan Manor. "Revisiting Putnam’s two-level game theory in the digital age: Domestic digital diplomacy and the Iran nuclear deal." *Cambridge review of international affairs* 31.1 (2018): 3-32.

⁹⁵ Putnam, Robert D. "Diplomacy and domestic politics: the logic of two-level games." *International organization* 42.3 (1988): 427-460.

Nevertheless, each level must find a compromise in order to achieve a “win set”. The concept goes around the consent to Level 1 agreements that could be ratified by Level 2. The larger the win sets, the more a leader tends to be under pressure in order to make concessions, and vice versa. So, DDD comes into play here to influence the issues that are of interest to their target audience, together with the necessity to frame specific issues and events. Hence, the engagement is both set on micro-targets, tailoring the messages accordingly, and macro level, too.

In the case study analysed by Bjola and Manor, the Obama administration created ad hoc the @TheIranDeal Twitter channel. In the last stages before the approval of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) - the framework agreement in which Iran promised to abandon nuclear capabilities in exchange of upholding targeted sanctions by the international community - the US administrative channel was dedicated to provide the developments on the framework agreement, explaining its details through infographic material, as well as paving the way for the ratification at Level 2, within the US Senate. Scraping the data from @TheIranDeal, Bjola and Manor evaluated the domestic population in support of a government’s foreign policy agenda. To do so, they put forward three fundamental components, which might sound familiar, i.e. broadcasting, listening and engagement. As previously said, digital diplomacy has the daily objective to engage with foreign and domestic populations in a dialogic fashion by breaking with the broadcasting models personified by the “old” media. From its inception in July 2015, the channel envisaged messages that could increase the appeal of the government's foreign policy and recalibrated them in case of negative feedback obtained through listening. Last, the account was engaging in a two-level conversation by properly answering comments and questions below their posts.

On the other “side of the table”, a similar job was conducted by Constance Duncombe, who analysed the Iranian digital diplomacy activities on Twitter during the reaching of the accord. First and foremost, what stood out was that all of Iran’s state representative posts were published in English. This was part of a signalling and reaching out process to communicate with all of its counterparts, especially the USA, outside the traditional and formal negotiations. Therefore, writing in English shortened the temporal length of negotiations and breached the space and ideological barriers from country to country. To this point, under the label of “transformative diplomacy”, which is similar to the one provided in the description of Digital

Diplomacy (section 2.1), Duncombe describes the use of social media apt to transform the framing of state identity to others. In the case of Iran, posts by state representatives had recognition purposes, namely they aimed and wished to be recognised by others as a state that wanted to be perceived as more progressive, law-abiding and prone to dialogue.

2.4. Managing national identity

According to the classical definition provided by the American Marketing Association in 1960, “a brand is a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller’s goods or service as distinct from those of other sellers”⁹⁶ (i.e. competitors). The brand is often associated with a name, yet it transcends the naming boundaries, but it is related to an *ensemble* of images, meanings, associations and experiences in the minds of people.

As a consequence, if branding “is endowing products and services with the power of a brand”⁹⁷, nation branding should be straightforwardly defined. Yet, nation branding embraces the image and reputation that a nation enjoys in the world, but it is not limited to that. For this reason, the definition of nation branding is not unanimously shared, as shown in Nadia Kaneva’s extensive overview of 186 sources across different disciplines⁹⁸.

On another vein, Ying Fan is keen to stress that a nation brand is different from a *national* brand⁹⁹. The latter is a specific product that is distributed abroad, while a nation brand refers to the mental image of the country that a foreign audience holds. It might be argued that a national brand can reinforce a nation brand, since it actively participates in the development of its construct. In Fan’s view, nation branding is thus linked to national identity, which is a nation’s self-perception and the culturally agreed-upon traits that bond its citizens. At the same time, nation branding tries to influence a country’s reputation, which in turn is the reciprocal of its own image. It ensues that a nation’s image consists of the feedback and perception that others attribute to it (see Figure 2) - as seen above by Iran's Twitter strategy and transformative diplomacy - and at the same time influences the nation branding identity.

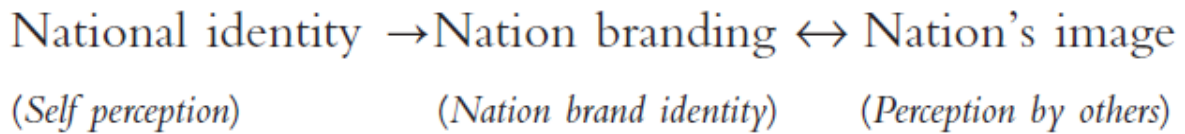
⁹⁶ American Marketing Association. *Marketing Definitions: A Glossary of Marketing Terms*, Chicago, American Marketing Association, 1960.

⁹⁷ Kotler, Philip, and Kevin L. Keller. *Marketing Management*. Pearson, 2015.

⁹⁸ Kaneva, Nadia. "Nation branding: Toward an agenda for critical research." *International journal of communication* 5 (2011): 117-141.

⁹⁹ Fan, Ying. "Branding the nation: Towards a better understanding." *Place branding and public diplomacy* 6.2 (2010): 97-103.

Figure 2
Nation branding process



Source: Fan, Ying. "Branding the nation: Towards a better understanding." *Place branding and public diplomacy* 6.2 (2010): p. 100

All this notwithstanding, the use of the term “nation branding” has mainly a journalistic connotation. To this point, Simon Anholt, a British brand consultant, is a leading expert in this area of study, having himself coined the term “nation branding”. The concept was then labelled “competitive identity”¹⁰⁰. This shift was dictated by structural and exogenous drivers such as the public-oriented changes in the social and political settings (read globalisation and the Web 2.0. Revolution), as well as the association of branding with advertising and propaganda. In such a globalised and interconnected world, the angle that Anholt suggests is that Competitive Identity (CI) represents the synthesis of brand management with public diplomacy and with trade, investment, tourism and export promotion¹⁰¹. In addition, CI represents a model for enhanced competitiveness, because every country, city or region is in competition with one another to obtain its share of consumers, investors, tourists, and others both at the national and international level.

Anholt metaphorically equates CI to a magnet. The latter has three main properties: first, as just said, it attracts and aims at obtaining its audiences’ attention and appeal; then it transfers magnetism to other objects, hence through a “halo effect” it can reinvigorate the image of other components related to a nation’s image; third, CI like a magnet is able to create order out of chaos. By this, he means that the multitude of actors at the national organisational level can be aligned towards a *telos*, that is the purpose of earning the reputation a nation needs and strives for.

¹⁰⁰ Anholt, Simon. “*Competitive identity: The new brand management for nations, cities and regions*”. New York, Palgrave Macmillan. 2007.

¹⁰¹ Ibidem p. 3

Of course, countries do not always have to create a brand from scratch. Most of the time, the workload is concentrated on brand management, to which both nation branding and competitive identity are strictly related. In case they do, the process of changing one's image is called rebranding. It usually takes place when a value-induced change of gear is in place or when the brand is in crisis. These two reasons may also be coexistent. The recent rebranding of Facebook into Meta Platforms is a fitting example of an attempt to leave behind the rifts, and above all project itself into the metaverse, a portmanteau term indicating a 3D social and virtual universe.

As seen above, nation branding has a well-developed academic work already in place. On the other hand, only a few studies in recent years have explored the relationship between nation branding and digital diplomacy. One proper instance is the America's Selfie study conducted by Manor and Segev¹⁰² in 2015, in which digital diplomacy is depicted as a tool for change management. The two experts agree with Anholt's analysis on the changing nature of the world into a globalised marketplace and on nation branding strategies being inherently dictated by financial imperatives as a consequence. The fundamental difference between a consumer-oriented product branding and a nation branding lies in the fact that the latter cannot always be kept under control. The sudden exposure to external events could deteriorate a nation's image, as in the case of America's nation brand after the collapse of the World Trade Center.

Yet, digital diplomacy comes in handy to overcome a nation's image crisis and other *impasses*. The branding process at a diplomatic level can work if cooperation materialises along both axes: vertically with embassies and diplomats; horizontally through the multi-stakeholder organisation of a country, i.e. government branches and ministries¹⁰³. What Manor and Segev claim is therefore essentially in line with Anholt's CI magnetic property to create order from chaos.

In conclusion, national images are still an important facet of diplomatic activity. Hence, if nation branding equates to the art of branding via SNS by drawing one's own portrait, then this process can be labelled as Selfie diplomacy. Its objective is to make a nation's image thrive, and as a consequence also foreign policy could be deemed as legitimate. The acquaintance to this concept was already dealt with when explaining the moulding capacity of soft power.

¹⁰² *ibidem* 54

¹⁰³ *ibidem* p. 94

A critique of “nation branding”

States and its citizens are identified with notable characteristics. Hence, when thinking about them, one's reputation or brand, be it positive or negative, is immediately recalled because of the heuristics and biases that are in play in the cognitive system. Still, in the management of a country's identity, branding brings to context an atomistic, rather than holistic order. Adopting an approach that stems from marketing, its host discipline, it ignores the fact that nations are complex entities and reduces them to marketable frames. In practice, it leverages on selected and (over) simplified aspects of a nation's identity for competitive advantage and economic returns. One of the most critical voices to nation branding, thus standing on the opposite side to Anholt, is Professor Sue Curry Jansen, who also reprimands its *raison d'être*. Indeed, drawing from Anne Cronin “calculative space”¹⁰⁴, she argues that nation branding transforms civic space into one that is “constituted by marketing data and decision making rather than conceived in terms of social relations or governance”¹⁰⁵.

Consequently, nation branding extracts and then projects a mirrored reality that is not accurate to the whole country but rather restricted to a selectively calculated identity. This identity-framing aims to communicate essential orientation and most-fitting information in order to attract investment, tourism, and ultimately the desire to be relevant and ambitious in influencing global affairs. However, by leaving complexity aside, nation branding strategies risk triggering cognitive bias towards the identity of a country, making even more difficult the task of persuading, or even debunking of stereotypes in the minds of people. Instead, it is important to bear in mind that identities undergo evolutive and changing processes.

Since 31st January 2020, drawing a new selfie, a new persona is what the United Kingdom has had on the horizon. In the aftermath of the withdrawal from the EU, several questions arise about the unravelling of its future. Hence, the coming conclusive chapter will delve deeper into some of the research questions pertaining to the framework of digital diplomatic activities. The analysis of the 2021 British Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy will be of crucial importance to assess the FDCO digital communication strategy and its management of the competitive identity.

¹⁰⁴ Cronin, Anne M. "Calculative spaces: Cities, market relations, and the commercial vitalism of the outdoor advertising industry." *Environment and Planning A* 40.11 (2008): 2734-2750.

¹⁰⁵ Jansen, Sue Curry. "Designer nations: Neo-liberal nation branding—Brand Estonia." *Social identities* 14.1 (2008): 121-142.

CHAPTER 3

The UK digital diplomacy after the withdrawal from the EU

Farewell! God knows when we shall meet again.

William Shakespeare in “Romeo and Juliet”, Juliet Capulet, Act 4.

3.1. The UK withdrawal from the EU

History of a strained relationship

Even before accessing the European Economic Community (EEC), the UK-EU bilateral relationship has been at loggerheads. In 1963, Charles De Gaulle vetoed - for the first time - their accession in the Common Market since he feared an “Americanisation of Europe”, as if the UK could, in the shape of a Trojan horse, conceal US interests, while Europe, as a continent and community, could lose its post-wars independence. In a different matter in 1967, the mid-year events turned the Kingdom's international history upside down. The Arab-Israeli conflict escalated into the Six-Day War and thus brought to the Suez Canal closure. Consequently, the pound sterling, which had previously had brighter moments, was compelled to a 14% devaluation during the “November crisis”. At the European level, this exacerbated the UK's bargaining position. Indeed, General De Gaulle said another infamous *non* to the British application, fearing that the UK would weaken the Six's¹⁰⁶ economic stability, and emphasised that the country was not a continental unit.

Nonetheless, as Grob-Fitzgibbon maintains in his book “The Continental Drift”, while Wilson and Brown (respectively PM and Foreign Secretary) concentrated on strategic withdrawal from the area East of Suez, other officials in the British government were already at work for the membership application for the EEC¹⁰⁷. Back then, their focus shifted towards Europe. There, they could find the friendly support of Jean Monnet, a founding father of the EU, who tried to push the entry of the UK into the Six. In 1968, the British government put forward a symbolic reorganisation in its infrastructure through which it signalled its programmatic foreign policy: the merging of the short-lived Commonwealth Affairs Office with the Foreign Office to form

¹⁰⁶The term “Six” is here referred to the founding members of the European Economic Community signing the Rome Treaty on 25th of March 1957, that is Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands.

