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Development and Challenges of EU Digital Diplomacy

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Abstract: The rapid development of globalization and communication technology has facilitated the change of diplomacy, giving birth to the concept of digital diplomacy. As an influential supranational organization, the European Union (EU) is increasingly recognizing the vital role of digital technologies in diplomatic practice, which has promoted its development in this area. This paper uses the methodology of literature review to explore the evolution and content of the EU's digital diplomacy while analyzing its present challenges and emerging trends. This paper finds that the evolution of the EU's digital diplomacy has experienced three stages, transitioning from a limited approach to one that is rapidly expanding. Although the EU has made important progresses in digital diplomacy domain, it still faces the challenges like incoordination, the unacceptance of some countries and a lack of leadership. However, the EU is poised to increase its global influence and realize its digital interests in the future.

Keywords: Digital Diplomacy, European Union, Digital Interests, Social Media Diplomacy

1. Introduction

Digital innovations are profoundly reshaping global economy and society through their exponential growth trajectory. The application of data visualization, computer algorithms and other technologies in diplomacy has promoted a new round of changes in this domain, and digital diplomacy has also evolved. In the background of globalization, digital diplomacy has attracted more and more attention from many countries. European Union, as an intergovernmental and supranational entity, actively promotes digital diplomacy strategies aimed at increasing its influence and control in the digital sphere, thus serving its strategic interests.

The concept of "digital diplomacy" can be traced back to the American scholar Wilson P. Dizard in his book *Digital Diplomacy: U.S. Foreign Policy in the Information Age* [1]. As an active and vital entity, the EU has the potential to exert its "soft power" through digital channels. Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and other e-tools are now used in EU digital diplomacy, and they are a great way to boost the Union's reputation abroad [2].

Most current researches focus on the United States, given its active involvement in this domain. However, this paper shifts the focus to the EU's digital diplomacy, building on previous research. This article reviews the evolution of the EU's digital diplomacy, illustrating its current status and challenges it faces, while exploring the EU's efforts and results in this area. This research provides a new perspective on EU digital diplomacy, addressing a gap in the literature.

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2. Literature review

The combination of digital technologies and diplomacy has given birth to digital diplomacy, which may be interpreted as an extension of public diplomacy. Both forms influence the ideas of the foreign public by organizing or coordinating some actions in order to promote the popularization of national values and the realization of national interests. In 2001, American scholar Wilson P. Dizard became the earliest person to use this concept [1]. In 2002, the establishment of the U.S. State Department's "Taskforce on E-Diplomacy" symbolized the emergence of a formal digital diplomacy agency [3]. Starting in 2005, the concept of "new public diplomacy" was put forward by many scholars, emphasizing the applications of the Internet communication technologies in diplomatic practices and recognizing digital platforms as new carriers for diplomacy. Digital diplomacy, according to Hanson, is the use of the internet and cutting-edge information and communication technology to assist diplomatic objectives [4]. Ilan Manor defined digital public diplomacy as engaging with members of digital society, transforming self-monologues into new forms of public diplomacy for dialogue, engagement, and long-term relationship building [5]. In summary, digital diplomacy can be defined as a new form of diplomatic practice in which various diplomatic subjects use modern technologies to spread values and information and realize their interests.

3. The evolution of EU digital diplomacy

The European Union is a diplomatic entity with significant global influence that has undergone three stages of development in its digital diplomacy, transitioning from "public" to "digital."

In the first stage, in the 1990s, the EU's digital diplomacy was very limited. Most diplomatic activities were operated in traditional forms, such as press releases, publications, and bulletins. At this time, the EU avoided using the term "public diplomacy" to characterize its transnational engagement strategies because it feared being perceived as disseminating political information or having overt propagandistic intentions [6]. Its main responsibilities were disseminating information instead of diplomacy, which was hampered by inadequate funding and a lack of coordination [7]. Additionally, the EU's external communication policies were often incongruous and fragmented.

