



## POLICY BRIEFS

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# The Effects of Digital Diplomacy on International Relations: Lessons for Sri Lanka

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Digital diplomacy is an emerging phenomenon that has fundamentally altered the way that governments communicate and negotiate with each other and with their people. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, this has been demonstrated like never before. The restriction of international travel and movement within countries has shown that the adoption and implementation of digital diplomacy in Sri Lanka is imperative. [Digital diplomacy](#) has been used interchangeably with other terms such as e-diplomacy, cyber-diplomacy, or twiplomacy (referring to the Twitter presence of states, government leaders, and embassies).<sup>1</sup> The influence of digital diplomacy on ideas which influence people's actions and the networks which carry these ideas has been monumental. This *LKI Policy Brief* aims to understand how this phenomenon has impacted international relations thus far, and what actions Sri Lanka can take to benefit.

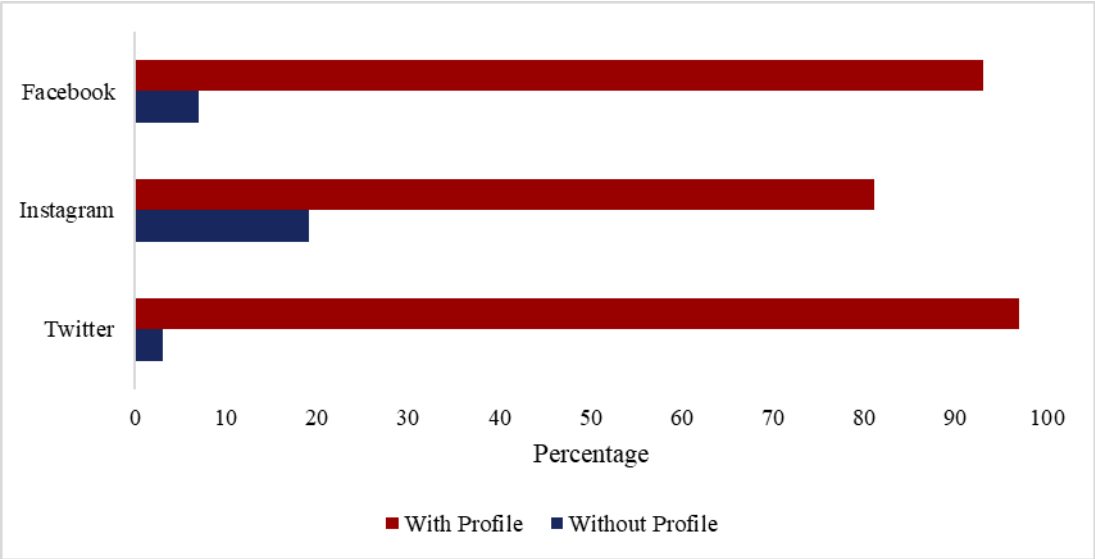
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## **I. What is Digital Diplomacy?**

The largest element of foreign policy is the ability of a country to achieve policy objectives in the name of national interest and diplomacy is the preferred method. Diplomacy allows states to articulate their foreign policy objectives and coordinate their effort through dialogue and negotiations in order to influence the behavior and subsequent decisions of foreign governments.<sup>2</sup> Yet the revolution of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has fundamentally changed the face of diplomacy and how countries communicate with each other, their populace, and non-state actors. This revolution of ICT has led to an emergence of digital diplomacy which has in turn revolutionized diplomatic engagement. The previous held status quo of government to government engagement has transformed, and social media has created an increase in people to government and people to people engagement.<sup>3</sup> While the effects of this relatively new phenomenon are still being studied, it is clear that there are certain consequences on international relations, and that Sri Lanka stands to benefit enormously.

Digital diplomacy is the most recent phenomenon in foreign relations, and has been interpreted and defined in a multitude of ways. For the purposes of this *Policy Brief*, digital diplomacy refers to the use of social media platforms by official state bodies of a country to achieve its foreign policy goals, image and maintain its reputation.<sup>4</sup> These platforms are typically run in the name of the state by official representatives such as members of the Ministry of Foreign Relations, officials, diplomats, or even Heads of State. Digital diplomacy creates a massive opportunity for governments to engage directly with a wider audience of civil society as well as with other governments, and influential individuals.<sup>5</sup> Countries have embraced e-diplomacy and use platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and more to communicate. There are even [dedicated offices in various countries for digital diplomacy](#) such as the US Office of eDiplomacy and the British Office of Digital Diplomacy.<sup>6</sup> But how has digital diplomacy changed the face of how international relations is overall conducted?