¹⁰⁷ Grob-Fitzgibbon, Benjamin. *Continental Drift*. Cambridge University Press, 2016, p.336.

the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). Although symbolic, this label change meant that the UK needed to be included as a Community member in order to step back into the limelight on the international stage and shift from its pivot points, i.e. the Commonwealth and their Anglo-American relationship.

The relaunching of their negotiations with the Six substantially moved on only when De Gaulle was no longer in power. For this reason, the UK formally became a member of the EEC on the 1st of January 1973. Despite its geographical position on an island and its late-to-come membership, the UK followed some of the fundamental steps as Ernst Haas envisaged in the “becoming of Europe” and his regional integration under the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). Haas built on Mitrany’s functionalist theory of integration where greater interdependence among international actors - above all their technocrats - could eventually lead to peace. In a similar vein, Haas is considered as a neofunctionalist to International Relations (IR) and argued that an intensified cooperation in certain sectors of the economy and technical matters could strengthen political unity between countries. Once the latter made an initial group commitment, further momentum followed suit in a positive-sum game. The political scientist synthesised it by the notions of “functional and political spillover” because, in his view, technical matters could not be separated from politics¹⁰⁸.

Hence, neofunctionalism provides a consistent framework in the history-making change, especially in the transition from the ECSC to the EEC. Yet, integration did not move that smoothly in the successive years. Indeed, Haas suggested that the theory of regional integration ought to be studied in a wider context, entailing the general one of interdependence. On this ground, the theory of “complex interdependence” by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye¹⁰⁹ longs for explaining an ever-changing world, where military and security issues no longer prevail over “low politics” and transnational actors other than the sole state leaders and heads of government deal with one another. Rather, the complex interdependence is also found on several levels of decision-making, and it is not by accident that domestic and international were becoming blurred notions.

¹⁰⁸ Haas, E.B. *The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social and Economic forces 1950-57*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 1958.

¹⁰⁹ Keohane, Robert O, and Joseph S. Nye. *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1977.

This interdependence between high-low and international-domestic politics can be retraced back to the history of the UK within the EU. One year after the accession to the EEC, the Labour Party already promised a renegotiation of the terms of accession to the Community and to hold a consultative referendum. The 1975 United Kingdom European Communities membership referendum was also intended to assess the general electorate's sentiment about staying in the recently entered market. On that occasion, the British people were asked: "Do you think the UK should stay in the European Community (Common Market)?" The outcome was that the UK electorate voted to remain a member of the Community. Nonetheless, periods of friction within the Union persisted, thereby shaping the UK-EU strained relationship.

The UK negotiated four opt-outs from legislation or treaties within the EU. An opt-out implies that the country does not have to participate in specific policy areas. Chronologically speaking, the first exclusion related to the Schengen Agreement in 1985, a staple to the freedom of movement principle. The agreement was meant to abolish border control internally to the European continent. Indeed, non-EU countries such as Iceland, Lichtenstein, Sweden and Switzerland decided to join it, while passports were still required in the UK.

Second, the UK's currency has always been the pound sterling. Before introducing the Euro and the Monetary Union in 1999 in order to achieve economic stability within the Common Market, European Communities adopted a pegged and adjustable exchange rate regime: the European Monetary System (EMS). Also referred to as the "snake in the tunnel", because each national currency could fluctuate within $\pm 2.25\%$ of the central rates, except for the Spanish peseta, the Portuguese escudo and the pound sterling, which were allowed to fluctuate by $\pm 6\%$, the EMS was considered a crucial intermediate step to complete the single market and eventually lead to the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). In 1997, the newly elected Labour government led by Tony Blair as PM was in favour of adopting the Euro. Yet, the pound sterling did not pass all of the five economic tests provided by the UK's currency custodian, the Exchequer. Hence, no consultative referendum was ever held on this issue.

The third opt-out pertains to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which was subject to a clarifying protocol that specified the issues that could not be brought before UK courts. Also in this case, the domestic fear originated from some social rights that could alter the British labour law, especially on grounds of strikes.

Finally, through Protocol 36 of the Lisbon Treaty, the UK brokered a flexible opt-out from legislation adopted in the areas of freedom, security and justice, which was previously part of the third pillar pre-Amsterdam Treaty, that is Justice and Home Affairs. However, it is possible to opt-in on specific individual pieces of legislation, but permanently.

To conclude, it is widely known that the UK-EU relationship did not live under clear skies. The aforementioned events exacerbated the rapports because of the UK's *à la carte* approach to the Union. Ultimately, this diversity of views brought to what is here referred to as the tipping point of UK contemporary history.

The tipping point

The recent history of the United Kingdom has been moulded by one fundamental event: the referendum held on the 23rd of June 2016. On that day, UK voters were asked the question “Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?”. Commonly labelled as “Brexit”¹¹⁰, a crasis of the words “British” and “exit”, it implies the process of the UK exiting the EU. Yet, the process was so long that the term acquired several meanings and transcended the political sphere. From the compound word stemmed the verb “to brexit”, whose common use, for instance, at a party or an event implies someone that decides to leave but eventually stays until the end. All this to say that if engagement's original meaning was the one of pledging to someone or something, Brexit's connotation and context were on the other way around.

To understand why the choice was made to hold a referendum in 2016, it is necessary to grasp the political motives that underlie the Remain-Leave cleavage preceding the popular vote and surrounding the widespread opinion of the UK electorate on the EU.

A proper starting point was the 2010 UK general elections, which resulted in a hung parliament, a situation in which no single political party wins a majority in the House of Commons. The Conservative party obtained a slightly higher number of seats, led by their leader and then Prime Minister (PM) David Cameron up until the referendum in 2016. Therefore, the Tories worked

¹¹⁰ A similar portmanteau was already employed in 2012, in the aftermath of the economic crisis in Greece, when the word “Grexit” was used to describe the then incumbent, but ultimately not accomplished, exit of the country from the Eurozone.

in cooperation with the Liberal Democrats in a coalition government during the five-year mandate.

One year earlier, in 2009, David Cameron managed to withdraw his party from the European People's Party (EPP), which is the largest grouping of European Christian Democrats and conservatives in the European Parliament. Consequently, the party merged into the European Conservatives and Reformists, whose political ideology is manifestly anti-federalist and skewed towards far-right positions. This move partly influenced the political direction of the Tories and saw their more Eurosceptic wing progressively come to dominate the public discourse. Of course, the path towards the withdrawal could not be easily achieved because of the coalition with Liberal Democrats, whose stance on the EU was on the other side of the spectrum with respect to their governing partners. The track, although not travelled by, was already taken.

Notwithstanding this, the passing of the European Union Act 2011 by the Parliament exacerbated the situation. Through this piece of primary legislation, the Parliament committed the UK government to convene a referendum on any future treaty or amendment to the existing ones that could allocate further powers to the EU. While this Act was deemed as a momentary instrument to placate general wrath, the more Eurosceptic wing of the Tories kept on putting pressure on their leader and the rest of the party, especially for inter-party politics concerns. In those same years, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), guided by Nigel Farage, was working to climb up the consensus ladder with its populist, anti-immigration, and Eurosceptic posture. The UKIP posed a threat because of the momentum and contingency that their topics had in popular debate such as retaining national sovereignty, border, and immigration control, namely the essential argument of *souverainism*.

The successive elections, in 2015, resulted in a landslide majority of the Tories and were surrounded by a general anxiety about the "EU issue". At that point, the PM could not conceal its party's changing nature behind a coalition government anymore. Back in 2013, he had already admitted that an in-out referendum could be convened as long as the terms pertaining to the UK's membership within the EU were renegotiated¹¹¹. So, in the months preceding the

¹¹¹ UK Government. Cameron, David. "Eu Speech at Bloomberg", 23 January 2013. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3fZq7Vk>. Accessed on the 10th of February

popular vote, after having sent a letter to then President of the EU Council¹¹² Donald Tusk, a (re)negotiation was scheduled at the tables of the EU Council. Consequently, David Cameron and the other 27 state representatives brokered a deal that symbolically exempted the country from the “ever closer union” clause¹¹³, thereby giving the UK a “special status”, along with other technical and financial issues and concessions on grounds of competitiveness, social benefits, and free movement (read migration). Nonetheless, the question did not vanish, but rather was deemed as too complex to explain to ordinary voters, hence a hollow victory for the Remainers.

On the other side, putting pressure on the Brexiteers’ stance, there was the rise in migration and the impact it had on safety nets and public services. According to Matthijs¹¹⁴, such large movements of people flowed from two sides: the first one was the upshot of the 2004 enlargement of the EU¹¹⁵, where mainly former communist countries from central and eastern Europe were accepted to join the organisation. From that point, these new EU citizens decided to move westward to higher income level per capita countries, above all Germany and the UK; the other robust side was in 2015 with the refugee crisis, in which more than one million migrants and refugees fleeing war-torn countries (such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Syria) reached the European shores and borders. The EU communicating vessels were not able to collectively agree upon an external migration policy to either of these unprecedented and multidirectional waves.

Hence, the UK's *aut-aut* membership passed mainly through migration, national identity, sovereignty issues and other concerns along with pros and cons about the EU. To this framework, the different response to the 2007-2008 financial crisis through domestic institutions and policy tools widened the cleavage between EU and UK to such an extent that the House of Lords remarked “the euro-zone remains on the road towards greater integration.

¹¹² UK Government. PM letter to the President of the European Council “*A new settlement for the United Kingdom in a reformed European Union*”, 10 November 2015. Available at: <https://bit.ly/35ukjkG>. Accessed on the 10th of February

¹¹³ The European Council. A New Settlement for the United Kingdom within the European Union. Official Journal, C/69, Annex I, Section C, para. 1. p. 6, 23 February 2016. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3H7BPJx>. Accessed on the 10th of February

¹¹⁴ Matthijs, Matthias. “Europe after Brexit: A less perfect union.” *Foreign Affairs* 96 (2017): 85-95.

¹¹⁵ The 2004 enlargement of the EU was the largest expansion in terms of territory, number of states, and population. The countries were (in alphabetical order): Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

The implications of this for the UK are immense.¹¹⁶ Consequently, the answer to such a dilemma was submitted to the people.

The referendum campaign was conducted on the Remain side by *Stronger In*. This umbrella organisation was backed by Conservative leaders such as the PM and George Osborne (the Chancellor of the Exchequer of the day), together with the PMs of Scotland and Wales, the Labour, and Liberal Democrat MPs. Instead, the Leave campaign was upheld by the two-fold efforts of *Leave.eu*, guided by Nigel Farage and *Vote Leave* under the aegis of two senior *Brexiteers* within the Conservative party, that is Boris Johnson and Michael Gove. The concurrent propaganda activities of the Leave side ultimately paid dividends. In addition, as documented by a report from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, the Leave campaign sent key and straightforward messages on border control and “getting the money back” from the EU budget, unlike the Remainers, who could not overtly criticise the status quo and thus focused on negative messages and content, hoping for a human tendency to security. Moreover, *Brexiteers* had on their side 6 out of 9 UK national newspapers¹¹⁷.

The foreshadowing of electoral fraud

At the end of the day, the referendum had 72,2% of electoral turnout, resulting in a victory by a narrow margin of the “Leave” (51,9%) over the “Remain” (48,1%) and was not evenly distributed among the different constituent countries within the kingdom. In fact, Scottish and Northern Irish electorate casted their preference to remain in the Union. It is the sign of an ideological and practical disaggregation within the UK and the tipping point of its relationship with the EU.

The legality of the results was never questioned, even though according to the British unwritten constitution, referenda are not legally binding *per se*. Indeed, the very occurrence of a referendum in the UK is dependent on the promulgation of a specific parliamentary Act in which it is formally established the content and the deadline before which the direct vote must take place. In the case at stake, the European Union Referendum Act 2015 was promulgated one year earlier. Therefore, the political outcome engendering from the referendum took the

¹¹⁶ House of Lords. “Genuine Economic and Monetary Union” and the Implications for the UK, European Union Committee, 8th Report of Session 2013–14, HL Paper 134, Authority of House of Lords, 2014. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3gxyyaM>. Accessed on the 10th of February

¹¹⁷ Levy, David AL, Billur Aslan, and Diego Bironzo. “UK press coverage of the EU referendum.” Oxford, RISJ. 2016.

upper hand and the UK started its process to withdraw from the EU.

