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Digital Diplomacy and Disinformation: Reshaping Global Public Opinion

Muhammad Arsal Latif
Lecturer, Department of Management Science, Shifa Tameer-e-Millat University (STMU), Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: arsal_latif.fssh@stmu.edu.pk

Dr. Samina Rooh
Lecturer, Department of Management Sciences, University of Buner.
Email: saminarooh@ubuner.edu.pk

Muhammad Farooq Malik
Independent Researcher and Policy Analyst
Email: mhd.f.malik@gmail.com

Abdul Samad
Pursuing Masters at National Research Tomsk State University, Tomsk, Russian Federation. Email: absamad028@gmail.com

Abstract
Digital diplomacy has revolutionized global communication by leveraging social media, artificial intelligence (AI), and real-time engagement, yet it simultaneously amplifies the risks of disinformation, reshaping public opinion in destabilizing ways. This paper examines the dual-edged nature of digital diplomacy, analysing how states and non-state actors exploit platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok to foster connectivity while spreading disinformation. Through historical precedents—from Cold War propaganda to AI-driven deepfakes—the study underscores disinformation's evolution into a tool of hybrid warfare, eroding trust in institutions and polarizing societies. Case studies of Russian election interference, Chinese influence operations, and domestic disinformation crises (e.g., the 2020 U.S. Capitol riot) highlight the transnational and psychological impacts of manipulated narratives. The paper argues that combating disinformation requires interdisciplinary strategies, including international cooperation (e.g., the EU's Digital Services Act), algorithmic transparency, and media literacy initiatives. Recommendations emphasize ethical AI governance, public-private partnerships, and culturally sensitive diplomacy to balance technological innovation with accountability. By integrating these approaches, policymakers can mitigate disinformation's threats while harnessing digital diplomacy's potential to foster global stability. The findings stress the urgency of safeguarding truth and equity in an increasingly interconnected yet fragmented information landscape.

Keywords: Digital Diplomacy, Disinformation, Social Media, Public Opinion, Artificial Intelligence, International Relations.

Introduction

Overview of Digital Diplomacy

Researchers and practitioners alike have interpreted, defined and understood

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digital diplomacy in various, but similar ways (Sotiriu, 2015). Rather than looking at the common English terms of digital diplomacy, virtual diplomacy, cyber diplomacy, and e-diplomacy, Eggeling (2023) describes diplomatic work online as digital diplomacy, virtual diplomacy, cyber diplomacy, and e-diplomacy. Moreover, the digital diplomacy is typically seen as a type of public diplomacy. For example, states leverage digital and social media platforms through Twitter, Facebook, Weibo, and others to converse with foreign publics cost-effectively (Adesina, 2017).

However, the growing importance of digital diplomacy in the modern era. Diplomacy is changing how diplomats engage with each other and with the public; that is, using social media, AI, and real-time data (United Nations University, 2024). Digital technologies have completely altered the conduct of international relations and digital geopolitics is an emerging subject for study (Nisar, 2023). These tools create opportunities for broader engagement, but at the same time, they introduce risks of disinformation spread and manipulation of public opinion (United Nations University, 2024).

The Rise of Disinformation

Disinformation is defined as 'false, incomplete or misleading information which is fed or confirmed to that target individual, group or country'. Finally, disinformation is to deceive a population (around) targeted (Cohen et al. 2021). The outlets are not limited to social media and online platforms, but they're especially promoted through propaganda, fake news, and other strategies to misinform the public, disseminate false information and shape public opinion, as well as influence foreign policy. It is this largely that determines its speed, reach, and impact (Gerrits, 2018).

Investigation has also been conducted into the impact of disinformation on politics and public opinion. The studies show that disinformation exposure leads to a decrease in trust in institutions and polarization of the public discourse (Dhiman, 2023) social media, factors and factors that have played a major part in increasing the spread of disinformation and hate speech (Vasist et al., 2023). Similarly, research has also been done to solve the problem of fake news and disinformation (Sultana, Ahmed, & Imran, 2024; Khan, haq & Naseer, 2022). Some of them are strategies like fact checking, media literacy education and changing the algorithms of social media in order to reduce the spread of false information. This phenomenon is complex and multi-faceted, and it also involves fake news and misinformation, and the treat must be addressed with such a complexity and novelty which is why it needs an interdisciplinary approaches (Dhiman, 2022).

Worldly revolution in global communication and public engagement through social media and emerging technologies amplifies risks of disinformation and nonetheless reshapes the rules of global public opinion to a new and sometimes destabilizing extent, which this paper argues. The primary objectives are threefold: first, to analyse the transformative role of digital tools in modern diplomacy and their dual capacity to foster connectivity and spread disinformation; second, to examine how state and non-state actors exploit digital platforms to manipulate narratives, erode trust in institutions, and influence foreign and domestic policies; and third, to propose actionable strategies for mitigating disinformation's harms while preserving the democratic potential of

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digital diplomacy. The paper combines historical precedents from Cold War propaganda to today's AI-based disinformation campaigns to emphasize the need for tackling these challenges in international cross-discipline terms, such as international cooperation, algorithmic transparency, and public media literacy. Ultimately, it states that the sustainability of digital diplomacy rests on how certain technological innovations and ethical safeguards can prevent the integrity of global discourse from being destroyed.