Figure 1: UN Member States on Social Media Platforms



*Source: Twiplomacy Study, 2018*

## II. The Effects of Digital Diplomacy on International Relations

As digital diplomacy is a relatively newer trend, it may be too early to conclusively analyze its impact on international relations, but this Policy Brief will attempt to summarize key conclusions that experts have made over the recent years. The primary effect of digital diplomacy on international relations is the most crucial; it has multiplied and amplified the voices of those involved in international policy making and their interests which has complicated the decision making processes of states.<sup>7</sup> Digital diplomacy has effectively reduced the exclusive control which states hold on policy and created a platform for people to express their opinions directly and in real time. The creation of a global platform through digital diplomacy has shifted the network of diplomacy from paper and real world onto a virtual network of digital connections. The physical barriers to decision making have disappeared leading to easier access to information, and created virtual structures for implementation.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, digital diplomacy has accelerated the dissemination of information, particularly during various crises. However, this incredibly instantaneous spread of information does not discriminate on accuracy, which has an impact on its consequences and handling. This has become particularly evident during the [COVID-19 \(Coronavirus outbreak\)](#) as multiple countries have used social media to communicate with citizens and the world as many are put into quarantine.<sup>9</sup> In addition, digital diplomacy has also allowed for [diplomatic services](#) to be delivered faster and more cost effectively to their own citizens as well as to those of other countries which has allowed embassies to become more efficient, working faster with less people.<sup>10</sup> While there are many benefits to digital diplomacy, it does come with a [multitude of risks](#) which include information leakage, hacking, and user anonymity.<sup>11</sup>

Figure 2: Advantages of Digital Diplomacy

# DIGITAL DIPLOMACY



*Source: Digital Diplomacy: India's Increasing Digital Footprints*

Despite these risks, digital diplomacy has changed the foundation of how ideas spread and how networks have functioned in international relations, which has brought the world closer together and led to more effective foreign policy. Many countries have already been using digital diplomacy to great effect. In 2014, [Germany](#) turned to digital platforms to crowd source opinions and new ideas for their foreign policy review for that year.<sup>12</sup> In 2012, [Russian President Vladimir Putin](#) designated digital diplomacy as one of the most effective foreign policy tools and encouraged diplomats to use social media platforms.<sup>13</sup> In [India](#), the Ministry of External Affairs used Twitter to evacuate 18,000 Indian citizens from Libya during the civil war in 2011, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi has called on his ambassadors to “remain ahead of the curve on digital diplomacy”.<sup>14</sup> States which do not engage in digital diplomacy risk falling behind, and yet it seems that low to middle income countries may be able to massively benefit from this phenomenon.

### **III. Sri Lanka and Digital Diplomacy**

ICTs offer [less developed countries](#) an opportunity to leapfrog the industrialization state and cultivate their economies into high value-added information economies which have the potential to compete with advanced economies on the global market.<sup>15</sup> Digital diplomacy is no different, and the potential for Sri Lankan digital diplomacy which is still in its infancy is enormous. Currently, the [Government of Sri Lanka](#) engages in limited digital diplomacy, and leaves it to the discretion of the individual or organization.<sup>16</sup> The main pages which engage in digital diplomacy for Sri Lanka are the twitter pages of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), found at @MFA\_SriLanka, and the Minister of Foreign Relations, Dinesh Gunawardena (@DCRGunawardena). Both of these pages tweet images, text and notices daily. Unfortunately, Sri Lanka does not currently have a standardized digital diplomacy strategy, plan, or policy in place.

Diplomacy is a competitive business, unlike other governmental departments, and Sri Lanka must continue to adapt and evolve as the industry changes or we risk becoming ineffective in our services. [Diplomacy](#) is one of the most powerful soft power tool's a country can employ and further research is necessary to implement a Sri Lanka specific plan to success.<sup>17</sup> Its proficient use would allow Sri Lanka the chance to actively cultivate our own narrative and image to the world through platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.