However, in 2018 a scandal broke out and questions arose over the impact it might have had on the successful Leave campaign. A British political consulting and data analysis firm named Cambridge Analytica, was accused of having interfered with the EU referendum. Cambridge Analytica specialised in psychographic profiling. Practically speaking, through a process of informed consent, data scientist Aleksandr Kogan extracted data to create personality profiles of voters. If it were circumscribed to this practice, probably the company would not have got into much trouble, since its mission was in line with any other firm of the sort. Kogan's data collection originally had academic purposes. The heart of the issue lies on the fact that the company not only profiled a given number of consenting people for marketing and self-proclaimed research purposes, but it harvested data from these people's Facebook friends, who were utterly unwitting of it. This harvesting method was perpetuated through an app called "*thisisyourdigitallife*" developed by Kogan and potentially profiled over 87 million Facebook users (mostly American), while only 270,000 users downloaded the app¹¹⁸. Among others, the data included the precise locations of the end users and other behavioural information helpful to microtargeting the voters.

As explained in the previous chapter, the scraped data is used to display users - in this case targeted voters - the tailored content, which is updated on a real time basis (thanks to the algorithmical machinery) and shaped after the current form of the debate. As Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison put it, the algorithm and database together crafted a powerful political tool since "it allowed a campaign to identify possible swing voters and craft messages more likely to resonate"¹¹⁹.

As per the Oxford Internet Institute analysis¹²⁰, circa 1,5 million tweets posted by 313,000 accounts were monitored from 5th to 13rd of June 2016. The social media activity at stake demonstrated that 54% of the tweets were pro-Leave, 20% were pro-Remain, and 26% were

¹¹⁸ Schroepfer, Mike. "An Update on Our Plans to Restrict Data Access on Facebook." Facebook Newsroom. 4 April 2018. Available at: <https://bit.ly/32JHyGs>. Accessed on the 10th of February

¹¹⁹ Cadwalladr, Carole, and Emma Graham-Harrison. "Revealed: 50 million Facebook profiles harvested for Cambridge Analytica in major data breach." *The Guardian*, 17 March 2018. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3ILUsms>. Accessed on the 10th of February

¹²⁰ Howard, Philip N., and Bence Kollanyi. "Bots, #StrongerIn, and #Brexit: Computational Propaganda during the UK-EU Referendum." Oxford Internet Institute, Project on Computational Propaganda, 2016.

neutral. Nonetheless, the distinctive trait during this timeframe was that a third of the aggregated tweets came from less than 1% of the accounts. No human can practically generate so many tweets and simultaneously interact with thousands of people in such a pace, not even it is foreseeable that 500,000 astroturfers were hired in this period. Therefore, the research validated the possibility that behind such a steep number of tweets, automation through political bots was involved, and Internet users cannot easily spot the differences between bots and conscient humans in the flesh.

After several ad hoc investigations, in 2020, the UK Information Commissioner's office found that despite some initial enquiries, there were no significant breaches of data protection, privacy issues, nor Cambridge Analytica broke the integrity of the vote. Hence, as new puzzle pieces about the UK withdrawal fit together, the debate on the regulation of technology companies and the impact they might have on political scenarios is still relevant.

Triggering Article 50: the ordeal to withdraw

As a consequence of the 2016 referendum the history of the EU changed too. For the first time since its inception, there was a case of withdrawal. Formally speaking, prior to 2009, there was no legal reference pertaining to it. As the Treaty on the European Union entered into force, through the withdrawal clause found in article 50, it was eventually possible to do so. Nonetheless, the process was not as simple as normatively prescribed.

Indeed, article 50 is a starting point. According to it, the European Council sets the negotiating guidelines for the EU, but any final bilateral agreement is subject to a double approval: a qualified majority vote in the Council as well as the approval from the European Parliament. Furthermore, the agreement must be reached within two years from the notification to the Council, which occurred in March 2017. Nonetheless, two years is a very limited amount of time to disentangle all the interdependent legislation, rights and court decisions (also known as *acquis communautaire*) that an EU country has embedded in its national constitutional *corpus*. In fact, the timeframe was further extended, prior to unanimous approval by member states.

In the prenegotiation context, parties established the rules of the game. A two-phased approach to negotiation was preferred, in which the first phase concerned “withdrawal issues”, while the second shaped the future relationship between the two parties. Crucially, the move to phasing

negotiations prevented the UK from leveraging trade-offs concerning its material and contingent strengths, its security assets in exchange for better concessions in other fields. For this reason, as Cini and Pérez-Solórzano Borragán¹²¹ point out, the Brexit process is not an ordinary international negotiation since it places the balance of power in the hands of the EU. Once overcome the momentary fear that a domino effect could engender in other countries wanting to leave the Union, during the talks, the EU Commission represented with a single voice all the 27 Member States, in the flesh of Michel Barnier, as Chief Negotiator. Furthermore, the absence of informal talks signalled a path towards transparent communication and public narratives control, whereas the British group of representatives appeared divided, reactive, and unprepared along both phases of negotiations.

At the domestic level, the government front was disunited and filled with obstacles to overcome. After the resignation of the PM, Theresa May took the regency at Whitehall, the siege of the British government. Yet, with a 12-seat parliamentary majority, it was almost impossible to make every member and backbencher of her party appeased. Therefore, early national elections were called, but, despite promising polls, they ultimately resulted in a hung parliament, where the Conservative Party cooperated with the Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party. In that historical moment, this political partnership did not help in the management of the Irish border issue. An emergency "backstop", that is a physical check on the frontier between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, hovered in the negotiations. Clearly, the spectres of the Troubles resurfaced to a time in which the island of Ireland was tangibly divided.

In addition, the first paragraph of Article 50 states that "any Member State may decide to withdraw from the Union in accordance with its own constitutional requirements." Given the unwritten nature of the British constitution, doubts were casted on whether the UK Parliament was allowed to move forward in the withdrawal process and deliver the notification of withdrawal. To this point, a concerned citizen, Gina Miller, brought her claim up to the Supreme Court. In particular, she asserted that the exclusion of the Parliament in triggering Article 50 lacked popular representation. Although the government insisted that it was allowed through royal prerogative, the Court ruled that the government was not entitled to use it, but rather it required national legislation to be promulgated, as well as parliamentary oversight to be

¹²¹ Cini, Michelle, and Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragán. "Brexit." *European Union Politics*. Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 418.

consistently present throughout the withdrawal process. In practice, through the EU (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill, the principle of parliamentary sovereignty was reaffirmed¹²².

The notification letter was delivered on the 29th of March 2017. From that moment onwards, Theresa May wanted to speed up the withdrawal negotiations, under the aegis of the slogan “Brexit means Brexit”. Easier said than done. In particular, the government’s proposed agreements and the fashion that the rapports between the parties should take were still vague. For almost two years, divergent views within the Parliament, and especially among the Tories, opposed the draft agreements three times. Thereby, the British position at the table was weakened, and fronts called upon a “soft” or “hard” version, or even “no deal” to withdraw.

It was undoubtedly necessary to delay the date of leaving the Union, even three times. As time passed, the UK membership as an EU member state did not fade. Despite its imminent withdrawal, the British people participated in the European Parliament elections in May 2019. Later, the deadline for leaving was further postponed, although the Parliament had already approved the withdrawal agreement in October 2019. At that point, given the internal fragmentation, Theresa May resigned, leaving room for a second snap general election in December. One of the two leaders of the *Vote Leave* campaign, Boris Johnson, was elected as the new PM. He managed to get the Agreement finally approved in January 2020. At midnight on the 31st of January 2020, the United Kingdom formally withdrew from the EU.

¹²² R (Miller) v. Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union [2017] UKSC 5, [2017] 1 All ER 593.

3.2. British digital engagement: a comparative approach

To be online, not a dilemma

Sabrina Sotiriu defined the latecomers of digital diplomacy as “slower participants”. These all came after the Anglo-American champions of the practice¹²³. As the French say, *les absents ont toujours tort*, which translates as “being absent is equal to being wrong”. At the same time, social media management, especially in crisis situations, is ever flexible and intrusive, since countries are accountable to their citizens that want to be informed online, but above all MFAs must face the surrounding and menacing informational ecosystem. Consequently, the presence of the UK on social media is compelling. On these grounds, the UK represents a stronghold in the realm of digital diplomacy, even if in a constant race with the USA.

The first chapter of the 2012 “Foreign and Commonwealth Office Digital Strategy” report focused on Digital Diplomacy, signalling that most of the digital enhancement within the Office would come after it. In the aftermath of the Libyan crisis and the outbreak of the Arab Springs, another revolution occurred at the digital level within Whitehall’s Main Building. They defined it as a “comms-led revolution”, through which the FCO should succeed in gathering information online by listening to and identifying key voices.

In that period, the matrix of the objectives was three-fold: first, the maintenance and enhancement of the present network should progress through innovative digital communications; second, the use of digital tools should be extensively broadened across the Foreign Office in the pursuit of foreign policy objectives. Finally, open policy formulation and an increase in transparency should be the beacons in the making of digital activities. The *telos* was thus to interactively get access to a wider range of inputs for policy decisions. Simultaneously, given that inputs are rooted in people’s real issues, better policies stem from their real needs. In substance, from the beginning, it was already clear which was the way forward in the exercise of digital diplomatic activities: a twine of the digital networked world and foreign policy implementation.¹²⁴

In the same occasion, the Digital Strategy report defines the FCO as a comms-led organisation.

¹²³ *ibidem* 46

¹²⁴ Foreign and Commonwealth Office. FCO Digital Strategy. 6th November 2012. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3oodjMG>. Accessed on the 10th of February

Hence, if at that time, the US Department of State managed a social media empire, the UK operated a global blogosphere¹²⁵. The FCO has a 23-language blog, where ambassadors, and scholars provide “a unique insight into UK foreign and development policy”¹²⁶. Nowadays, blogs are less frequently used, but the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office Blogs practitioners share their thoughts whenever they deem it necessary, and if and only if there is a sense of urgency.

Instead, the UK’s platform presence has dramatically grown in recent years. The very first website of the FCO was available in 1995, while in 2011 the Foreign Secretary held one of the world’s first live Twitter Q&A sessions. From these primordial moments, the Office has now expanded into a more comprehensive organisation, which uses social media platforms routinely and where it has a flag, as it is shown in Table 3. These renewed infrastructural settings can help the FCDO achieve its foreign policy goals and proactively manage its Competitive Identity through content tailored to the information gathered *in loco*.

Table 3
Comparative table of FCO-FCDO’s platform presence

FCO in 2012	PLATFORM	FCDO
250+ (93 in foreign languages)	Websites	287
120+	Twitter	160 countries + 36 central FCDO accounts
120+ pages	Facebook	165 countries + 6 central FCDO accounts
	Instagram	93 profiles
	YouTube	channels in 22 countries

Source: Personal elaboration of open-source data and FCO Digital Strategy (2012).

However, this change of pace did not occur *en masse*, instead it was a gradual process. As of April 2013, the entire staff of the Foreign Office, not only limited to the communication and

¹²⁵ Manor, Ilan. *Are we there yet: Have MFAs realized the potential of digital diplomacy?: Results from a cross-national comparison*. Brill, 2016, p. 18.

¹²⁶ Based on your location, the blog will direct you to the appropriate language: <https://bit.ly/3Hs3PaU>.

public relations sectors, was granted access to social media. The underlying reason was that social media was expected “to be a core part of the toolkit of a modern diplomat”. Indeed, staffers feeling empowered to adopt social media should use it in three main ways: indubitably to listen to the general public, to create a network and finally for active engagement purposes. The latter task was empowered to authorised staff only, since acting on behalf of the Office with a FCO-branded channel¹²⁷. Along with this authorisation came the suggestion that employees make use of Hootsuite, a social media monitoring tool. As previously said, although MFA’s “gatekeeping” function that used to bridge information and then translated into policy is no longer found, the 2012 departmental policy seemed to suggest the adoption of it.

Still, the conceptual development of digital diplomacy back then was intertwined with the concepts of soft power and public diplomacy (see Chapter 1). To this point, a British official, when interviewed, declared that in “creating this digital diplomacy function, we are really piggybacking on public diplomacy”. He continued, stressing that “what we are using digital for is to do that kind of the engaging and influencing that was already part of different jobs and it was directly the job of public affairs offices and people in the embassies to do this.”¹²⁸

As explained in the former chapter, Clarke defined digital diplomacy as a third-order policy change, by which she meant that it produces wide-ranging, let alone transformative shifts in the conduct of diplomatic work. Based on a sampled study on the British and Canadian MFA Twitter accounts’ activity from February to June 2012, the professor concluded that, back then, the difference between digital diplomacy and well-entrenched top-down practices (e.g. public diplomacy initiatives) could not be identified. Indeed, digital diplomacy was “business as usual” since it represented mere digitisation of traditional ways of working, rather than “as a platform for open, networked collaboration with non-governmental actors”¹²⁹ and the general public. This is probably due to the fact that in 2009, the FCO reorganised its communication office into a Strategic Communications Directorate which included five sectors: strategic, campaigns, public diplomacy, digital diplomacy, the press office and internal corporate communications. Practice makes perfect, or at least better. On this point, Manor warns that, as diplomacy migrates online, the plurality of channels working in the digital age leaves room to

¹²⁷ Foreign and Commonwealth Office. FCO Social Media Policy. 2013. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3AT44Ji>. Accessed on the 10th of February

¹²⁸ *ibidem* 57, p.120.