In the second stage, EU digital diplomacy has turned a corner. The key turning point of EU digital diplomacy was the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in 2011, which was the core of EU's practices in digital diplomacy. The new unit took over some of the responsibilities with regards to communication and engagement with foreign public, aiming to increase the visibility of the EU foreign policy 'footprint' around the world [8]. After Federica Mogherini became the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and took over EEAS in 2014, the digital diplomacy based on social media played a more vital role in EU's external communication strategy. She regarded Twitter as a revolutionary social network in politics and dedicated herself to making it one of the tools of EU diplomacy [9]. Several campaigns have been launched by the EEAS that align with the leadership of Mogherini Between 2016 and 2019 [10]. During this phase, EEAS created profiles on well-known social media platforms worldwide, such as Instagram, Twitter, the Russian-language VKontakte, and even China's Sina Weibo, which provided a foundation for EU to communicate with foreign public today [8].

In the third stage, the development of EU digital diplomacy has accelerated due to the pandemic. The current EU policy cycle has witnessed the terminology of "digital diplomacy" as a crucial buzzword in Brussels diplomatic agenda. The EU's long-term agenda now centers on the "twin green and digital transitions" [11]. The pandemic has made diplomacy more digital. Diplomatists held online meetings and video calls, which expedited the applications of digital diplomacy. Twitter gradually became a vital platform for performatively fleshing out the EU's identity. EU and its member states extensively used it as a communication channel during the pandemic, to demonstrate a

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liberal and fair image of the EU to foreign audiences [12]. In 2023, the European Council approved conclusions on EU digital diplomacy, stressing that the EU needs to act in a "Team Europe" approach, jointly bringing its digital diplomacy to the next level [13]. It is clear that the EU has tried to take more active actions in digital diplomacy domain.

4. The content of EU's digital diplomacy

The EU's digital foreign policies serve its digital strategy and interests, with the goals of securing its place in the global digital economy and advancing a dynamic, human-centered regulatory framework for an inclusive digital transformation. The supranational bloc has suggested a number of key measures to guarantee more strong, strategic, cogent, and successful EU involvement in international digital affairs in order to achieve these objectives. The content of the EU's digital diplomacy mainly has four aspects.

First, strengthening the EU's influence in Global Digital Governance is a key priority. EU decided to increase its engagement in international fora, focusing on both innovation and regulation. It has integrated digital diplomacy into the Global Gateway initiative, which aims to enhance secure and trusted global connectivity. This initiative seeks to expand the EU's digital footprint and influence partner countries' approaches to digital governance by investing in safe and secure digital infrastructure worldwide. Additionally, Brussels is working to exert greater impact in the international organizations-led processes. For example, EU tried to strengthen its capacity to provide substantive and coordinated guidance on digital issues towards Geneva-based organizations such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and World Trade Organization (WTO) and consolidate its role in digital policy development discussions [13]. Moreover, it is dedicated to enhancing its leadership of digital rule-making and being a real global digital player to shape a rules-based digital future. For instance, it attached importance to strengthening its role in telecommunication standardization, including future generations like 6G.

Second, the EU is laying the foundations for common external action on digital issues. It seeks to common positions in the world, including through enhanced bilateral and regional digital partnerships and alliances. For example, the EU has collaborated with G7 partners to consolidate the security of critical digital infrastructure, promote trust-based data flows, and enhance the resilience of global ICT supply chains. It has also strengthened partnerships such as the EU-India Trade and Technology Council and the EU-Latin America and Caribbean Digital Alliance, while pursuing common digital trade rules with countries from Oceania to ASEAN periphery [13]. However, President Donald Trump's criticism of EU digital regulations following his inauguration in January has increased uncertainty in the bloc's digital relationship with the US, its biggest trade partner [14]. Nevertheless, technical cooperation between both sides continues.

