Digital Diplomacy in Africa: Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Globally, digital diplomacy is taking over as the dominating format. As long as Africa is a part of the globalization era, it must adapt to new technologies. However, there are several obstacles that African digital diplomacy must overcome, such as a lack of infrastructure, a lack of proficiency with new technologies, limiting regulations, the anonymity issue and others. So, with the proliferation of digital technologies, Africa is facing growing cyber security threats. These include hacker attacks, online fraud and disinformation campaigns. Weak cyber security measures and limited capacity to address these challenges make African countries vulnerable to cyber-attacks. Africa should follow the present realities and dynamics in digital diplomacy as the world constantly changes and transitions. In fact, in the diplomatic sphere of Africa, digital diplomacy is being practiced without the concept and practice promoted. However, Africa has many opportunities to embrace digital diplomatic initiatives. The primary ones include; the penetration of the internet, the rise in the public interest, the engagement of the African diaspora, the African Union's digital strategy, the desire to create an intelligent society, and the revolution of smartphones. Africa also offers much potential for improving the natural and human resources used in digital platform infrastructure. Thus, Africa should assist in developing the information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and encouraging training for these electronic platforms. Therefore, the paper aims to analyze the opportunities, challenges, and potentials of digital diplomacy in the African context. To do so, a qualitative research approach was used collected from secondary sources and document analysis. Finally, the collected data is thematically analyzed.

Key Words: Diplomacy, Digital Diplomacy, Africa

INTRODUCTION

Diplomacy has fundamentally changed with greater global access to the internet and the advent of social media (Turianskyi & Wekesa, 2021). States around the world have used many forms of diplomacy over the years. The ubiquitous use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in all facets of life, on the other hand, is what defines the twenty-first century (Waithaka, 2018). With the increasing use of Internet technology worldwide, several countries have turned to digital platforms such as social media, blogs, and websites to project a positive image of them and achieve foreign policy goals (Adesina, 2017).

In academia today, there is a growing interest in using the Internet and social media in diplomacy. In contrast, the existing literature on digital diplomacy focuses on Europe and the Americas, and there needs to be more evidence that digital diplomacy also impacts Africa (Nyewusira, 2019). As a result, the notion that Africa lags in democratic principles and traditions and technological innovation is a myth. However, since

the mid-2000s, the continent has been struggling, albeit feebly, to catch up with the rest of the world and be like the West (Endong, 2020).

In Africa, digital diplomacy faces several challenges, including a need for ICT infrastructure. Authoritarian social media rules, cyber security, the problem of anonymity, diplomats' lack of skills, and the problem of secrecy are also important issues. Many African States have controversially shut down or restricted social media and internet platforms, displaying their scepticism of the Internet (e.g., Uganda, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Togo, Burundi, Chad, Mali, and Guinea) (Meads, 2017). African diplomacy is not without its difficulties, however. Internet culture offers a multitude of opportunities and perspectives. The myth of the intelligent society is gaining popularity, as is Internet penetration on the continent, the smartphone revolution, people's increasing interest in using ICTs, and the growing engagement of the African diaspora (Endong, 2020). It is also an opportunity for the digitization of systems and transparency of diplomacy in Africa. In this digital age, Africa's youthful population composition and abundance of resources (human and natural) offer immense potential, necessitating a high priority for digitally connected socioeconomic development (African Union, 2020).

Rapid digitalization can enhance structural transformations among African countries and galvanize progress on regional developments by facilitating diplomacy, financial flow, and market efficiency. The paper aims to analyze the opportunities, challenges, and potentials of digital diplomacy in the African context. Therefore, this paper will answer four basic questions: 1) how can one make sense of digital diplomacy dynamics from the African perspective? 2) What does digital diplomacy mean? 3) What are the trends of digital diplomacy in Africa? 4) What are digital diplomacy's significant challenges, opportunities, and potentials in Africa?

THE CONCEPT OF DIGITAL DIPLOMACY

In developing countries like African States, digital diplomacy is a relatively new notion in research. Even though digital diplomacy is becoming a hot issue in academia, it needs a clear definition. Virtual diplomacy, e-diplomacy, mobile diplomacy, cyber diplomacy, and networked diplomacy are all used to describe digital diplomacy (Turianskyi & Wekesa, 2021). As a result, different researchers and organizations have diverse definitions of digital diplomacy.

Digital diplomacy refers to the widespread application of technology in diplomacy, particularly the Internet and other ICT-based advances (Olubukola, 2022). In addition, digital diplomacy is described as using the Internet and information communication technologies (ICTs), such as video conferencing and social media platforms, to assist state and non-state actors in managing global change (Bjola & Holmes, 2015).