¹²⁹ *ibidem*, p. 125.

incoherent narratives for MFAs, thereby making the coordination between digital diplomacy and identity shaping activities burdensome, let alone idle.¹³⁰

To cope with novelty and state-of-the-art tools to pursue national interest and image management, the FCO inaugurated the Diplomatic Academy of the United Kingdom in 2016. As a result of the header change from FCO to FCDO, the academy was then relabelled into International Academy. The necessity to update one's array of skills and expertise, due to the fast-paced evolutions that technology set in motion, makes education a compelling choice to be competitive. In particular, since senior ranking diplomats are considered "digital immigrants", namely newbies to the digital world and functioning, they may lack the intuitive ability that "digital natives" yield.

To this point, the International Academy in 2020 issued a *change program* called "Diplomacy 20:20". Through this program, the FCO aimed to deliver a more expert and agile organisation by upgrading the 21st century skills that are needed in the diplomatic service. This change of pace was expected since November 2018. In a report called "Delivering Global Britain: FCO Skills", after having collected evidence from the Foreign Office, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the UK Parliament identified the skills in the pursuit of Global Britain. Specifically, the committee realised "the importance of digital diplomacy, primarily in the context of diplomats using social media" that it "requires learning new skills" and digital tools that "may open up potential audiences for UK foreign-policy messaging that were not previously reachable", concluding that it "is a significant opportunity if executed well"¹³¹. On these grounds, the Priority Skills Statement and Skills Framework 2020 provide evidence of four strands of core diplomatic skills, from which Communication as the use of media, social media, and digital in international settings stands out as first. So, the Academy commits to boosting expertise in a full range of relevant skills for the sake of modern digitalised diplomacy.

Different strategies and patterns of interaction which levelled the playing field in digital communication were not the only byproducts of an ever-changing technological sphere, whose ramifications extended also into the economic realm. Online interaction is low-cost, yet rich in content and engagement. Through digital engagement, countries with smaller networks and

¹³⁰ *ibidem* 122

¹³¹ UK Parliament. "Delivering Global Britain: FCO Skills" Report. Foreign Affairs Committee. 28th November 2018, para. 48. Available at: <https://bit.ly/34xzedk>. Accessed on the 10th of February

reduced economic capabilities could accomplish better results in terms of global outreach with respect to the past. For larger and better-equipped countries, as the UK is, staying ahead of this digital race is *de rigueur*. For this reason, if the FCO did not participate in the “digital game”, it would be ruled a loss by default. Hence, it is not even a Shakesperian dilemma, whether “to be or not to be” online, because the answer is self-evidently positive.

Label change equals policy change?

On the 2nd of September 2020, the FCO was transformed into the FCDO, whereby the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (created in 1968) and the Department for International Development were merged into the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. The current British PM, Boris Johnson, argued that the choice was determined by an intensely competitive world and the contingent pandemic circumstances that rendered artificial and outdated the divide diplomacy and overseas development. The merger was also designed to focus on strategically relevant regions and to have a holistic vision in the conduct of foreign policy.

In 2018, still Johnson, acting as Foreign Secretary, announced an increase by 15% of FCO diplomats deployed as country-based staff, thus scattered all over the world¹³². Along with it, new overseas missions and specifically 10 new diplomatic posts, be they embassies or High Commissions, ought to be established. The difference between the latter two lies in the hosting country’s status. If said country is part of the Commonwealth, then the institution takes the label of High Commission, otherwise it is an embassy. However, it is not possible to obtain the precise number of newly hired British diplomats, since the Annual Report and Accounts lists the number of staff employed both locally and UK-based. Nonetheless, it can be argued that there has been an overall increase in the workforce due to “the expansion of the global (diplomatic) network in support of EU Exit, Global Britain and the delivery of a new approach to Africa”¹³³.

Such research is relatively more accessible concerning the new diplomatic posts, given the availability of open-source data on the FCDO official website. The data proved insightful in

¹³² UK Government. “Foreign Secretary announces 250 new diplomatic roles and ten new sovereign missions overseas”. 21st March 2018, Press Release. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3sisXKG>. Accessed on the 10th of February

¹³³ Foreign and Commonwealth Office. FCO Annual Report & Accounts: 2019–2020. HC 553, 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3ro6FYP>. Accessed on the 10th of February

tracing the trajectory of the diplomatic posts in the period between October 2014 and September 2021 in comparative Table 4. As shown below, the number of posts increased steadily, yet the settlement of embassies and High Commissions fell short of the coveted figure 10. The answer is found in the unprecedented pressure that the COVID-19 outbreak has had on the UK Government and its spending capabilities. And, the new institutions are found in Africa (Djibouti, Eswatini, Lesotho, Tanzania), Central America (Antigua and Barbuda, Grenada, Saint Vincent and Grenadines), North America (The Bahamas) and The Maldives. All but Djibouti are members of the Commonwealth.

Table 4

Comparison of FCDO posts¹³⁴

	OCTOBER 2014	SEPTEMBER 2018	SEPTEMBER 2021
AFRICA	39 posts (32 countries)	42 posts (34 countries)	46 posts (37 countries)
AMERICAS	48 posts (26 countries)	53 posts (26 countries)	55 posts (30 countries)
ASIA/PACIFIC	34 posts (21 countries)	=	37 posts (24 countries)
EUROPE	64 posts (38 countries)	65 posts (38 countries)	64posts (38 countries)
EASTERN EUROPE/CENTRAL ASIA	16 posts (12 countries)	15 posts (12 countries)	14 posts (12 countries)
MENA REGION (MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA)	27 posts (20 countries)	26 posts (19 countries)	26 posts (20 countries)
MULTILATERAL	9 delegations to IOs	=	11 delegations to IOs
OVERSEAS TERRITORIES	12 representatives	=	=
SOUTH ASIA AND AFGHANISTAN	18 posts (6 countries)	17 posts (6 countries)	18 posts (7 countries)

Source: Personal elaboration of open-source data. Retrieved from the List of Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office posts, published in October 2014, March 2021, September 2021.

¹³⁴ The following data are based on my elaboration of the List of Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office posts, published in October 2014, March 2021, September 2021. Raw data available at: <https://bit.ly/3rkkOpY> . Accessed on the 10th of February

Furthermore, the PM claimed that the UK has the third world-best aid budget and diplomatic network. The UK represented the most influential power in the world in terms of EU representation. Drawing from the data collected by the EEAS in December 2019, Gatti inferred that the UK had an embassy network of 122 in non-EU countries, standing at the third place right after France and Germany, while the other EU countries had an average of 56. As shown above, this sizeable asymmetry could be explained by the consolidated strength that the Commonwealth of Nations takes into custody in the UK contemporary history.

Hence, the “divorce from the EU” (and its diplomatic branch EEAS) set in motion two impactful consequences: first of all is the downsizing of the EU diplomatic network, which was weakened in quantitative terms in several countries, and for several activities such as the collection of information and implementation of policies in small and medium-sized developing countries. In these unevenly represented areas by the Union, the presence ranges from little to none, thereby weighing on the burdensome diplomatic activities of bigger countries. On another hand, it put some pressure on EU Delegations, whose current ambition is to demonstrate whether they can supplant their fellow neighbour by carrying out diplomatic missions of sovereign states in terms of consular protection of EU individuals, also in the UK¹³⁵.

All this notwithstanding, the sheer number of new high-level representational institutions says little in terms of the UK diplomatic power, but rather it speaks volumes about the attainable engagement with the people and the direction its foreign policy has been taking. Indeed, it suggested what “Global Britain in a Competitive Age. The integrated Review of Security, Development and Foreign Policy” (the Integrated Review hereinafter) would outline on the 16th of March 2021.

Decoupling from Europe

The 111-page document published by the Whitehall government yearned for pointing the way forward in the aftermath of the withdrawal from the EU. On public engagement grounds, the UK launched a public call for evidence, where more than 450 respondents contributed with their perspective on a range of security, defence, and foreign policy questions. After having

¹³⁵ Gatti, Mauro. "EU diplomacy after Brexit." *The Routledge Handbook on the International Dimension of Brexit*. Routledge, 2020. 165-180.

surmounted peaks of difficulty and confidence downs in recent years, London, embodying the centre of all the constituent countries within the kingdom, is looking for a new role that could differ from the post-Cold War scenario.

The document sets a full-fledged watershed. In fact, it sets out the programmatic foreign policy of the post-withdrawal UK, which is inscribed within the aura of “Global Britain” (see next section). The Integrated Review attempts to add significant content to the vast contribution about this label and aims at providing a strategic framework for national security and deterrence objectives until 2030, along with the fundamental instruments to face the twenty-first century challenges. One week later, a defence command paper titled “Defence in a Competitive Age” was published by the Ministry of Defence. In sum, the Integrated Review was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity since it overturns the aforementioned decision to dismantle the UK global role by withdrawing its position *East of Suez* in 1968, around which the UK core foreign policy should gravitate, at least up until 2030¹³⁶.

Since 2015, when the last Strategic Defence and Security Review was issued, there was no specific direction towards which the UK could point. Starting from the EU departure, the country intended to engage on different routes, one of which is to strengthen the century-long bond with the Commonwealth countries. The Commonwealth is a voluntary international association that includes 54 countries and 2.4 billion people. In the words of the then Secretary of State, Liam Fox, during the inaugural conference of “Commonwealth Trade Ministers” in 2017, the association involves “some of the world’s oldest and most resilient friendships” and he stressed the relevance it holds in the field of free trade¹³⁷. The relationship with the Commonwealth countries has always been deemed necessary for the sustenance of the country, which would swim in deep waters because of its lack of raw materials. Hence, the withdrawal from the EU, that is the world’s largest importer, posed relatively higher obstacles to UK’s global trade.

More importantly, the UK committed to deepening its engagement in the Indo-Pacific area, a regional prioritisation move framed within the review as the “tilt to Indo-Pacific”. This wording

¹³⁶ UK Government. “Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy.” CP 403. 16th March 2021. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3rtBvPJ>. Accessed on the 10th of February

¹³⁷ UK Government. Liam Fox. “Commonwealth trade ministers meeting: towards a free trading future” speech. 9th March 2017. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3rswFCe>. Accessed on the 10th of February

appears three times in the document, while the word “Indo-Pacific” is repeated 32 times. Again, the stress is posed on economic opportunities, but also on security concerns in the area, along with other pressing global challenges. The Indo-Pacific area is said to be dealing with crucial events deriving from climate chaos and maritime security, and it is now thus considered as the defining theatre of geopolitical competition. It is by no accident that a new position as FCO Director General responsible for the Indo-Pacific was appointed, as well as a dedicated Ambassador to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2019. Then, the justification to the engagement inclination *East of Suez* is given by the fact that the neighbouring People’s Republic of China represents, in their view, “the biggest state-based threat” to the UK’s economic security¹³⁸.

Moreover, the Indo-Pacific prioritisation is further outlined by the signature of the AUKUS trilateral security pact on the 15th of September 2021. The name is obtained from the compound of its signatories, namely Australia, the UK and the US. It aims at strengthening the enhanced security partnership that is already in function between these countries in the fields of cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and underwater defence. Clearly, dire answers were sent from different latitudes. Although its name was never mentioned, it is evident that the pact has been designed as an anti-Chinese policy. Furthermore, ever since the withdrawal occurred, the UK has been free to pursue enhanced cooperation with other allies, yet its former ones resented it by defining this unilateral move as a “stab in the back”¹³⁹.

Finally, the document does not display any hostile stances towards the EU. The UK is aware of being a European country having vital partners in the Continent. Yet, it is a “country with *uniquely* global interests, partnerships and capabilities”¹⁴⁰. The adverb “uniquely” precisely describes the British historical exceptionalism, since it geographically belongs to the European Continent, but is concomitantly separated from it. For this reason, the attitude towards its former partner is merely on security grounds, since the UK commits to be the largest contributor to the security of the Euro-Atlantic area to 2030.

However, fears rise about the UK overturning its stance on reducing nuclear capabilities. If the

¹³⁸ ibidem 133, p. 60-68.