2. Theoretical Framework

Concepts of Digital Diplomacy

The use of digital technologies and social media platforms by states and international actors for diplomatic activity is here referred to as digital diplomacy, and it is a new paradigm of international relations (Sotiriu, 2015). It's the actual combination of these three main factors – communication, engagement and influence – which can be considered at its core. It starts, for instance, using platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Weibo to broadcast the state narrative to the global audience directly, cutting out traditional media gatekeepers (Adesina, 2017). Second, it allows diplomats to interact in real-time with foreign publics and measure their sentiments to tailor messaging (Eggeling, 2023). Thirdly, digital diplomacy harnesses emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and big data analytics to forecast trends and design specific campaigns (United Nations University, 2024). Whereas traditional diplomacy is conducted behind closed doors, digital diplomacy is aimed at transparency, speed, and digital accessibility and turns diplomacy into a participatory process (Niazi, 2023). This openness makes states, however, vulnerable to cyberattacks, and the weaponization of information (Khursheed, 2023).

Theories of Public Opinion Formation

Media influence, cognitive biases, and socio-political context all play a role in shaping public opinion. Media, as per Agenda-Setting Theory, does not dictate what to think but what to think about and frames issues so that they are given priority to certain narratives (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This effect is further expanded by the social media algorithms of today, which as Pariser (2011) puts it, choose to filter bubbles, that is curate content to feed the users' pre-existing beliefs. Within The Spiral of Silence Theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) it is further explained how individuals suppress dissenting views in fear of social isolation preventing a prevalence of the perceived majority ideology. Through the Internet, this dynamic is largely amplified as polarized echo chambers manage to silence moderate voices (Vasist et al., 2023). The Two-Step Flow Theory emphasizes the mediators of information which are opinion leaders which include the influencers or political figures; in communication between media and the public (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Together, these theories emphasise how digital platforms replicate both constructive dialogue and divisive rhetoric; and how they remold the public perception to the same degree (Dhiman, 2023).

Disinformation and Its Mechanisms

Disinformation, which is described as intentionally deceptive information given to mislead opinion, moves through technological affordances in conjunction with psychological vulnerabilities. People who share engaging but false narratives can

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cause false narratives to 'go viral' on social media by sharing and liking (Cohen et al., 2021). "Astroturfing" (where orchestrated campaigns are hidden behind the appearance of grassroots effort), deepfakes (synthetic media generated with artificial intelligence), and bot networks which boost divisive content (Twomey et al., 2023), are key mechanisms. As for the psychological, disinformation leverages confirmation bias (people are prone to what aligns with my preexisting beliefs and persecution of facts that contradict them) and cognitive dissonance (they deny the facts contrary to my preexisting beliefs) to reinforce polarized views (Gerrits, 2018). For instance, Russia's 2016 U.S. elections used platforms like Facebook to micro-target voters with emotionally charged misinformation that eroded faith in democratic institutions (Guzmán Rincón et. al., 2023). AI-generated imagery in the Russia-Ukraine war made it difficult for the public to discern in truth between reality and blurred reality (Majchrzak, 2023). This not only destabilises societies but also undermines the efforts of diplomacy by leading to the 'erasure' of multilateral cooperation in crises. It is shown by the fact that the UN University (2024) suggests that multilateral cooperation in crises is deemed 'eroded' (Ali, et al., 2021; Muhammad, et al., 2020; Farooq, et al., 2019).

Historical Context

Evolution of Diplomacy in the Digital Age

International relations and diplomacy are undergoing a great change in the era of fast technological development. The advent of social media platforms has produced a new dimension on how international affairs are being carried out on the global stage (Schiller International University, n.d.). While these have been advancements, this shift has also created major challenges, in particular in the realm of disinformation, which has become vital to modern statecraft and has disastrous effects on any country's stability, society, and economy, and poses severe national security threats.

Transition from Traditional to Digital Diplomacy

The development of digital tools has revolutionized the way states interact and bring the benefits and challenges in global governance to its forefront. Digital diplomacy is the reformation of traditional diplomatic practises and change in dynamics in the international relations (Ali, 2024).

Traditional diplomacy is based on within face-to-face negotiations, with the back channel, formal and official relations of the states and done by accredited and professional representatives of the states, such as diplomats and ambassadors (2024, February 24). Furthermore, this 1876 of a nation-state as a legal entity and a principle of sovereignty upon which the modern Western international law is built is the foundation of the Congress of Westphalia in 1648, and the Congress of Vienna, which followed the Napoleonic Wars, which takes place from September 1814 to June 1815 (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025). Alongside this, the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 at the close of the War of the Spanish Succession inaugurated the notion of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, and all magisterium here point to in-person summits and written agreements (Niazi, 2023).