### **IV. Policy Recommendations**

- Sri Lanka should aim to create a coordinated and standardized plan which outlines key actions that governmental departments and officials can take to create an official presence. Alongside this, there should be sufficient training to cultivate e-literacy among relevant government departments and outgoing diplomats.



- Digital diplomacy has created the space for public services to be provided online through digitalization of necessary consular services such as investment support, travel advice, passport, and visa applications. [Sri Lanka's Electronic Travel Authorization website](#)<sup>18</sup> which launched in 2012 is a prime example of a measure which has significantly cut back on the strain on physical public services at visa offices and airports. Sri Lanka should introduce a standard website with these services available for all consular websites which aims to reduce physical documents and a physical presence as much as possible. The launch of the "[Contact Sri Lanka](#)" portal on March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020 to connect Overseas Sri Lankans with necessary help during the COVID-19 crisis is a welcome example of this.<sup>19</sup>
- Sri Lanka would benefit from improved social media campaigns, ones which particularly aim to attract foreign nationals to Sri Lanka. There is massive potential to reinvent the Sri Lankan image as an attractive, safe tourist destination to a wider audience for a relatively lower cost than physical ads. [Cinnamon's "Bring a Friend Home"](#) campaign is an example of such an initiative to attract more visitors in the wake of the 2019 Easter attacks.<sup>20</sup>
- Furthermore, Sri Lanka can follow in the footsteps of other countries who have directed each embassy and high commission to create a social media page on platforms such as Twitter or Facebook.<sup>21</sup> This allows for a greater digital presence at very little cost and allows citizens and the citizens of other countries easy access to information. These pages should have the same standard of content, and be maintained regularly as well as engage with people who reply to tweets or have questions.
- The internet provides a medium for exchanging ideas and Sri Lanka should actively engage in platforms which allow ideas to circulate. This would mean rethinking how to manage effective policy participation in online discussions through platforms such as Twitter or Facebook by engaging in a wider circle of policy experts rather than Ministers and their spokespeople.

- In order to advance the country specific interests of Sri Lanka in technology and social media, Sri Lanka would benefit from following the examples set by [Denmark in creating the post of a Silicon Valley Ambassador](#).<sup>22</sup> The [exponential rise of technology companies as de facto foreign policy actors](#) has created a need for increased means of communication and in turn diplomacy.<sup>23</sup> Sri Lanka has keenly felt the lack of these channels during the 2018 Digana riots as well as the 2019 Easter Attacks. The resulting reactive social media measures proved that Sri Lanka needs to strengthen and create direct ties with corporations in Silicon Valley such as Facebook.

## **V. Conclusion**

It is too soon to understand the full effect of digital diplomacy over the past decade on international relations, but it is very clear that the advancement of technology has led to a degree of digitization that has transformed the face of modern diplomacy. Through this phenomenon, Sri Lanka is able to cultivate a wider digital presence, create e-governance services to aid citizens, and increase efficiency at little cost. Governments must take greater account of the influence of digital diplomacy in international relations in the future and make full use of these opportunities or risk becoming ineffective.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup>Ross, A. (2011). Digital Diplomacy and US Foreign Policy. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*. 6(3-4): 451-455.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Manor, I. & Segev, E. (2020). *America's selfie: how the US portrays itself on its social media accounts*. In: C. Bojla & M. Holmes. eds. *Digital Diplomacy Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge, pp.89-108.

<sup>5</sup>Supra note 2.

<sup>6</sup>Verrekia, B. (2017). *Digital Diplomacy and Its Effect on International Relations* Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection. [Online] Available at: [https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3619&context=isp\\_collection](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3619&context=isp_collection) [Accessed 21 January 2020].

<sup>7</sup>Sotiriu, S. (2015). *Digital diplomacy: Between promises and reality*. In C. Bjola & M. Holmes. eds. *Digital Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*. New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 33–51.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>De la Garza, A. (2020). *How Social Media Is Shaping Our Fears of — and Response to — the Coronavirus*. Time Magazine. [Online] Available at: <https://time.com/5802802/social-media-coronavirus/> [Accessed 20 January 2020].

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<sup>13</sup>Permyakova, L. (2012). *Digital diplomacy: Areas of work, risks and tools*. [Online] Available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/digital-diplomacy-areas-of-work-risks-and-tools/> [Accessed 21 January 2020].

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