¹³⁹ France 24. “France deplores 'stab in the back' by US, Australia over subs contract” Online video, 16th September 2021. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3uzlo54>. Accessed on the 10th of February

¹⁴⁰ ibidem 133 p.38

2010 Coalition Government reduced the overall nuclear warhead stockpile ceiling to 120, “in recognition of the evolving security environment” the UK would now “move to an overall nuclear weapon stockpile of no more than 260 warheads” under the Tory leadership. This overturning does not shift the world nuclear equilibrium, but it might open up to unpredictable scenarios. Nonetheless, the decision was justified as the deterrent power against the most extreme state threats, but also in pursuing the nuclear declaration in 1962 when the UK joined NATO. So, they will continue to safeguard European and Euro-Atlantic collective security.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ *ibidem* 133, p.77.

3.3. The concept of “Global Britain”: rebranding or innovative strategy?

The previous section dealt with the infrastructural assets of the FCO, which has then changed its name into FCDO. This label change is not only a merger of two already existing Ministries, rather it suggests the UK’s willingness to project itself in the world as Global Britain. Forty-seven years of membership in the European supranational organisation, which is based on mutual agreements and treaties covering thousands of different subject matters, made it difficult for the UK to leave the EU. Above all, disengaging from an international organisation representing the quasi-entirety of the continent also revolutionises the way in which one country comes to terms with itself. Therefore, since 2016, the crux has been to forge the path towards the new United Kingdom. Hence, this section aims to evaluate the tangible meaning of “Global Britain” as well as the assets from which this strategy should arise.

At the time of writing, by looking at the material and invaluable assets of the island perched on the edge of Europe, the United Kingdom remains the world’s fifth-largest economy, a nuclear power, and a permanent member of the UNSC. In addition, it is a member of several international organisations such as NATO, the G7, the G20, the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO, the OSCE, not to mention the Commonwealth. Among its non-material assets, language must be taken into account since it represents a competitive advantage. The English language is still a *lingua franca* in the domains of international business and on the Internet.

As reported in the Integrated Review, the kingdom considers itself as “a soft power superpower”. The British Council and the BBC, two of the strongest arm’s length bodies of the UK, let alone soft power heralds, enhance the influence and prosperity of the British image and culture abroad. In addition, according to many indices that measure soft power, the country consistently positions in the top-3 rankings. Yet, the new non-EU member status poses fundamental hardship in maintaining such a distinguished position on a global scale. In this regard, the UK is aware of the fact that its soft power cannot be taken for granted. In particular, this is also due to systemic competitors, like Russia and China, which are heavily investing in cultural projection and information operations¹⁴².

All this to say that after the strained divorce from Europe, the UK decided to put forward its strategy of Global Britain. Yet, few know the extent of it. In that respect, the Integrated Review

¹⁴² ibidem p.49

itself does not help frame what “Global Britain” is exactly, since these two words are only found seven times (excluding the titles). In one of the seven instances, the succinct paragraphs of “Global Britain in action” provide a general understanding of the practical concept, since what it “means in practice is best defined by actions rather than words”. Then, it is stressed that Whitehall has worked for this strategy since the 2019 general elections and delivers in the interests of the British people, such as “sustaining the UK’s openness as a society and economy, underpinned by a shift to a more robust position on security and deterrence”. Along with this, the UK commits to renew its image as a “force for good” in the world in defence of democracy and human rights, as well as a determination to seek multilateral solutions to world present and future challenges¹⁴³.

The meaning of Global Britain

Kids are usually asked what they would like to be when they grow up. In a similar manner, the UK has been wondering what it currently is and what it wants to be once having grown out from the EU. Few analyses on different fronts stem from these existential doubts. The view of the British Council Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Ciarán Devane helps in understanding the issue from a historical and soft power perspective. In a 2016 conference, he maintained that it was not possible to draw a line on the past. Comparing the withdrawal process to the post-Enlightenment and post-French revolution, where a *tabula rasa* approach was applied, he continued that it cannot be employed on history and culture, let alone in this interdependent world. Something positive about the past must be retained. He continued asserting that “culture is what we do and what we do is often because of our history”¹⁴⁴.

Although it might sound a bit *cliché*, part of a country's actions is the upshot of former decisions, events, and obstacles. Constructivist scholars are well aware of this since they ascribe many facets of IR to socially constructed components. Therefore, in their view, one’s Competitive Identity would build simultaneously on what one thinks of itself and on the ideas that surround him, namely what others do think about it and its actions. These days, the UK is undergoing a process of (re)construction of itself, and as a consequence of its foreign policy posture. To put it in simpler terms, it is shaping its place and role in the world. Borrowing from one of the most

¹⁴³ *ibidem* p. 14, para. 18

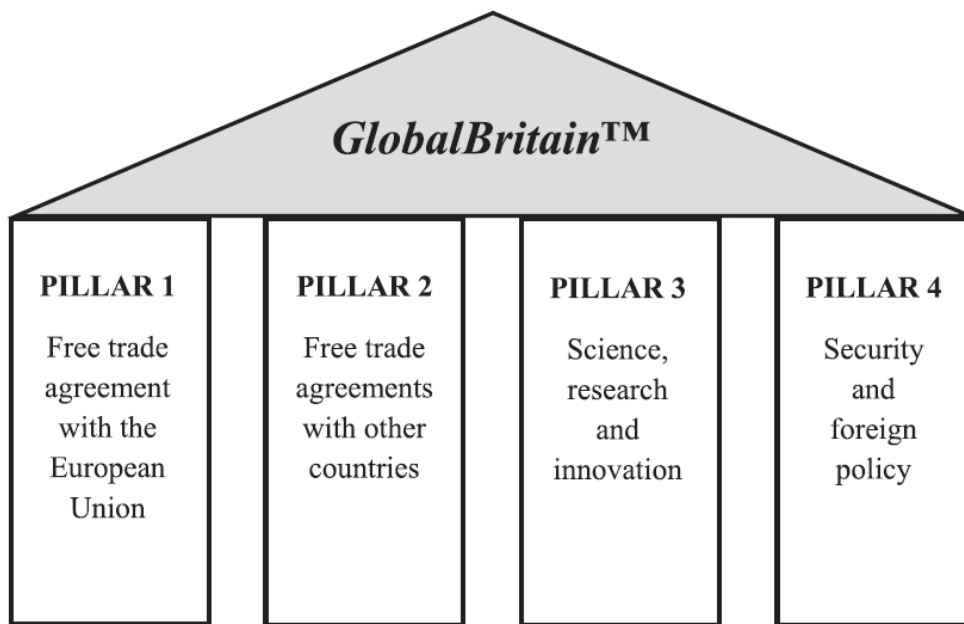
¹⁴⁴ Devane, Ciarán. “Reflections on the evolution of Britain: Brexit, Identity, and the United Kingdom’s Place in the World.” Edmund Burke Lecture, October 2016. Available at: <https://bit.ly/32Sx3AF>. Accessed on the 10th of February

popular books about constructivism written by Alexander Wendt, it can be argued that Global Britain is what the British make of it. At the same time, it would be mistaken to interpret this *modus operandi* as if the British are the only architects of their destiny.

In the textual analysis of Global Britain provided by Oliver Daddow¹⁴⁵, the author offers an interpretivist account of how the trademark of Global Britain was discursively constructed. The scholar extracted text data from public speeches and parliamentary reports. Most of these are related to the Tories leading government representatives. As shown in Figure 3, Daddow's policy architecture of Global Britain is sustained by four main pillars, where the first and second are about free trade agreements with EU and third countries. To put it succinctly, it relates to the way in which the British economy could keep on the same level as it did within the Common Market; the third pertains to the science, research and innovation and finally the fourth pillar deals with the hard power component of security and foreign policy.

¹⁴⁵ Daddow, Oliver. "GlobalBritain™: the discursive construction of Britain's post-Brexit world role." *Global Affairs* 5.1 (2019): 5-22.

Figure 3
Global Britain™ architecture



Source: Daddow, Oliver. "GlobalBritain™: the discursive construction of Britain's post-Brexit world role." *Global Affairs* 5.1 (2019), p. 7.

Pillars 3 and 4 directly draw from the “pragmatic” tradition in British foreign policy, pervaded by the pursuit of vital British economic and security interests employing its hard power (in the fourth pillar) and its soft power capabilities and knowledge (in the third). About the latter, right after the PM's foreword and vision for the UK in 2030, the first focus of the Integrated Review relates to science and technology. The two are intended as strategic assets to sustain an advantage. Hence, through the power of culture they want to reach, and simultaneously attract from, all the corners of the world. Differently, when dealing with Britain's role in the world economy, the discourse in the first and second pillar relies on well-entrenched standpoints of the Conservative Party. Mainly, it builds on the assumption that Britain helped in building the current free trade system stretched on a global basis, and that peace could flow only from free trade. Lastly, being the Tories the main supporters of leaving the Union, they praise an unhinged market that is not harnessed within the Single Market and Customs Union system. Most of the Global Britain narrative is centred around a reactionary narrative towards its recently separated partner, i.e. the EU.

In addition, some of the core ingredients of the current British role in the world stem from

spatial, temporal, and ethical narratives. Concerning the spatiality discourse, one might think that it simply revolves around the geographical collocation of Britain. It is instead related to the “reobtained sovereignty” which was previously lost to a supranational body. As if, part of their sovereignty was not allocated, rather conceded to the EU. In a similar manner, the temporality of Global Britain is found in metaphors, which are helpful in visualising something undetected. Such is the case of framing metaphors about the backwardness of the EU and the brightness of the future. Finally, the ethical nature of the trademark is expressed through words such as freedom, emancipation from a period of captivity all of which lead to a British country ready to finally embrace the world.¹⁴⁶

In substance, Daddow’s analysis provides a constructivist approach to the definition of Global Britain, which essentially stems from confronting others. In fact, the kind of Global Britain he defines passes through reactive narratives to the “other”, rather than proactive ones. As if the withdrawal from the UK were the same as the Act of Supremacy in 1534, where Henry VII set forth the monarch's supremacy as the head of the Church of England, thereby breaking with the Vatican.

Still on historical foreign policy grounds, the UK has undergone different processes of reconstruction. For instance, during the so-called *Pax Britannica* (which lasted from the French Revolution until the outbreak of the First World War), the kingdom, or better to say the empire, acted in the lens of the splendid isolation doctrine. The term describes the foreign policy pursued by Britain during the late 19th century under the Conservative Party’s premierships of Benjamin Disraeli and Lord Salisbury. Henry Kissinger defined this doctrine in contrast with the American isolationism of the 20th century. While the Americans had an ocean separating them from European affairs, the British version had some features of aloofness. From time to time, they engaged in strategic partnership with European countries, but this doctrine “could be entertained only by a country that was sufficiently strong to stand alone¹⁴⁷”. At that time, as the creator of the doctrine, Lord Salisbury, once said “we are fish”¹⁴⁸, because Great Britain was a thalassocratic power, whose projections went far away from their neighbouring peers, and instead focused on the high seas. For this reason, the kingdom stood better off alone.

¹⁴⁶ *ibidem* p. 10-11.

¹⁴⁷ Kissinger, Henry. *Diplomacy*. Simon and Schuster, 1994, p. 97.

¹⁴⁸ *ibidem* 178

Some commentators affirm that the country is experiencing a “postcolonial melancholia”, that is the condition of a morbid culture of a once-imperial nation, consumed by “an unhealthy and destructive post-imperial hungering for renewed greatness”. For the people endorsing this historical bent, the very entry into the EEC in 1973 was a loss of prestige. For this reason, the exit from the Union serves as a revival of the imperial splendours. Yet, two days after the issue of the Integrated Review, Jeremy Shapiro and Nick Witney maintained that London will have to get used to life as a middle power¹⁴⁹. Namely, more than 100 years on, the grandeur witnessed during the *Pax Britannica* is clearly over.

3.4. The UK digital diplomacy: the case of Global Britain

Instances of UK national image reconstruction

During the last decade, the UK has been involved in several brand crises, often occurring contextually with conflicts. At the present critical juncture, by drawing a new self-portrait, nations may be able to distance themselves from their past and reinvent their brand. The reconstruction of a nation’s image might happen through the launch of a social media advocacy campaign which focuses on a global issue. Somehow, this has already been conducted by the UK in recent years, even before the 2016 referendum. Such was the case with the UK’s Campaign to End Sexual Violence in Conflict (ESVC), which was initiated by the FCO in May 2012 and jointly sustained by two leading female figures: Zainab Bangura, the UN Secretary General’s incoming Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, and Angelina Jolie, Special Envoy of the UN High Commissioner. Through an aggressive promotion strategy on the Foreign Office’s Twitter, Facebook, and above all YouTube channels, using the hashtag *#timetoact*, along with the involvement of Jolie’s platform and outreach, the campaign targeted the issue of gender-based violence in times of conflict.