In addition, it is not just to manage bilateral relationships. Thus, to mediate the interests of many states internationally, have been created in, international

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institutions (Rana, et al., 2021; Khan, et al., 2021; Sarmad, 2016). By sending their representatives of their countries to forums where they can parley with and participate in discussions with other representatives, the states get to state their stand about the happenings in the whole world. Despite looking for power and security these states continue to pursue these, but also in the multilateral diplomacy they are seeking to suggest the best possible solution to a world problem. These states can nonetheless have the ability to dialogue so that they make compromises and come to agreement(s) (Verrekia, 2017). A notable example was the 1945 formation of the United Nations (UN) which had a significant influence on adopting multilateral diplomacy (Niazi, 2023).

Consequently, in the late 20th and early 21st century, we have witnessed a seismic transformation through the rise of digital communication tools (Niazi, 2023) like Twitter, Facebook, or Weibo for states' entry into communication with foreign publics, largely in a low-cost way (Adesina, 2017). Further still, this has increased the range and rate of diplomatic efforts, so all countries can now have a direct impact on global conversation. For instance, social media is being used by political leaders to issue statements, react to people, and react to global events (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021). This is something that played out, particularly through the Arab Spring, and social media was central to planning protests and the propagation of political narratives (Ali, 2024). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic transformed diplomatic practices continuing to increase the acceptability of online and blended summits (IE University, 2024).

On the other hand, there are complex sets of challenges to digital diplomacy, beginning with the cybersecurity risks as well as the speed at which the information, as well as misinformation, easily spreads—which is making ideological polarization, and distrust in digital communications even worse. To counter disinformation, diplomats need to address the increasing threats of cyber-attacks directed against sensitive diplomatic data (Khursheed 2023). Even as digital diplomacy has profoundly impacted (Diplo, n.d.), changing traditional diplomacy practices and extending the scope of diplomatic activities (Diplo, n.d.), it's turning out to be more adaptable and efficient (Khursheed, 2023).

To further elaborate, tech diplomacy has come about as a solution to such challenges. It is a form of negotiation, representation and [co]operation among governments and technology companies or companies that are always developing AI and other digital innovations. However, unlike traditional diplomacy, it has parties of diplomats, and the private sector (Diplo, n.d.).

Historical Examples of Disinformation in Diplomacy

Disinformation is an old thing in foreign policy and war. But it is different today. In other words, disinformation today is not about intent or content but rather technology (Ahmad, et al., 2021; Ali, et al., 2020; Ahmad, 2018). Today, technology made disinformation much more different than what used to be the case with earlier international information manipulation (Gerrits, 2018), and it broke our journalistic norms that were being seriously challenged by our era's journalistic norms (Soll, 2016).

One can find examples of disinformation throughout history, Unfortunately As far back as ancient Roman times in the first century BC when historians reported a propaganda war between Julius Caesar's heir, Octavian and his rival, Mark Antony. Octavian and Antony were said to have circulated propaganda on coins,

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poetry, pamphlets and speeches trying to win public and military support. Health disinformation was around in the 1600s in Italy during the black plague. The Museum of Australian Democracy (n.d.) also specifies that sometimes, spreading rumours of plague elsewhere was used for political advantage.

In 1898, USS Maine sank in Cuba. The Spanish were blamed by some of the newspapers of the time for the sinking and artist's illustrations of a dramatic explosion persuaded readers that the Spanish had committed the crime. However, it was not a real fact that this was taken place. The Spanish had become the enemy to Americans. A few years earlier the Spanish American War broke. For the false reports worked (BBC, n.d.).

One more usher would enter the 20th Century: totalitarian ideologies, followed by their leaders, violent in their use of disinformation and propaganda for their purposes which were equally obsessed with denying any public or private space to deviations to the party line, as in Berlin or Moscow. However, abuse for disinformation and propaganda existed not only in totalitarian states in the 20th Century. George Orwell, perhaps the era's greatest champion of free speech, commiserated on what was an onslaught of lies and propaganda penetrating even democracies such as Britain in the Spanish Civil War which took place from 1936 to 1939, the newspaper reports which did not bear any relation to the facts, not even the relationship which is implied in an ordinary lie.....; and newspapers in London retailing these lies and eager intellectuals building emotional superstructures over events that had never happened." (Mchangama, 2017).

Among the most critical aspects of the recruitment effort in 1914–1918 (World War I), disinformation and propaganda played this role through nationalism and patriotism as well: "Your country needs YOU"; "Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War?" As described in his book The War that Hitler Won (1978), Edward Herzstein called the Nazi propaganda campaign in WWII the 'most infamous propaganda campaign in history.' (Posetti & Matthews 2018). During World War II, not only the Nazis and all parties involved in the war, such as the Axis and Allied powers used propaganda to affect public opinion (Dhiman, 2023).

With the end of the Second World War, there started a European information war. The reign of the Soviet Union's military alliance with its main Western allies, the United States and Britain came to an end, and the Soviet Union supported small communist parties in Eastern Europe who asserted ever tighter control over much of Eastern Europe (Brown, 2017). At that time of the Cold War, therefore, Radio Free Europe and Radio Free Liberty were both controlled by radio stations whose covert funding and broadcasting pro-Western narratives were part of operations under the control of the CIA which had even formulated general policy guidelines to determine the content.