Digital diplomacy frequently includes at least three components, according to (Bjola & Holmes, 2015): First, how actors interact with non-actors in order to convey a specific message or picture (the public-diplomacy component). Second, it refers to the structure and organization of information resources for diplomats and other clients by foreign ministries and other public and private institutions (the information-accessibility component). Third, the methods by which actors collect data on the ground to track small endogenous changes in political systems and public opinion (the data-analysis component).

Therefore, even though the term "digital diplomacy" is frequently used interchangeably with "public diplomacy," however this narrows the breadth of the notion (Verrekia, 2017, p. 7). As a result, it is different from public diplomacy. For the purpose of this study, Digital diplomacy refers to "the use of digital technologies, such as social media, online communication tools, and other digital platforms, to conduct diplomatic activities and engage with foreign audiences". It involves the use of digital tools to promote a country's interests, values, and policies, as well as to build relationships and foster cooperation with other

countries and international organizations. Digital diplomacy can be used for a range of purposes, including public diplomacy, crisis management, cultural exchange, trade promotion, and more. Therefore, cyber espionage, information collection on social media, video conferencing discussions between states and non-state actors, and communication between embassies and home offices are all examples of digital diplomacy.

DIGITAL DIPLOMACY IN AFRICA

The topic of digital diplomacy in an African academic setting is highlighted by two variables (Wekesa, Turianskyi and Ayodele, 2021). First, while traditional diplomats and other international stakeholders engage in digital diplomacy in Africa, the practice of digital diplomacy on the continent is limited compared to other regions. Second, digital diplomacy is nonexistent in African colleges, indicating a significant research vacuum.

By the early 2000s, however, African nations had begun implementing e-government systems to global trends. That location will serve as a jumping-off point for research into the continent's history of digital diplomacy. Digital diplomacy has become a commonly accepted concept across the African continent, from Kenya and South Africa to Mali, Namibia, and Rwanda (Endong, 2020).

The current COVID-19 pandemic is, in some ways, one of the recent events and motivators that, ironically, has been a boon to African digital diplomacy. The pandemic's travails, constraints, and social distancing models have compelled practically every African country's ministry of foreign affairs, embassies, and diplomats to accept the long journey of digital diplomacy (Endong, 2020). As a result, most African countries have been obliged to hold bilateral and multilateral talks virtually. Furthermore, according to Allen (2022), damages on computer infrastructure are expanding rapidly in African countries with more advanced economies and financial systems, such as South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana. As a result, many African governments are now aware of the importance of digital diplomacy.

The culture of digital diplomacy is evolving, and some conferences have been hosted entirely online. In June and July 2020, the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), the African Centre for the Study of the United States (ACSUS) at the University of the Witwatersrand, the Department of International Relations and Cooperation of South Africa (DIRCO), and the Center on Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California hosted a series of webinars on digital diplomacy with African diplomats (Wekesa, Turianskyi, and Ayodele, 2021).

Second, despite the pandemic, African countries have convened security conferences that have brought together thousands of African stakeholders (Heney, 2020). The African Union (AU) successfully sponsored a three-week-long online conference called "Silence the Guns" in May 2020. Since the outbreak of the epidemic, African officials, such as AU Chairman President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa, have held online discussions with stakeholders (Olubukola, 2022). Finally, in 2021, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) will organize a capacity-building workshop on digital trade in preparation for the African Free Trade Area. Therefore, although it is not very satisfactory, African states are at a good start.

OPPORTUNITIES OF DIGITAL DIPLOMACY IN AFRICA AFRICAN

African diplomacy has its challenges. African diplomacy's digital culture has a wide range of potential and opportunities. One of the opportunities that African Digital diplomacy has is the increased adoption of the internet and the revolution of mobile phones. Africa's Internet and social media penetration has risen steadily throughout the years. According to a report by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), as of 2020, Africa had an internet penetration rate of 39.3%, which was lower than the global average of 59.5%. However, the report also noted that internet penetration in Africa had been growing rapidly in recent

years, with an annual growth rate of 9.1% between 2010 and 2020. In addition, in recent years, Africa has had the fastest growth rates in terms of Internet penetration (Kemp, 2018). Rising Internet and social media usage, as well as increased mobile connectivity and Smartphone accessibility, bode well for African digital diplomacy. Digital diplomacy is centred on using information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Endong, 2020).

Another opportunity is the desire to establish or create a "smart society." Thanks to various specialized projects, the intelligent society concept has recently gained traction in Africa, similar to how it has elsewhere in the world. The Smart Africa Initiative, developed from a meeting held in Kigali (Rwanda) in 2013, is one of these programs. The initiative concluded in the endorsement of the Smart Africa Manifesto document by seven presidents of state (Rwanda, Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan, Mali, Gabon, and Burkina Faso), which was approved by the remaining African heads of state in 2014 at the African Union's General Assembly (Endong, 2020).