In point of fact, the UK acted in a calculated manner to associate its “brand” with humanistic values and distance itself or even distract the audience from the legacies of the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan¹⁵⁰. Not by chance, the ever-growing practice to involve Goodwill Ambassadors, as in the case of Angelina Jolie, indirectly strengthens the identity of a country.

¹⁴⁹ Shapiro, Jeremy, and Nick Witney. "The Delusions of Global Britain: London Will Have to Get Used to Life as a Middle Power." *Foreign Affairs* (2021).

¹⁵⁰ In a similar manner, the movie “Wag the Dog” by Barry Levinson depicts a pre-electoral situation in which a movie director and a spin doctor fabricate a war, and the images of it, in Albania in order to distract the domestic audience from the US president sex scandal.

It does so by willingly developing engagement all over the world thanks to the former's outreach web. Apart from being a clear attempt to rebrand the country's image, this strategy helped shape the online debate on the issue. Not surprisingly, in the following year and a half, approximately 80 out of 100 top tweets related to the hashtag *#sexualviolence* were prominently posted from official British positions, also thanks to the visual and audio content they displayed throughout their on-field visits¹⁵¹. Thus, as Manor claims, under the label the term "selfie diplomacy" lies not only the employment of social media by nations to promote their desired image but also to the entire SNS language that is required in order to achieve their goals¹⁵².

Different is the case of national image devaluation, as it happened during the 2018 Skripal case, where a British double agent and his daughter, Sergei and Yulia Skripal were poisoned by a nerve agent. The British suspected the Russian Federation to be involved in this attack. In order to defend itself from accusations by the UK government, together with the ones connected to the Cambridge Analytica incident, the Russian Embassy based in London tweeted some trolling, humoristic and sarcastic use of memes and posts, whose ultimate goal was to "ridicule Britain's accusations and then feed the cynical attitude that Britain was being hypocritical in a world where everyone engages in this sort of activity"¹⁵³. The employment of this unique, out-of-the-box and cross-cultural approach was a strategy, through which the Russian Embassy, first of all, tried to deflect the attention from the accusations claimed by the UK, switching the focus from objective to ironic grounds, and secondly created a new persona or "selfie", whose magnitude is found in the fact that the embassy had more followers than any other G20 country's diplomatic mission to the UK¹⁵⁴.

On the other side, the FCO had few options to employ either to ignore or debunk the disinformation activity. The choice initially fell on the first. The British MFA's attitude was the opposite of the Russian one, since they were consistent with the decision taken, and reiterated it through posting a staid video in which it was announced that the single biggest expulsion of diplomats in over 30 years was on the way. Then, they tried to debunk the misinformation

¹⁵¹ Pamment, James. "Digital diplomacy as transmedia engagement: Aligning theories of participatory culture with international advocacy campaigns." *New Media & Society* 18.9 (2016): 2046-2062.

¹⁵² Manor, Ilan. "America's selfie—Three years later." *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 13.4 (2017): 308-324.

¹⁵³ Sharp, Paul. *Diplomacy in the 21st century: A brief introduction*. Routledge, 2019, p.70.

¹⁵⁴ Belam, Martin. "Twitter diplomacy: How Russian embassy trolls UK government". *The Guardian*, 15th March 2018. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3gqil7b>. Accessed on the 10th February 2022

spread by the Russian account. Yet, the situation escalated because the FCO deleted a tweet containing the likely proof of Russian involvement and production of the Novichok nerve agent. The Russian Embassy took no time to reply.

Global Britain: a “force for good”

Using the words of Olubukola Adesina, “the UK Foreign Office actively encourages personal engagement of its ambassadors on Twitter, and it has become virtually impossible to become a Foreign Office diplomat if you are not using digital tools”¹⁵⁵. As seen above (Table 3), the UK has a large “twiplomatic” network with a record of 196 Twitter accounts and an estimate of over 700 official social media profiles. Yet, in written evidence provided by the Foreign Office to the Parliament, a degree of further clarity about the meaning of Global Britain was called for, otherwise the diplomatic staff would not know what skills it should focus on, especially given the ever-changing circumstances that are characterising the British diplomats’ job.¹⁵⁶

Nonetheless, in 2016 the FCO had “around 20 permanent Digital Data & Technology (DDAT) specialists, together with “a small team of full-time digital communications specialists in London and at key Posts such as Moscow, Washington, Madrid, and UK Mission to the UN in New York”. The list continues with over 100 people in the global network working on digital issues and running an extensive training programme to ensure anyone with a communications role can deliver basic digital communication. Finally, there were nine digital communications specialists in London and approximately ten to 15 permanent digital specialists at Post.¹⁵⁷

Updated staff data is unavailable, yet given the contingency of the practice, higher numbers can only be expected. Still on contingent grounds, the Integrated Review came in a crucial year for the UK’s international leadership, as it held the Presidency of the G7 and co-hosted (in partnership with Italy) the postponed COP26 Climate Change Summit in Glasgow. At this critical juncture, “rebranding” its Competitive Identity is crucial for the UK, and above all hybridising the significant on- and offline activities. Bjola uses the term “hybridisation” borrowing from Goffman’s concepts of online “frontstage” and offline diplomatic “backstage”. Both need to be well coordinated to be effective, consistent and successful, too. This

¹⁵⁵ Adesina, Olubukola S. "Foreign policy in an era of digital diplomacy." *Cogent Social Sciences* 3.1 (2017): 1297175.

¹⁵⁶ *ibidem* 128

¹⁵⁷ *ibidem* para.42

means that digital outputs and outcomes cannot be allowed to substantially diverge or contradict objectives set for traditional diplomacy¹⁵⁸.

Moreover, to make any research project “doable”, be it quantitative or qualitative, a necessary element of selectivity is implied. Hence, in order to understand the key ingredients in the “Global Britain” narrative construction in the field of digital diplomacy, I selected representative illustrations from the FCDO official Twitter account. The latter was created on the 10th of April 2008 and - at the time of writing - has 1,028,571 followers. The time frame was restricted through the “advanced search” tool of Twitter from the day before the issue of the Integrated Review, the 15th of March 2021, to the 31st of January 2022. The reason for the exclusion of the relative Facebook account from the analysis lies primarily on a lack of public engagement since the number of followers (472,095) is less than half Twitter’s, even though Twitter’s end users are fewer (see Table 1). Secondly, the underlying reason lies in the limited number of posts containing the exact phrase “Global Britain” that would not be explanatory in the present research.

Out of the 1022 posts of the @FCDOGovUK, tweets containing the precise phrase “Global Britain” are 7. 6 out of 7 relate to the former Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab and his public emphasis on one of the distinctive characteristics of Global Britain, that is the UK as a “force for good”. While the hashtag #GlobalBritain is found 10 times and mainly relates to the operational deployment of the HMS *Queen Elizabeth* lead ship and its UK Carrier Strike Group, which have travelled 26,000 nautical miles across 40 nations. Both instances attempt to signal two important things: on one hand, that the UK sets out its globalising ambitions, rather than being perched on the edge of Europe. Secondly, it gives substance to the March 2021 programmatic texts, both the Integrated Review (for the post’s captions) and the “Defence in a Competitive Age” command paper (for the hashtag). Among other things, it thus made a claim about the direction towards which the UK is going, that is *East of Suez*, more precisely towards the Pacific.

Another slightly symbolic, even imperceptible change, can be assessed in the use of the wording “global Britain” before March 2021, and “Global Britain” from the Integrated Review onward.

¹⁵⁸ Bjola, Corneliu. "Getting digital diplomacy right: what quantum theory can teach us about measuring impact." *Global Affairs* 2.3 (2016): 345-353.

As if the adjective not only connoted the direction towards which the UK should point, rather than that the UK has already become a global actor. As explained above, self-perception is paramount in projecting and defending a country's Competitive Identity.

In the first place, the main objective of the digital diplomatic strategy adopted by the @FCDOGovUK on Twitter was to get past the bias that being an isolated country automatically resulted in an isolated foreign policy. The time of isolationism has passed, also, as repeatedly said within this thesis, as living off the grid is no longer possible in an interdependent world.

For this reason, to start the analysis on the Global Britain digital communication strategy, I will use one of the first tweets posted by the FCDO account. As shown in Image 1, the tweet was posted on the 17th of March 2021, one day after the issue of the Integrated Review, through which the words of the former Foreign Secretary Dominik Raab (July 2019 - September 2021) and the image of Global Britain as a force for good is eventually displayed. As it says, the UK mission is to be a force for good in the world, so the country is outwardly looking, and only through its "economic, military, diplomatic, cultural clout" can it increase people's security and living standards across the world. He then continued stressing that the UK will tackle all the challenges that touch us, all from Covid-19 to the threat of climate change. In sum, all those challenges that threaten the future of present and future children.

Image 1

FCDO Tweet “A force for good: Global Britain in a competitive age”¹⁵⁹



By looking at the analytics on “followers gained” on Social Blade¹⁶⁰, I retraced a sudden reduction of followers on the official Twitter account some months after this tweet. In the week that also includes the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia #IDAHOBIT (16-22 May) the account @FCDOGovUK lost 2,141 followers. Although marginal, a drop in its audience represents feedback from its engaged audience, which apparently did not accept such postings. Moreover, many of the comments to the post at stake (Image 2) related to accusations of “rainbow washing”. The latter consists in the act of using or adding rainbow colours and/or imagery to advertising, apparel, landmarks in order to indicate progressive support for the LGBT+ community.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. “A force for good: Global Britain in a competitive age”. Tweet available at: <https://bit.ly/3Hy5UC2>. Accessed on the 10th of February

¹⁶⁰ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3uyTrKC>.

¹⁶¹ “Rainbow washing.” Urban Dictionary, <https://bit.ly/3rAcRwK>. Accessed on the 10th of February

Image 2

FCDO Tweet “International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia”¹⁶²



On this point, the analysis of the former director of the International Academy and practitioner of Digital Diplomacy at the FCDO Jon Benjamin may come to our help. In the practice of successful digital diplomatic activities, there must always be the twine of three components: authenticity, engagement, and a real purpose¹⁶³. If the latter falls under the category of Global Britain as force for good, while engagement materialises in the 50 thousand people watching the video at issue, and even more than 2000 quitting the FCDO “echo chamber”, the authentic aspect of the post is instead not found. One day earlier, Dominic Saab announced that he was going to take the position of co-chair of the Equal Rights Coalition at the global LGBT+

¹⁶² Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. “International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia”. Tweet available at: <https://bit.ly/3HBw7jd>. Accessed on the 10th of February

¹⁶³ UK Government. Jon Benjamin. “Diplomacy in the digital age”, 29th July 2016. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3oCrpdt>. Accessed on the 10th of February

conference in 2022¹⁶⁴. For this reason, it was deemed as overly insincere and self-promoting behaviour. Nonetheless, in the following months, the official account kept on posting on the topic, for instance on the 30th anniversary of the lifting of the ban in the Foreign Office, thereby creating a pattern on this topic.

It is important to stress that people tend to have short-lived memories, while diplomacy and diplomats yearn for long-term objectives and outcomes. Indeed, at the end of August 2021, during the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, the engagement rate was on the other way around. Plenty of new followers joined the central Twitter account, especially to receive updates on the rescue of fellow nationals and Afghani population in harrowing conditions. Nonetheless, the evacuation brought to an end the UK's 20-year military involvement on the ground.

The case of the COP26

In preparation for the United Nations Climate Change Conference UK 2021 (31st October - 12th November), also referred to as the Conference Of Parties (COP26), the UK Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee gathered inputs from practitioners and scholars. In a historical period characterised by pandemic uncertainty, the written evidence provided by Rietig and Peringer, suggested that in order to avoid a further surge in Covid-19 cases in the UK, digital diplomacy should be preferred¹⁶⁵. They added that the employment of digital diplomatic channels would increase inclusiveness and transparency, keeping the interested public, government peers, and delegates abreast on the developments of the negotiation topics.

At the end of the day, the COP26's negotiations were held in person. Therefore, the fear that informal coalition-based meetings, which are the crux of these kinds of negotiations, could not take place, was eventually spared. Some of the countries which were most expected to attend due to their percentage of global greenhouse gas emissions, such as Russia and China, did not ultimately attend, thereby undermining the very chances of success of the Conference. On the contrary, during the opening speeches, to which every country is entitled, the minister of Justice, Communications and Foreign Affairs of Tuvalu, Simon Kofe, attended the conference with the appearance and demeanour typical of diplomatic negotiations. Just one little detail is discounted

¹⁶⁴ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. “#Safetobeme2022 Global LGBT+ Conference”. Tweet available at: <https://bit.ly/3LmzjS8>. Accessed on the 10th of February

¹⁶⁵ Rietig, K., and C. Peringer. "Environmental Diplomacy: effective climate negotiations through digital diplomacy and facilitation." *House of Commons* (2020).

here, which is that he made his speech while standing knee deep in seawater. In that case, the objective was to juxtapose the negotiations with real insight and inputs of what climate change may engender if unprecedented and prompt actions would not be taken to stop it.