Another notable example is the Gulf of Tonkin Incident that happened after two days in August 1964 (History Skills, n.d.). The first such incident confirmed was triggered by covert operations off the North Vietnamese coast and occurred on August 2, when North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked the U.S. destroyer USS Maddox. The second incident on Aug. 4 is controversial and most likely has been misreported or possibly fabricated (Millen-Penn, 2022).

Also, in 2003, before the Iraq war, articles about Saddam Hussein's non-existent weapons of mass destruction were printed in newspapers around the world to justify the United States and U.K. governments and their ally's invasion of Iraq (University Library, 2023). Another possibility is the elections in the US of

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America (USA) in 2016, where the Russian government, through the related agencies, intermediaries, paid advertising campaigns, paid users, and trolls, as well as through state-funded media discredited the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton mainly in key states of the USA of America (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023). With the advancement and spreading of technology there is fast spread of disinformation in the first year of the Russian – Ukraine War through the use of images generated using artificial intelligence and this has been used by entities such as the use of disinformation (Twomey et al., 2023). The war between Russia and Ukraine (Wesolowski, 2022l) includes manipulated photos, false statements, state propaganda and deepfake videos (Prakasha, et al., 2024).

The Ukrainian conflict is so riddled with incorrect information that it is 'rampant disinformation' coming out of Russia, Olga Boichak, a University of Sydney lecturer in digital cultures said. Meanwhile, on the other side, such as during which such as Russia invaded Ukraine to attack secret US Biolabs in their country, such as Russia had been accused of launching an 'ongoing Russian disinformation campaign' (McCutchan, 2022). Indeed, there has been no evidence presented indicating Russia was targeting 'US Biolabs' when they launched their full-scale attack on Ukraine. (Evon, 2022).

Still today we can say that, in the present era, the spread of dissemination of disinformation and conspiracy theories and such cases of online radicalization are problems on which Governments of the world are starting to worry (IE University, 2024).

The Role of Social Media in Digital Diplomacy

Social Media Platforms as Diplomatic Tools

Modern diplomacy has become a social and dependent affair which relies on social media platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to engage global audiences in real-time (Shah, et al., 2025; Haq, et al., 2024; Noor, et al., 2024). They allow governments to circumnavigate traditional media gatekeepers and the crafting, and dissemination of narratives that align with their foreign policy (Adesina, 2017). Twitter, however, is very concessive and short in nature, making it perfect for the issuing of statements when it comes to crises – for example, the U.S. State Department issuing statements condemning human rights abuses, as well as coordinating international aid (Eggeling, 2023). Like embassies, Instagram also allows the use of its visual storytelling capabilities to make diplomatic efforts more human, such as in sharing cultural exchanges and humanitarian missions (Niazi, 2023).

Weibo and WeChat exemplify state-controlled digital diplomacy as content that curates and promotes the Belt and Road Initiative while countering oral narratives from the West (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023). However, smaller states such as Estonia have used social media to expand their geopolitical influence by turning themselves into 'e resilient' democracies through sticks promoting cyberspace innovations (United Nations University, 2024). Furthermore, the interactive nature of these platforms gives diplomats opportunities to watch likes, shares, and comments to gauge public sentiment and make small adjustments to messaging (quickly) (Dhiman, 2023). Yet, there is a risk in this democratization of diplomacy, as more simple policies are reduced to hashtags or viral posts (Khursheed, 2023).

Case Studies of Successful Digital Diplomacy

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U.S. Virtual Embassies and Digital Outreach
When the U.S. State Department created a 'Virtual Embassy to Iran' on Facebook and Twitter in 2012, lacking physical diplomatic relations, the prohibition to reach the Iranian people was bypassed and the opportunity for uncensored information on visas, education and especially human rights (Sotiriu, 2015). By elucidating how social media can sustain dialogue in adversarial settings, this initiative gained over 100,000 followers within months (Ali, 2024).

Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy Campaign
As a cornerstone of its foreign policy, gender equality is a key message of Sweden's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which managed to use its new social media accounts, Instagram and Twitter, to spread the message (Hanif, et al., 2021; Hanif, Naveed & Rehman, 2020). The campaign succeeded in reaching 2.3 million users, and sharing stories from female activists as well as live Q&A sessions with diplomats, strengthened Sweden's soft power (Eggeling, 2023). Strategic digital engagement can help to make niche issues global through the use of the hashtag #FeministForeignPolicy which trended in 15 countries (United Nations University, 2024).

Multilateral Coordination During COVID-19
Using Twitter and Facebook, the World Health Organization (WHO) sent pandemic guidelines through influencers, such as Cristiano Ronaldo, to broadcast reach (Dhiman, 2023). Similarly, many countries identified Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand as leading the way when it comes to the use of Facebook Live to deliver empathetic, transparent updates that increased public trust and garnered a model for crisis communication (Vasist et al., 2023).

UAE-Israel Abraham Accords (2020)
After normalising relations between the UAE and Israel, both countries have posted TikTok and Instagram videos celebrating cultural exchange, joint tech projects and interfaith dialogues. By courting public scepticism with this 'digital charm offensive', it particularly swayed younger demographics (Nisar, 2023).
These examples serve as examples illustrating how social networking media can make diplomacy seem a bit more human, transnational grassroots movements can be mobilized and politics can be bailed out.