The AU also unveiled its Digital Transformation Strategy for 2020–2030 in May 2020, a potentially positive step that might be worked upon to build a continent-wide digital diplomacy strategy similar to that of the European Union (African Union, 2020). Currently, member states adopt such measures at the national level, whereas the AU plan allows states to pool their efforts into a continental strategy. Such an approach could increase inclusivity in the future, for example, in organising continental conferences, meetings, and forums, thereby increasing interactions between policymakers and citizens on the continent (Turianskyi & Wekesa, 2021).

Digital diplomacy also opens up new avenues for underdeveloped countries to pursue their foreign policy. The technology revolution in diplomacy can help African states achieve their foreign policy goals. Foreign policy, or the goal that a country aspires to achieve in international relations, can be advanced through digital diplomacy (Nyewusira, 2019).

In addition, it might pave the way for transparency of government activities concerning diplomatic activities. Moreover, it would have its role in enhancing the engagement of the diaspora in public diplomacy. Lastly, social media and other digital platforms are accessible and cheap so that many African people can participate in diplomacy.
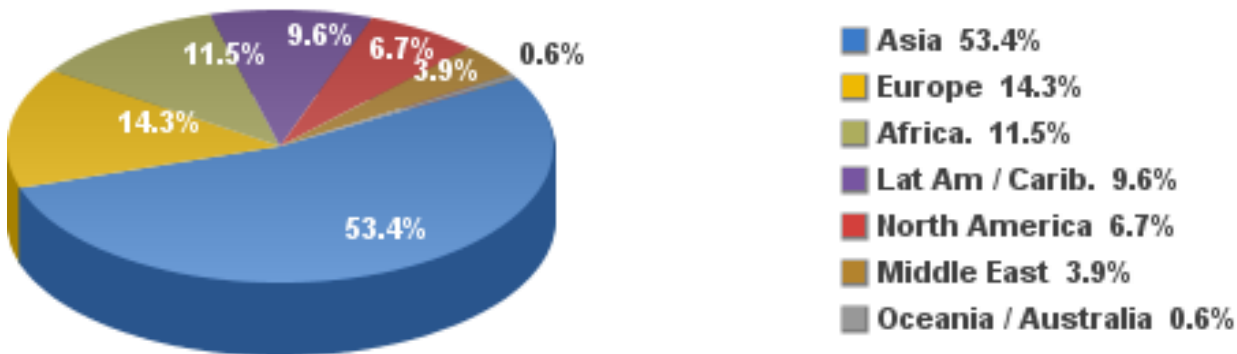
To conclude, Digital diplomacy in Africa offers significant opportunities, including enhanced communication through platforms like social media and video conferencing. It allows African countries to shape their narratives and counter negative stereotypes, promoting their culture and investment opportunities. In times of crisis, digital platforms aid in disseminating information, coordinating relief efforts, and seeking international assistance. Economic diplomacy and trade promotion can be facilitated through online platforms, helping attract foreign investments and boosting export-oriented industries. Citizen diplomacy and public engagement are fostered, allowing citizens to participate in policy discussions and bridge the gap between governments and the people. Data-driven diplomacy enables evidence-based policy decisions and predictions. Digital platforms also provide opportunities for capacity building, knowledge exchange, and networking among African diplomats. Therefore, digital diplomacy opens up avenues for efficient communication, economic growth, crisis management, citizen engagement, and policy-making in Africa.

CHALLENGES OF DIGITAL DIPLOMACY IN AFRICA

This new technology provides several benefits, but it also has many disadvantages. Infrastructure issues majorly contribute to African digital diplomacy gaps, resulting in "digital divide-driven downsides" (Verrekia, 2017, p. 12). As Verrekia (2017) stated, "Digital divide" is defined as "uneven access to or distribution of information and technology." The digital divide is a worldwide issue, but its repercussions

are especially severe in developing nations and Africa. However, regarding Internet users, Africa needs to catch up with the Global North and other regions of the Global South (Turianskyi & Wekesa, 2021). The figure below highlights differences in internet usage worldwide, which is about 11.5%, despite Africa having a large population.