On the UK leadership side, to properly meet the expectations, the FCDO adopted in any case a long-term strategy. Worth mentioning is the creation of an ad hoc profile (in November 2019) for the event (@COP26), through which during the days of conference the UK kept the public posted on the topics addressed and the temporary agreements reached. The total number of followers reached more than 200,000 users before the end of the conference.

More importantly, in September 2021, an innovative communication approach was adopted through a partnership with Netflix (see note 68). The colossal streaming platform and the UK jointly launched the collection “Together for our Planet” (Image 3). Ahead of the November COP26, this represented a multi-platform and multi-level attempt to educate and invite people to act together in this global challenge. As reported by Netflix over 160 million households have watched these contents.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Netflix staff. “Together for Our Planet: A New Collection of Sustainability Stories on Netflix” 30th September 2021. Available at: <https://bit.ly/34JBUEB>. Accessed on the 10th of February

Image 3

FCDO Tweet “*Together for our planet* Netflix-UK Partnership”¹⁶⁷

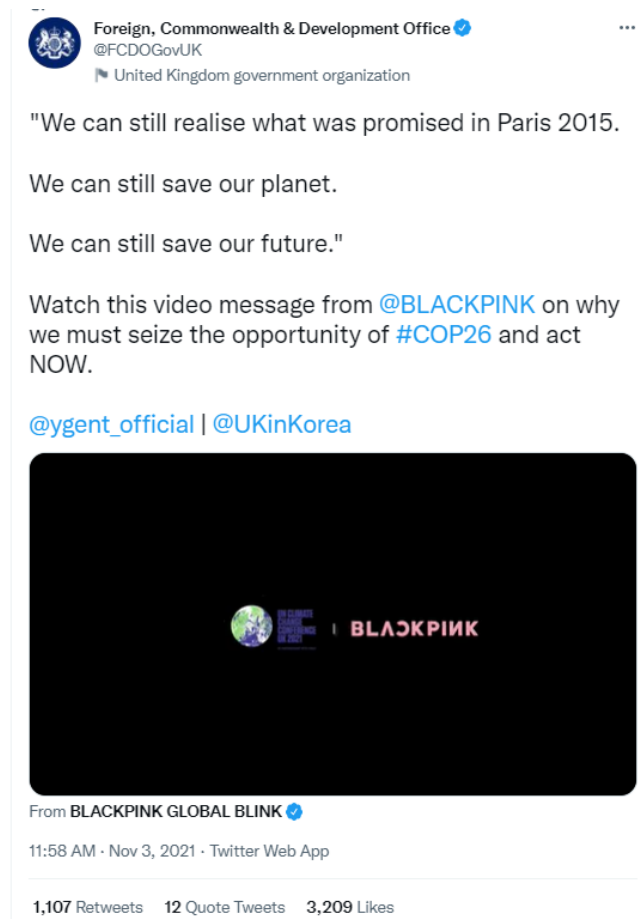


Finally, the FCDO tried the same strategy as during the ESVC Campaign. In that case, the targeted issue was to end gender-based violence in times of conflict, while here they developed a partnership with the Korean girl band Blackpink. The four members of the group reposted a two-minutes video, in which they advocated for raising awareness on the current climatic situation and the dramatic changes that might derive thereof. The video at stake (Image 4), although entirely held in English, reached more than 400,000 end users. In this occasion, the objectives were two-fold: first of all, to raise awareness on climate chaos, given the implications on economic, social and humanitarian fields; second, the FCDO tried to engage with the platform outreach of a group having millions of followers all over the world, and even whose geographical origin is still *East of Suez*.

¹⁶⁷ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. “*Together for our planet* Netflix-UK Partnership”. Tweet available at: <https://bit.ly/3oy1GCQ>. Accessed on the 10th of February

Image 4

FCDO Tweet “Blackpink COP26 Awareness Video” ¹⁶⁸



Tying up loose ends, in the time frame under analysis, the official FCDO Twitter account has had a harmonious and positive approach to conduct digital diplomacy. In particular, it was able to mingle on- and offline activities in order to support its renewed competitive identity, i.e. Global Britain. Indeed, as its meaning was not clear beforehand, the posts on Twitter initially had a programmatic function, by explaining that Global Britain prides as its utmost priority the mission of being a “force for good”.

Nonetheless, the UK should be aware of the pitfalls of applying a branding approach to a nation’s image. As the synecdoche, a figure of speech, associates a part of something to the whole of it, similarly the application of nation branding, which comes from a marketing background, to a country’s foreign policy is reductive. Hence, the Integrated Review, even

¹⁶⁸ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. “Blackpink COP26 Awareness Video”. Tweet available at: <https://bit.ly/3JgisOK>. Accessed on the 10th of February

though multidirectional in nature, intends to project abroad a rebranded and polished image, akin to a logo, which eventually falls short of the multi-faceted dimensions of a country's identity. Indeed, it only displays a frame of the complex architecture, but hides what lies beneath and surrounds it. An architecture made up of cultural, historical, political, and social aspects, which have proved to be an intervening variable in the UK's contemporary history.

For this reason, assessing the impact of a digital communication strategy is all but straightforward. In particular, the underlying question is how can success by a MFA, like the FCDO, be measured. If it were a private company, the answer would be found under the profit figures in the annual report, whereas in the case of the FCDO, there is no benchmark but the one of attracting influence, that is to be seen as a benign agent and a leader in the world. In the short-term, the FCDO was able to do so, also thanks to the leading positions it has covered during the year. Above all, the UK placid, yet outward looking strategy adopted by the FCDO in preparation for the COP26 had the capacity to outlast the algorithmic impediments. If the Russian Embassy to UK succeeded through humoristic and playful behaviour, the Global Britain digital diplomacy displayed the typical subdued tone but succeeded to address contingent topics which the audiences held dear.

The strategy was possible thanks to the bold move of involving celebrities and even platforms whose outreach is much wider than the FCDO's. Through these methods algorithmic barriers to dialogic engagement were broken, but little attention was brought to the listening part. Instead, the UK has been busy focusing on managing its Competitive Identity, which works like a magnet and, as such, it broadens the attraction to other components of its Global Britain identity. For this reason, it can be argued that, after the withdrawal from the EU, the FCDO digital communication strategy was not innovative, but rather more of a rebranding kind. A brand associated with positive purposes as explained by the slogan "Global Britain as a force for good".

In the long-run, far from the spotlight of global meetings' leading positions, it will be interesting to analyse how Global Britain identity could endure or even thrive despite the contingent external threats. For instance, in the light of the renewed tensions between Ukraine and the

Russian Federation, Global Britain sought to show its military worth¹⁶⁹ and imposed a sanctions regime on Russian citizens on UK territory. To posterity the tough sentence to judge whether the Global Britain brand will have a shelf-life, especially one that endures the challenges of the present decade.

¹⁶⁹ Hughes, Laura, and Henry Foy. “‘Global Britain’ seeks to show its military worth in Ukraine”. *The Financial Times*, 25 January 2022. Available at: <https://on.ft.com/3JcEbHn>. Accessed on the 10th of February

Concluding remarks

The state-of-the-art diplomacy envisages interpersonal relations that are no longer restricted to diplomatic peers or delegates. Those belonged to the Westphalian world of nation-states. Rather, in the interconnected world we are living in, a networked version of diplomacy is preferred. The latter represents a more dynamic, flatter and highly transparent mode of conducting diplomacy with respect to the club version of it, which met the requirements of a male, élite, secret club. Not least, women's presence, although unevenly distributed among the diplomatic ranks, is steeply increasing in recent times. Hence, the meaning of network diplomacy is related to Social Network Analysis, by which a network is a collection of nodes that are connected to each other through links.

Therefore, the shift from club to network diplomacy has further levelled the diplomatic playing field. It allowed for the entry into the game of new nodes such as non-state actors, IOs, and MNCs. Not by chance, already at the end of WWI, it was widely agreed that diplomacy should be made public and that treaties should follow suit. Now more than ever, states are accountable to their citizens. Because of digital disintermediation, they do not get information from traditional media nor from the gatekeeping MFAs, as they used to do through top-down practice of public diplomacy.

On these grounds, given that Digital Diplomacy is endowed with a predisposition to transparency and accountability, its arrival seemed undeniable. According to the definitional framework provided by Manor and Segev, it refers to “the growing use of social media platforms by a country in order to achieve its foreign policy goals and proactively manages its image and reputation”. As important as its advent, Amanda Clarke deemed Digital Diplomacy as a third-order policy change, because it set in motion the highest attainable degree of change in the diplomatic paradigm. Thus, any actor does stand on the same level and is no longer objectified as *the other*. The latter is now a subject with whom to engage with.

However, even though Digital Diplomacy provides channels going beyond the traditional ways, its practice is not free of challenges to overcome. The most threatening one is what Anne Helmond defined as “the platformization of the web”. At the present critical juncture, Web 2.0 allowed platforms to become the dominant infrastructural and economic model and as a consequence set social media platforms free in other spaces online. This was possible through

the intertwined mechanism of ever-increasing amount of data gathered in the datafication process which are fuelled by the algorithmic calculations. Although this mechanism may seem trivial to the analysis at stake, platforms grow bigger every day and it is also important to remember that they play a dual role. Simultaneously, social media platforms are, on one hand, the intermediary, that is the theatre in which digital diplomacy takes place, and on the other an active player in digital diplomacy capable of steering users' content through echo chambers and filter bubbles.

Regarding the users, digital diplomatic practitioners have to face several hurdles in order to engage with them. Some are naively or purposely conducted by the end users (see for instance the trolling activity performed by the Russian Embassy to UK after the Skripal case), while other times disruptive activities can be other-directed (as in the case of digital astroturfing).

Having clear in our minds these theoretical and definitional components among which to move, I then passed to analyse the way in which the FCDO managed its Competitive Identity after the withdrawal from the EU, which by itself was all but unproblematic. Since 2016, the UK has lived with internal fragmentation (see for instance Scotland's overall preference to Remain, or the hung parliament), that in turn could not help neither in "Brexit" negotiations nor in its external projection. After a period of nation's image crisis, as it was during and after having triggered article 50, the UK focused on drawing a new persona, i.e. Global Britain. It did so by recognising that the world in which we are living is also competitive, let alone interdependent.

Not by chance, questions have been asked on many fronts and pertained to what the UK currently is and what it wants to be. To quell any doubt, the March 2021 Integrated Review provided an all-encompassing overview of Global Britain. In particular, the focus of the document was to provide the direction of its foreign policy (the "tilt" to the Indo-Pacific), the economic partnerships (especially with the Commonwealth countries) in the Competitive report but also at the soft power level, remembering UK's top-level non-material assets. In sum, Global Britain longed for being a Competitive Identity in a competitive era.

Hence, in the light of the already mentioned definition of digital diplomacy, I tried to answer the research question on whether, during the reconstruction of its "post-Brexit" identity, the FCDO online activities and its related strategy were more of a rebranding or an innovative kind.

On these grounds, through the selection of tweets of the period at stake (1022 posts, from March 2021 to January 2022) I tried to provide a snapshot of the UK practice in digital diplomacy in an extraordinary year of leadership at global meetings.

My analysis led to the conclusion that the FCDO strategy was a rebranding one, since first of all, it tried to reinforce the meaning of its renewed competitive identity, as outlined in the Integrated Review, from which the concept of Global Britain as a “force for good” emerges. A global force endowed with military, cultural and diplomatic assets, which by others is willing to increase the overall security in the globe.

Even though having self-perception is a key ingredient in the management of a country’s identity, it is equally important to argue that by applying a nation branding strategy to the post-withdrawal British identity, the shortcomings of a marketing-related approach are clearly displayed. Nation branding is not an all-encompassing concept, but rather a more selective one. Hence, the selection of specific traits reduces the multi-dimensionality as well as the complex evolution that the UK, both as a country and as a society, is currently undergoing.

Furthermore, setting aside the final agreement of the COP26, the UK digital communication was part of a long-term and prepared strategy as a participant and a co-host to the conference. They set up a new ad hoc Twitter account in order to update the engaged audience on step-by-step negotiations. Still on engagement, the FCDO created a unique partnership with Netflix, a world leading streaming platform. Through its streaming services, the platform made available to its audience - much wider than the UK's - the movie and documentary collection “Together for our Planet”. Finally, to increase engagement and participation in this digital dialogue, the FCDO cooperated with Blackpink, a Korean girl group having millions of followers.