Challenges Posed by Social Media
While social media offers its benefits, its architecture itself petitions risks, most importantly the speed of spread of disinformation. The algorithms that aim for maximum engagement promote sensational content and false narratives outrun the fact-checking efforts (Cohen et al., 2021). One example is the Russian troll farms that took advantage of Facebook's micro-targeting ability during the 2016 U.S. elections, spreading divisive ads to swing state voters to exacerbate societal polarization (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023). AI deepfakes during the Russia and Ukraine wars were equally blurring the line between reality and fabrication which makes diplomatic responses to war crimes (Majchrzak, 2023) just as difficult.
Trust in institutions also suffers due to the virality of disinformation. In Myanmar, Facebook's inability to curtail the hating against the Rohingya Muslim

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minority culminated in real-world violence, demonstrating the platform's willingness to participate in humanitarian crises (Gerrits, 2018).

In addition, social media's echo chambers exacerbate the problem of creating online public opinion: Users stick to ideologically homogenous communities. By this theory, the Spiral of Silence Theory, moderate pros argue that fear of backlash silences moderate voices, allowing extremism to go unchallenged (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). For example, India's polarized Twitter landscape has prevented it from reaching a consensual climate policy (Vasist et al. 2023) due to the presence of nationalist hashtags that drowned out scientific discourse.

This is why he needs multilateral cooperation to address these challenges. The 2023 EU Digital Services Act requires transparency in algorithmic processes, while UNESCO Media and Information Literacy campaigns equip inhabitants with the ability to critically evaluate online content (United Nations University 2024). Unfortunately, there remain gaps for bad actors to exploit despite global regulatory harmonization.

Diplomacy has been redefined as a participatory, dynamic practice in the age of social media and engaging in social media with billions (Ali, et al., 2023; Yasmin, et al., 2020). But because it is a double-edged sword both for, and against, connection and manipulation alike, it needs urgent ethical and technical safeguards too. If states utilize this social media tool to its fullest with the deployment of transparency, accountability, and public education into digital strategies, it can serve as a great portal, as opposed to the digital avenue to hell (Shoaib, et al., 2024; Zainab, et al., 2023).

Disinformation Campaigns and Their Impact

Case Study 1: Russian Disinformation Tactics

Internet Research Agency (IRA) is a hallmark of modern cyber warfare in all its manifestations: electronic, psychological, disinformation and all others. Using social media's algorithmic biases, these campaigns spread discord, get people more polarised and undermine democracy. Russian operatives began weaponizing platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram during the 2016 US presidential elections to micro-target voters with divisive content about issues such as immigration, race, and gun politics (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023). An example of this is during the IRA creating fake accounts and using them as American activists, posting memes inciting fear that if voting wasn't rigged against you, then it would be about illegal immigration or voter fraud (Cohen et al., 2021). By 2018, Facebook determined that Russian-produced content reached over 126 million Americans and troll farms worked their way through conspiracy theories to coordinate narrative strategies to extend their reach into the most powerful democracy in the world (Twomey et al., 2023).

The tactics extend beyond elections (Feng, et al., 2023; Hafeez, et al., 2011). The term 'Firehose of Falsehood' was coined by RAND to describe how Russia seeks to confuse audiences in Europe with contradictory claims. For instance, during the 2017 French elections, bots spread the story that Emmanuel Macron was hiding offshore accounts and was a U.S. puppet (Gerrits, 2018). Likewise, Russian-linked accounts have also facilitated the amplification of anti-EU sentiments by fabricating stories of migrant crimes (Majchrzak, 2023). Emotional priming (content that causes users to feel angry or afraid) and asymmetric credibility (fusing truths with lies to create believability) are what

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these campaigns are designed to erode trust in institutions (United Nations University, 2024).

The psychological impact is profound. Repeated exposure to disinformation leads to the dilution of critical thinking and the cultivation of cynicism (Dhiman, 2023), a condition described as 'truth decay'. For example, after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Russian state media pushed for the idea of a "genocide in Donbas" and a rebranding of the invasion as a humanitarian rescue mission. Thus, it amplified this narrative, and spread via public opinion in Eastern Europe and Africa, making NATO's diplomatic response more complicated (Vasist et al., 2023).

Case Study 2: Chinese Influence Operations

China's disinformation strategy combines overt propaganda with covert tactics to achieve narrative control and soft power expansion. As a platform, the United Front Work Department (UFWD) oversees the efforts to shape the global perception through Twitter, TikTok, and WeChat. An example of this is during the COVID-19 pandemic when Chinese State-backed accounts spread the "Wuhan lab leak" conspiracy to deflect blame and propagate that China is leading the world (with aid to Italy and Serbia as proof) while promoting that China is the global leader (Niazi, 2023).

Chinese "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy ethos of confrontation in diplomacy is now happening in the digital spaces. In 2021, after Australia requested an inquiry into COVID-19 origins, Chinese officials, media and the national shame of #AustraliaApologize flooded Twitter with accusations of racism (Ali, 2024). However, state-linked influencers also downplayed human rights abuses in Xinjiang by using TikTok videos of 'happy Uyghurs' to combat the Western reports (Majchrzak, 2023). Such campaigns benefit from such platform algorithms, such as TikTok's 'For You' page, which promotes pro-China content in Southeast Asia where territorial disputes in the South China Sea are a contentious issue (Eggeling, 2023).