Internet Users Distribution in the World - 2021

- Asia 53.4%
- Europe 14.3%
- Africa. 11.5%
- Lat Am / Carib. 9.6%
- North America 6.7%
- Middle East 3.9%
- Oceania / Australia 0.6%

Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm
Basis: 5,168,780,607 Internet users in March 31, 2021
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The other challenge is that, according to numerous indicators, the African Ministry of foreign affairs, embassies, and heads of state need more dynamism and flexibility to keep up with new digitally driven cultures in diplomacy. Many are reluctant, unsure, distrustful, and even phobic about very sophisticated digital diplomacy in an era of supersonic, technologically driven changes. While some make a negative impression by not being active on social media, others are simply inactive (Endong, 2020).

Culture plays a significant role in shaping the landscape of digital diplomacy in Africa. Africa is a continent known for its rich diversity, comprising numerous ethnicities, languages, traditions, and belief systems. Cultural nuances and sensitivities influence how African countries engage in digital diplomacy and communicate with international audiences. Cultural factors such as language preferences, communication styles, and social norms impact the effectiveness of digital diplomacy initiatives. Understanding and respecting cultural differences is vital to ensure successful digital diplomatic engagements, as misinterpretations or miscommunications can hinder effective dialogue and relationship building. Additionally, cultural challenges such as the digital divide and varying levels of technological adoption across different regions and communities in Africa can affect the extent to which digital diplomacy initiatives can reach and engage diverse populations. Therefore, cultural awareness and sensitivity are crucial for leveraging digital diplomacy to its fullest potential in Africa.

In Africa, cyber-attacks and hacking are also becoming a growing concern for digital diplomacy. For instance, a cyber-attack on the South African state-owned firm Transnet, which operates the country's major ports, disrupted the region's supply chains to unprecedented levels in 2021 (Allen, 2022).

Another difficulty is the protection of government secrets and censorship. It is difficult for governments to keep secrets and restrict content deemed dangerous to national security Because of social media's open and egalitarian nature. Furthermore, African regimes like Ethiopia have formulated authoritarian policies prohibiting open social media usage. In March 2020, Ethiopia enacted the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation to address hate speech and disinformation, which have

historically troubled the country (Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), 2020). According to CIPESA (2020), in reality, besides having overbroad and ambitious definitions that are subject to misinterpretation and abuse, the new law also weighs heavily on social media users and intermediaries, and introduces harsh penalties, contrary to international human rights instruments, including articles 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights.

The internet's "culture of anonymity," in which anybody can adopt any alias, address, or even attack anyone, is another digital diplomacy difficulty (Antwi-Boateng & Al Mazrouei, 2021, p. 8). The other problem is fake news from hostile sources. The growth of digital tools like social media has resulted in a crisis of trust in online information. Not only is it a political war, but it is also a media battle. Fake news is all over the place (Pinnell, 2018). For instance, the dissemination of fabricated stories or distorted facts about a particular country or its leaders can strain bilateral relations, erode trust, and fuel tensions. Fake news can exacerbate conflicts, create misunderstandings, and impede diplomatic efforts aimed at resolving disputes.

Another challenge is a need for more understanding of how to use new communication technologies, the internet, and social media, which can have disastrous consequences. Users of digital diplomacy must be regularly trained and practiced, as well as adopt new digital technologies as soon as possible, mainly if they are complex, in order to obtain the necessary information about how to use them and prevent such threats (Rashica, 2018).

The other challenge is that, the African Ministry of foreign affairs, embassies, and heads of state need more dynamism and flexibility to keep up with new digitally driven cultures in diplomacy. Many are reluctant, unsure, distrustful, and even phobic about sophisticated digital diplomacy in an era of supersonic, technologically driven changes. While some make a negative impression by not being active on social media, others are simply inactive (Endong, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The number of social media platforms has been relatively limited before COVID-19, indicating that while the Ministry of foreign affairs can use digital diplomacy to conduct diplomatic activities, there needs to be more digital diplomacy in Africa. Indeed, digital diplomacy is underway in Africa without the concept and practice being boosted. Since the world is constantly changing and transforming in digital diplomacy, Africa should go with the current realities and dynamics. Digital diplomacy is becoming a dominant platform at the global level so that adaptation to new technologies is mandatory as long as we live in the globalization period.

Indeed, African digital diplomacy has faced numerous challenges, including a lack of infrastructure, skills in using new technologies, restrictive rules, the anonymity problem, and others. However, Africa has numerous opportunities and potential to implement digital diplomatic activities. Penetration of the internet, the increased interest of the people, the involvement of the African diaspora, the AU's digital policy, the interest in building an intelligent society, and the revolution of smartphones are the major. In addition, Africa has great potential for human and natural resources to enhance the infrastructures of digital platforms. Therefore, Africa should contribute towards building the infrastructure of ICT and promoting training on those digital platforms. Despite its limitations, it could boost diplomacy's transformation, facilitate financial flows, create job opportunities, and promote African values and cultures on the continent.

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