ABSTRACT

In spite of its global nature, digital diplomacy has mostly attracted the attention of Euro-centric scholars. Most studies on the issue have dominantly focused on the activities of western MFAs giving little or no attention to those of their African counterparts. This chapter attempts to fill this apparent gap in knowledge. Based on empirical understandings and secondary data, it critically examines how, and to what extent the digital technology paradigm has affected—or may affect—the conduct of public diplomacy particularly in Black African countries. The chapter is divided into four main sections. The first section provides a theoretical framework composed of the actors network theory and the digital divide theory. The second section provides a definition of e-diplomacy and traces its history. The third section examines African countries’ progressive “appropriation” of this culture, and the fourth section highlights the prospects of e-diplomacy in Africa as well as major challenges faced by African countries in their deployment of digital diplomacy.
INTRODUCTION

Innovations in the realm of information and communication technologies – particularly the internet and the social media – have remarkably revolutionized international communication, the conduct of international relations and public diplomacy. From government organs through civil society organizations to private enterprises, almost all the social and political institutions in the world have recognized the imperative to adapt to the formidable mutations brought about by the ubiquity of the Internet, the World Wide Web and the social networks among others. One egregious evidence of this phenomenal shift is the increasing magnitude with which world countries have been resorting to digital diplomacy – otherwise called e-diplomacy, cyber-diplomacy, “numerical diplomacy” and twidiplomacy – as a paradigm to reconfigure and ameliorate their public diplomacy strategies in the world. Indeed, digital diplomacy is today envisaged as a universal tradition. It is equally envisaged as a realm where in, the digital divide between the North and the South seems considerably to be narrowing (Diplomacy School of Armenia, 2015; Manor 2016; Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2015). According to scholars such as Flanagan (2015), the social media in particular have enabled or increased the ability of even common men to be both players and participants in the realm of public diplomacy. In effect, one does not need to be a government official or part of an international (intergovernmental) organization, an embassy or a transnational trade and cultural organization to be a digital diplomat. It will therefore not be surprising that even common men and small socio-political and economic institutions in Africa progressively have the potential to be participants in digital diplomacy.

According to popular imaginations, western countries constitute the hottest spot for the use of digital diplomacy by foreign ministries and diplomats (Center of International Governance and Innovation [CIGI], 2013; Williams, 2015). This means that they represent the part of the world considered as the leading force in the implementation of digital diplomacy as strategy to facilitate countries’ foreign policies. This is perhaps due to a greater rate of penetration of the internet and social media in this hemisphere of the globe. In tandem with this, Flanagan (2015) contends that the above described situation (the west’s dominant use or championing of digital diplomacy paradigm) may be the outcome of western countries’ strong attachment to e-diplomacy and tremendous investments of resources in social media engagement around major diplomatic events in the world. Despite the pertinence of these speculations, more research is needed to understand all the nuances of this scenario (the West’s leading position in the use off e-diplomacy) and other issues related to the practice and future of e-diplomacy in the world.
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