Pro-regime posts dominate China's forums courtesy of its "50 Cent Army"; Confucius Institutes and CGTN relentlessly rebrand China as a benevolent global power (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023). They have tangible geopolitical effects. Haq, Bilal, and Qureshi (2020) in 2021 a Chinese diplomat fuelled a false narrative about Australian soldiers murdering Afghan children that resulted in trade sanctions and a diplomatic freeze (United Nations University, 2024). Yet, overreach is risky: The EU's 2023 report on foreign interference found China's 'aggressive disinformation' to be a risk to democratic cohesion (Gerrits, 2018).

Case Study 3: Domestic Disinformation Issues

Domestic disinformation that is amplified by partisan media and political elites causes polarization and destroys public trust, weakening national politics. The 2020 "Stop the Steal" movement in the United States, which resulted from purported fraud in determining the winner of last year's presidential election, ended with the July 6 Capitol riot. Such platforms on social media including Parler and Gab became echo chambers for conspiracy theories, and the algorithms recommended extremist content to users (Dhiman, 2023). In Brazil, as in many parts of the world, false WhatsApp messages were broadcast by former President Jair Bolsonaro linking COVID vaccines to one of the highest

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worldwide death rates (Vasist et al. 2023).
Disinformation on WhatsApp has already incited real-world violence in India. Since 2017, tens of fake child abductions that are later proven to be doctored with AI have resulted in more than 50 lynchings linked to them (Twomey et al., 2023). In Myanmar's case, Facebook was weaponized to dehumanize the Rohingya minority by military assumptions of "terrorist" attacks to justify genocide (Gerrits, 2018). The cases they document show how domestic actors who disseminate disinformation make use of cultural fissures (caste, religion) and the affordances of the platform (encrypted messaging) to escape scrutiny.
The psychological toll is stark. Matching the conditions of the "illusory truth effect" is why 68 per cent of Americans distrust election integrity post-2020 (Cohen et al., 2021). In Kenya, the spread of fake news before the 2022 elections that vote rigging is taking place among the different tribes increased ethnic fights thus undermining democratic progress over decades (Niazi, 2023).

Implications for Global Diplomacy

Weaponizing information as a tool of statecraft is a form of challenge to traditional diplomatic norms: disinformation campaigns. First, they erode the trust in the multilateral institutions. For instance, Russian claims of NATO aggression have weakened consensus in the EU and slowed down approaches to cyberattacks (United Nations University, 2024). Secondly, they blur the boundary between the domestic and foreign policy by China's interference in the Australian election on the basis of "public diplomacy" (Eggeling, 2023).
Accountability of online actors becomes more complex due to their anonymity. By utilizing non-state proxies – hacktivists, or troll farms for example, states can deny responsibility as Russia is common in the wake of the 2016 election hacks in the US (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023). Moreover, algorithmic diplomacy, in which the platforms dictate the visibility of the content, alienates the powers of the sovereignty of the states. For instance, some ASEAN nations criticized Meta's decision to remove Myanmar military accounts in 2021 as 'digital colonialism' (Majchrzak, 2023).
States are therefore engaging in what they call tech-plomacy: diplomatic engagement with tech firms. The Digital Services Act (2023) of the EU requires transparency in political advertising, The US agrees to Google's collaboration about debunking state-sponsored disinformation (Ali, 2024). There are, however, fragmented regulations and ethical dilemmas. This is demonstrated by the weaponisation of India's IT Rules 2021: these rules are used to muzzle dissent (Dhiman, 2023).
In the end, fighting disinformation will need a combination of solutions from different disciplines.

- Platform disclosure of criteria for handling content (Cohen et al., 2021, algorithmic accountability).
- United Nations University shares UNESCO's initiatives in Africa and Latin America on teaching users how to identify deepfakes (2024).
- Rapid Response: The G7's Rapid Response Mechanism shares intelligence on foreign interference (Gerrits, 2018).

Strategies for Countering Disinformation

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International Cooperation and Frameworks

But disinformation is a cross-border challenge and because of this, it is something that cannot be tackled through the action of individual states alone. Tech giants, mandated, for example, by Multilateral frameworks such as the EU's 2023 Code of Practice on Disinformation are required, among other things, to label political ads, disclose algorithmic processes and report foreign interference (Cohen et al., 2021). The G7 Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) that was created in 2018 allows the member states to share foreign disinformation campaign intelligence – in real-time, in order to develop a joint counter-narrative (United Nations University, 2024). For example, during the 2022 French elections, RRM alerts broke up Russian bot networks spreading the anti-Macron propaganda (Gerrits, 2018).

In this vein, the United Nations has been leading the charge in combating disinformation by means of the initiatives of Verified, a global campaign brought together with influencers to share factual content in times of crisis (Ali, 2024). As during outbreaks of Ebola, regional alliances such as the African Union Media Fact-Checking Partnership work for the purpose of debunking health misinformation, by helping local journalists out (Dhiman, 2023). Yet geopolitical rivalries make the situation tricky. For instance, Russia and China have blocked UN resolutions condemning state-sponsored disinformation based on a claim of 'Western bias's (Eggeling, 2023). Neutral entities, such as the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI), believe that ethical AI standards can be created so as to detect and remove malicious content without damaging free speech (Twomey et al. 2023).