In conclusion, the UK, in the digital flesh of the FCDO, is a pioneer in the field. As one of the most admired practitioners of digital diplomacy, the former UK Ambassador to Turkey, now Chief of the UK Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), Richard Moore, maintained in his first speech of his secret service career, “the changing nature of the threats we face requires a greater degree of openness”, this means that also secret services “must become open, to stay secret”. All this to say that even when the most secret apparatus of a state retraces the necessity to be open within the webs of our societies, then digital diplomacy is not even a dilemma. Thus, as

Benjamin Disraeli said, “the secret of success is constancy of purpose”. *Ceteris paribus* the purpose is the one to be online and engage.

List of abbreviations

APIs Application Programming Interfaces

ASEAN Association of Southeast Asian Nations

CEO Chief Executive Officer

CI Competitive Identity

COP26 United Nations Climate Change Conference of Parties in UK

DDD Domestic Digital Diplomacy

DDAT Digital Data & Technology

ECSC European Coal and Steel Community

EEAS European External Service Action

EEC European Economic Community

EMS European Monetary System

EMU Economic and Monetary Union

ESVC Campaign to End Sexual Violence in Conflict

EPP European People's Party

EU European Union

FARC Revolutionary Armed Forces in Columbia

FCO Foreign and Commonwealth Office

FDCO United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

FDI Foreign Direct Investment

HR/VP High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

ICT Information and Communication Technologies

IR International Relations

JCPOA Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

MFA Ministry of Foreign Affairs

MNCs Multinational corporations

NPD New Public Diplomacy

PD Public Diplomacy

PM Prime Minister

SDGs Sustainable Development Goals

SNA Social Network Analysis

UKIP United Kingdom Independence Party

UNSC United Nations Security Council

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Summary

A fast digitisation of our daily lives and the evolution of contemporary technologies have strongly affected the power structures of politics, together with the participation of the people in the newsmaking and policy activities. In addition, because of its horizontal nature, digital media favours non-state-centric narratives, thus bringing state and non-state actors contending the very same publics. Hence, communication strategies and narratives have recently become public-centric.

Diplomacy is not exempted from these adjustments. Some may argue that modern diplomacy, intended as a peaceful tool through which to pursue the goals of foreign policy, is nothing but old diplomacy with some new features. Indeed, the state-of-the-art diplomacy envisages interpersonal relations that are no longer restricted to diplomatic peers or delegates. Those belonged to the Westphalian world of nation-states. Rather, in the interconnected world we are living in, a networked version of diplomacy is preferred. In the first and more theoretical part of the thesis, I investigate the evolution of the means in the conduct of diplomacy and the latter's transformation from club to network diplomacy. This shift has not only quantitative effects, rather qualitative. Network diplomacy represents a more dynamic, flatter and highly transparent mode of conducting diplomacy with respect to the club version of it, which met the requirements of a male, élite, secret club. Not least, women's presence, although unevenly distributed among the diplomatic ranks, is steeply increasing in recent times. In addition, the meaning of network diplomacy is related to Social Network Analysis, by which a network is a collection of nodes that are connected to each other through links.

My research proceeds with the examination of the concepts of soft power and public diplomacy (PD). The first is defined as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” and it is opposed to the concept of hard power. Soft power entails a centripetal force that stems from the image of a country, whereas diplomacy is a proactive activity. Differently, PD is meant as a set of tools used by governments to cultivate public opinion in other countries and influence “public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies”. PD differs from soft power on three significant dimensions. First, it is endowed with a vertical projection over the designated publics, but in a more pro-active way towards the public. Therefore, there is a shift from centripetal (belonging to soft power) to vertical forces, which aim to establish long-term relationships with the designated publics. In addition, because of its proactive dimension, PD could serve as a strategic task of perception

management of a country, which is the second aspect. The perception management is carried out, not only to create respectful relationships, rather to influence and mould the image that a general public or targeted groups have of it, often trying to change their mind in post-crisis situations. Due to this perception, an actor's decisions and actions disentangle.

The second chapter revolves around the concept of digital diplomacy, which is the core argument of the thesis, and it is separated from the two abovementioned notions of soft power and public diplomacy. Digital diplomacy differentiates on several aspects from the two. First of all, it has a horizontal conception, which implies that the dialogue is initiated on an equal foot between parties using the ICT and its platforms. Therefore, as the international order switches from a Westphalian approach (where *governments* are the only component in place) to a horizontal and non-hierarchical *governance*, digital diplomacy also seems to follow this shift. Differently, soft power takes advantage of the centripetal force (from periphery to core) of its non-material assets, whereas public diplomacy is like a vector which is endowed with a vertical direction pointing to the public.

Hence, within the present research I used the definitional framework provided by Manor and Segev according to which digital diplomacy refers to “the growing use of social media platforms by a country in order to achieve its foreign policy goals and proactively manages its image and reputation”. The advent of digital diplomacy has changed another portion of the diplomatic paradigm, namely the one of considering *the other* not as a mere object, but rather a subject with whom to engage with. Soft power and public diplomacy lack the predisposition to transparency and accountability which are intrinsic to digital diplomacy. Such accountability is not limited solely to the relevant MFA, but rather to the engaged digital publics. For what concerns the MFAs, digital diplomacy allows “to listen to the concerns and interests of local populations in a far more cost-effective way than opinion polling”. Without dialogue it would be impossible to properly engage with the target audience.

However, even though Digital Diplomacy provides channels going beyond the traditional ways, its practice is not free of challenges to overcome. The most threatening one is what Anne Helmond defined as “the platformization of the web”. At the present critical juncture, Web 2.0 allowed platforms to become the dominant infrastructural and economic model and as a consequence set social media platforms free in other spaces online. This was possible through

the intertwined mechanism of ever-increasing amount of data gathered in the datafication process which are fuelled by the algorithmic calculations. Algorithms are “encoded procedures for transforming input data into a desired output, based on specified calculations”. Algorithmic calculations are made on every click and every query, also considering the time spent on a page or before an image is computed. In the current digital society, before such a content overload to which we all are exposed, controlling the content to be shown means controlling the information and knowledge.

Although this mechanism may seem trivial to the analysis at stake, platforms grow bigger every day and it is also important to remember that they play a dual role. Simultaneously, social media platforms are, on one hand, the intermediary, that is the theatre in which digital diplomacy takes place, and on the other an active player in digital diplomacy capable of steering users’ content through echo chambers and filter bubbles. The latter are both structural impediments to the conduct of digital diplomatic activities. A filter bubble is intended here as the mechanism through which algorithms amplify ideological segregation by automatically recommending personalised content an user is likely to agree with, whereas an echo chamber creates these “social bubbles”, hence they are the upshot of filter bubbles, where only people thinking alike are part and parcel of it. The two are on the opposing side to the primordial objectives of the Internet, which promised free and unrestricted access to a vast array of information.

Another threatening challenge regards the platforms’ end users that hinder digital diplomatic practitioners in the possibility of engaging with them. Digital astroturfing and trolling are two of the hurdles and depending on the case are naively or purposely conducted by end users or peers. In the first case it is “a form of manufactured, deceptive and strategic top-down activity on the Internet initiated by political actors that mimics bottom-up activity by autonomous individuals”. To put it in simple terms, “political actors can create online activity that seems like authentic activity by regular citizens, when it is, in reality, anything but”. Instead, trolling relates to malicious and deceptive online behaviour conducted by individuals who engage in the activity of trolling out of their own volition. The intrinsic difference between the two concepts, although both are deceptive in nature, lies in the origin. In the two cases, the individuals yield their agency, but the mind of digital astroturfing stems from political actors, who manufacture these activities with the intent of attacking someone or something.

Furthermore, being digital diplomacy a communicative practice, its aim is to engage with the public. As Taylor and Kent maintain, organisations must “engage in dialogue” to be ethical, because it mitigates power relationships, values, and poses the recipient to the same level of the sender. Dialogic engagement is key for success in the conduct of digital diplomacy since it creates emotional involvement or commitment to a country.

At the end of the second chapter, I analysed the notion of nation branding, which embraces the image and reputation that a nation enjoys in the world. the use of the term “nation branding” has mainly a journalistic connotation. To this point, Simon Anholt, the creator of the word has then labelled it as “competitive identity”. This shift was dictated by structural and exogenous drivers such as the public-oriented changes in the social and political settings (read globalisation and the Web 2.0. Revolution), as well as the association of branding with advertising and propaganda. Anholt metaphorically equates CI to a magnet. The latter has three main properties: first, as just said, it attracts and aims at obtaining its audiences’ attention and appeal; then it transfers magnetism to other objects, hence through a “halo effect” it can reinvigorate the image of other components related to a nation’s image; third, CI like a magnet is able to create order out of chaos. By this, he means that the multitude of actors at the national organisational level can be aligned towards a *telos*, that is the purpose of earning the reputation a nation needs and strives for.

All this notwithstanding, in the management of a country’s identity, branding brings to context an atomistic, rather than holistic order. Adopting an approach that stems from marketing, its host discipline, it ignores the fact that nations are complex entities and reduce them to marketable frames. In practice, it leverages on selected and (over) simplified aspects of a nation’s identity for competitive advantage and economic returns. nation branding extracts and then projects a mirrored reality that is not accurate to the whole country but rather restricted to a selectively calculated identity. This identity-framing aims to communicate essential orientation and most-fitting information in order to attract investment, tourism, and ultimately being relevant and ambitious in influencing global affairs.

Nonetheless, national images are still an important facet of diplomatic activity. Hence, if nation branding equates to the art of branding via SNS by drawing one’s own portrait, then this process can be labelled as Selfie diplomacy. Its objective is to make a nation’s image thrive, and as a

consequence also foreign policy could be deemed as legitimate. The acquaintance to this concept was already dealt with when explaining the moulding capacity of soft power.

Since 31st January 2020, drawing a new persona is what the United Kingdom has had on the horizon. In the aftermath of the withdrawal from the EU, several questions arise about the unravelling of its future. Hence, in the conclusive chapter I delved deeper into the developments of the withdrawal process from the EU, as well as the internal problems in triggering article 50. Subsequently, I answered some of the research questions pertaining to the framework of digital diplomatic activities. The analysis of the 2021 British Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy was of crucial importance to assess the FCDO digital communication strategy and its management of the competitive identity. In particular, the focus of the document was to provide the direction of its foreign policy (the “tilt” to the Indo-Pacific), the economic partnerships (especially with the Commonwealth countries) in the Competitive report but also at the soft power level, remembering UK’s top-level non-material assets. In sum, Global Britain longed for being a Competitive Identity in a competitive era.

Moreover, in the light of the already mentioned definition of digital diplomacy, I tried to answer the research question on whether, during the reconstruction of its “post-Brexit” identity, the FCDO online activities and its related strategy were more of a rebranding or an innovative kind. On these grounds, through the selection of tweets of the period at stake (1022 posts, from March 2021 to January 2022) I tried to provide a snapshot of the UK practice in digital diplomacy in an extraordinary year of leadership at global meetings, as it held the Presidency of the G7 and co-hosted (in partnership with Italy) the postponed COP26 Climate Change Summit in Glasgow.

My analysis led to the conclusion that the FCDO strategy was a rebranding one, since first of all, it tried to reinforce the meaning of its renewed competitive identity, as outlined in the Integrated Review, from which the concept of Global Britain as a “force for good” emerges. A global force endowed with military, cultural and diplomatic assets, which by others is willing to increase the overall security in the globe.

Even though having self-perception is a key ingredient in the management of a country’s identity, it is equally important to argue that by applying a nation branding strategy to the post-

withdrawal British identity, the shortcomings of a marketing-related approach are clearly displayed. Nation branding is not an all-encompassing concept, but rather a more selective one. Hence, the selection of specific traits reduces the multi-dimensionality as well as the complex evolution that the UK, both as a country and as a society, is currently undergoing.

Furthermore, by analysing the case study of the COP26, I argued that the UK digital communication was part of a long-term and prepared strategy as a participant and a co-host to the conference. They set up a new ad hoc Twitter account in order to update the engaged audience on step-by-step negotiations. Still on engagement, the FCDO created a unique partnership with Netflix, a world leading streaming platform. Through its streaming services, the platform made available to its audience - much wider than the UK's - the movie and documentary collection "Together for our Planet". Finally, to increase engagement and participation in this digital dialogue, the FCDO cooperated with Blackpink, a Korean girl group having millions of followers.

In the long-run, far from the spotlight of global meetings' leading positions, it will be interesting to analyse how Global Britain identity could endure or even thrive despite the contingent external threats. For instance, in the light of the renewed tensions between Ukraine and the Russian Federation, Global Britain sought to show its military worth and imposed a sanctions regime on Russian citizens on UK territory. To posterity the tough sentence to judge whether the Global Britain brand will have a shelf-life, especially one that endures the challenges of the present decade.