Role of Technology and Media Literacy

Technology makes technology able to fight disinformation, and at the same time, it is a double-edged sword. Using AI tools like Graphika and NewsGuard, bot networks and credibility ratings are derived from social media indicators (Majchrzak, 2023). As an example, in 2019, Meta's Deepfake Detection Challenge crowdsourced algorithms for detecting synthetic media, achieving 82% accuracy when judging AI-generated videos (Cohen et al., 2021). Much like this, platforms that are based on blockchain, such as Civil, timestamp and encrypt articles to show content provenance, and limit the spread of manipulated news (Niazi, 2023).

Media literacy remains equally critical. More than 100,000 educators from 60 countries have been trained through UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy (MIL) programs to teach their students to separate fact from fiction (United Nations University, 2024). Citizens in Finland have lowered susceptibility to fake news by 38% through the incorporation of MIL into a national curriculum in 2016 as a means of cross-verification (Vasist et al., 2023). Apps like InVID and the First Draft News also partner with journalists to debunk viral hoaxes while grassroots initiatives like Grassroots utilize it to debunk hoaxes (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023).

However, without technology alone, systemic problems cannot be fixed. Promoting verified facts before debunking myths works. That's the truth sandwich approach. For instance, WHO's EPI-WIN network predictively disseminated authentic COVID-19 data over WhatsApp to 2 billion people, whose beliefs in conspiracy theories decreased by 24% (Dhiman, 2023).

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Best Practices for Digital Diplomacy
The first thing states and organizations must take is a proactive, transparent strategy to enhance credibility in digital diplomacy.

Transparency in Communication
Social media posts shared publicly should be archived by governments along with any funding sources for a digital campaign. Third-party verification of the content of Sweden's foreign aid projects helps reduce suspicions of hidden agendas and Sweden's Open Data Initiative publishes datasets on theirs, allowing for this (Eggeling, 2023).

Proactive Engagement
The engagement with audiences by diplomats must be direct, and they must work to build trust with them. In 2020, the U.S. Embassy in South Africa hosted Twitter Spaces to take part in discussions on racial justice in response to Russian narratives of American hypocrisy (Ali, 2024).

Collaboration with Tech Platforms
The EU-NATO Tech Diplomacy Task Force partners with companies such as Google and Meta to flag disinformation. For example, when TikTok implemented state-controlled media labels in 2022, 53% less RT and CGTN content received reach (Twomey et al., 2023).

Crisis Protocols
A key aspect of developing rapid response teams is to counter disinformation during emergencies. Since the 2019 Christchurch shooting followed by the 2019 Christchurch shooting, New Zealand's Digital Emergency Management Agency (DEMA) coordinates with platforms to remove extremist content within hours (United Nations University, 2024).

Ethical AI Guidelines
By adopting the kinds of frameworks that the OECD has developed around the issue of its Principles on AI, algorithms should put accuracy interests ahead of engagement interests. For instance, Twitter's Birdwatch lets users crowdsource facing of misleading tweets, where in effect there is a practice of fact checks without the signatories of the checks (Cohen et al., 2021).

Cultural Sensitivity
This helps in avoiding backlash of messages that are tailored to the local contexts. Thus, the UAE's Hope Probe Mars Mission social media campaign used Arabic poetry and regional influencers for the sake of resonating with the Middle Eastern audiences away from cultural imperialism allegations (Nisar, 2023).
Hybrid approach to counter disinformation requires intersecting good old cooperation, current tech, and ethical digital diplomacy. States can reclaim the information space as a force for global stability by investing in media literacy, prioritizing transparency, and developing cross sector partnerships.

Future Prospects and Recommendations

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While the specific solutions do not come with my forecast, I would say advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), augmented reality (AR), and decentralized technologies are likely to shape the evolution of digital diplomacy. Rollers produced by 2030 could use AI to drive negotiations for preliminary trade agreements or climate accords, analysing huge datasets to formulate mutually beneficial terms (United Nations University, 2024). Already Sweden and the UAE are piloting virtual embassies, which could become the norm with embassy help provided through metaverse platforms (Nisar, 2023). The immutability of ledgers could also be used for trust-building around treaty compliance or humanitarian aid distribution (Eggeling, 2023).
However, these innovations might actually magnify disinformation. Generative AI deepfakes could fake world leaders, causing diplomatic crises, foreshadowed by that of Ukraine President Zelensky, being AI-generated video of him falsely surrendering last year (Twomey et al., 2023). The emerging social media fragmentation into deplatforming niche platforms (e.g., “free speech” far right), would exacerbate global discourse polarization, eviscerating multilateralism (Vasist et al., 2023). Furthermore, state-sponsored ‘algorithmic colonization’ in which powerful states determine platform policy, may silence Global South voices (Gerrits, 2018).

Recommendations for Policymakers

In navigating these challenges, policymakers will need to employ a multipronged strategy of linkages between innovation and accountability. One first investment is ethics governance in AI. Establishing the adoption of such standards as the OECD Principles on AI will make use of algorithmic tools used for public diplomacy more transparent, preventing the existence of biases that can affect the narratives used by states (Cohen et al., 2021). For instance, citizens and society at large would be able to trust AI systems as long as they are mandated to be 'explainable' in systems such as diplomatic messaging, which are tailored. Second, global coalitions need to be strengthened to defend against cross-border disinformation. Making the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism a UN body would create the opportunity for real-time intelligence sharing and joint counternarratives in line with the EU’s efforts through the East StratCom Task Force (Ali, 2024) to expose and consequently debunk Kremlin propaganda. Third, media literacy must be a foundation stone of education. Finland’s critical thinking integrated into national curriculums allows for replication (Dhiman, 2023) of their 38% reduction of susceptibility to fake news. UNESCO’s Verified campaign is a good example of the partnerships already established with influencers that bring fact-based content to communities that are not the greatest demographics for the activity and can be expanded.
Also, governments should set up specific crisis protocols to address disinformation during elections, conflicts, and so on. Much like New Zealand’s Digital Emergency Management Agency (DEMA), which works with tech platforms to remove extremist content within hours of being flagged, rapid response offers a blueprint for how to respond to the crisis (Majchrzak, 2023). Public-private partnerships are equally vital. Accountability of state-controlled media and the source of ad funding, such as required by the EU Digital Services Act, will incentivize platforms to label state-controlled media and also diminish the reach of malicious actors (Guzmán Rincón et al, 2023). Finally, diplomatic

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engagement must be culturally sensitive. The UAE's Hope Probe Mars Mission campaign, an example of localized messaging that reduced perceptions of cultural imperialism (Niazi, 2023) demonstrates regions' increased ability to shape messaging to resonate with cultural and local audiences in the Middle East.

Proactive, collaborative, culturally informed strategies are the future of digital diplomacy. Policymakers can help neutralise disinformation's corrosive impact by embedding ethical principles into technological innovation, outlining multilateral cooperation, and educating citizens about the use of digital tools to create a more connected and resilient global community.

Conclusion

Summary of Key Findings

It has been shown through this paper that digital diplomacy, a method of global communication through social media, AI, and real-time engagement has not only revolutionized the systemic way we communicate, it has also significantly increased the risk of disinformation that has further warped opinion in ways that destabilize democratic institutions and international stability. The theoretical model explained how online media actually further strengthens the effect of Agenda Setting and Spiral of Silence theories given the basing of digital space on algorithms and filter bubbles that polish language to further polarize the discourse. It is highlighted that disinformation is not new but rather a sophisticated inclusive tool of hybrid warfare that can be traced in Russian election interference, Chinese influence operation and domestic disinformation crisis. This included case studies of the dual-edged nature of social media in diplomacy: both an innovation platform (Sweden's feminist foreign policy) and a destabilizing force (the U.S. Capitol riot). Although they focused on countering disinformation, strategies for doing so highlighted the need for international cooperation, technological accountability and media literacy, while future scenarios forewarned of future threats such as deepfakes and algorithmic colonization.

Reiteration of the Importance of Addressing Disinformation in Diplomacy

Disinformation is an existential threat to the integrity of global diplomacy's pervasive spread. Disinformation erodes trust in institutions; exacerbates social polarization; and enables state and non-state actors to manipulate narratives, all of which are at the heart of undermining the underpinning indicators that make international relations possible, like transparency and mutual understanding. The weaponization of platforms like Facebook and TikTok during crises — from pandemics to armed conflicts — shows how the virality of falsehoods can speed up such crises to escalate tensions further, derail diplomatic efforts and even incite violence. Myanmar's Rohingya genocide and the 2020 U.S. election interference are stark examples of the cost to human lives and democracy in the face of unchecked disinformation. While the technical issue of combating misinformation is being addressed, muffling truth and equity, and promoting ignorance and division are not only technically but morally imperative given the increasingly intertwined world we live in.

Final Thoughts on the Future of Digital Diplomacy

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In the world of digital diplomacy, technological innovation is crucial but must be balanced with ethical safeguards. Advancements of AI AI-driven predictive analytics and blockchain-based transparency tools do indeed present possibilities to improve the way we work online but they need to be tempered and balanced by robust governance frameworks. The EU's Digital Services Act and UNESCO's media literacy programs provide blueprints for accountability, but unless they're adapted and adopted globally, they won't work. To ensure that free expression does not give way to manipulation, policymakers must foster interdisciplinary collaboration between tech experts, diplomats, and civil society and create systems that protect free expression. As important is helping citizens become more educated in ways to interact with digital experiences, encourage critical engagement, and be resistant to disinformation.

In the long run, whether digital diplomacy will be sustainable at all will depend on humanity's skill in utilizing technology for unity instead of division. It's never been so high, as the world grapples with existential challenges like climate change and geopolitical strife. Drawing on the digital landscape and reaffirming common sense towards truth, the international community can transform the information age into an era of renewed diplomacy, solidarity and shared progress, by embedding ethical principles.

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