Third, EU is committed to promoting a human-centric digital environment. Brussels strives to defend and advance democratic processes, human rights, and the rule of law online in accordance with the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy. It continues to defend civic cyber freedoms and equities while paying attention to protecting the rights of marginalized and vulnerable individuals across gender, age, and ability spectra [15]. In doing so, the EU ensures efforts between diplomats and experts in Brussels and Member States to accomplish the adoption of a human-centered and human-rights-based paradigm in the field of emerging technologies and digitization.

Fourth, EU is establishing a social media matrix. The EU can effectively communicate with the public using social media because it allows the organization to generate its own narrative, in contrast to more conventional methods like news conferences [8]. The EU has set up profiles on popular social media sites like Twitter, Facebook and even Sina Weibo, forming a communication network. With

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the increasing exposure on digital platforms, the EU's media visibility and the awareness of EU issues among foreign audiences have grown in the past decades.

5. Challenges in EU digital diplomacy

The EU has made significant progresses in its digital diplomacy, as witnessed by its active engagement in various social media and international affairs. It has gradually realized that actively involving with foreign public was an essential step in its efforts to become an influential actor in international society, with digital diplomacy serving as a vital measure in this process. However, the EU's digital diplomacy still faces various obstacles.

First, there is the issue of internal coordination and coherence. Since most foreign and security policy provisions depend on the unanimity of all 27 member states, this may lead to certain activities related to data governance that are difficult to approve. Although the EU has taken actions to achieve greater coherence, its digital diplomacy is still riddled with limitations and ineffectiveness. Furthermore, member states also have an active voice in process of EU external affairs, and their divergences of rules and different perceptions about how to interact with the public on social media may weaken EU's coherence. Thus, social media content needs to be cleared beforehand by the Brussels headquarters of the EEAS in order to prevent upsetting the delicate balance of consensus among the twenty-seven members [8]. Therefore, it would be advantageous to standardize social media activities among member states, especially with regard to uniform rules about who is permitted to speak or post on the organization's behalf.

Second, the recognition and acceptance of EU values pose a challenge. The EU needs to consider how to partner with developing countries or non-aligned countries, which is one of the things that EU wants to further work on by the Global Gateway initiative. Values dissemination plays a crucial role in the EU's external communication, but there are many challenges in its spread towards the Global South. For example, in the Global South, there is a pervasive suspicion that values often conceal interests, particularly in the case of the EU's "green" standards. These standards are frequently viewed as protectionist measures by countries that may lose market access to the EU due to challenges in complying with them [16]. In summary, it is beneficial to keep emphasizing EU values while keeping a balance by clearly calculating how those values align with the organization's interests. These approaches can reduce accusations from foreign audiences.

Third, the EU is trying to gain digital leadership, but it is falling short. There is a great deal of technological competition between countries. In terms of tech-related domains, the EU is lagging behind the US and China, especially in investment in AI start-ups, adoption of new business models, blockchain technology or market valuations of technology companies. According to EU 2030 Digital Compass, most of the world's major digital technologies are developed outside the EU. Notably, 90% of EU data is managed by US companies, less than 4% of mainstream online platforms come from the EU, and chips manufactured in the EU region account for only 10% of the EU market [17]. Additionally, in accordance with 2030 Digital Decade Report, member states are making slow progress in connectivity, digital skills, and enterprise AI applications, and as things stand, EU will struggle to meet its 2030 digital transformation targets [18]. Although the EU has the ambition to lead the development of the digital domain, its digital capabilities are inadequate.

6. Trends in the development of EU digital diplomacy

A clear digital diplomacy strategy can provide strategic guidance and policy support for safeguarding national digital sovereignty. The EU has recognized that digital platforms are an essential tool in contemporary foreign affairs for communicating and engaging with the outside world [8]. It has realized the need to enhance its global presence in digital diplomacy through international

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cooperation and exchange, while protecting common interests, to ensure that its interests and values are recognized and disseminated. The EU integrates democratic ideas into the process of digital diplomacy, linking the rules of digital governance to its core values, thus exporting data rules, standards, and shared values to the world. In the future, the EU may continue to promote the values of freedom, democracy and human rights and integrate them into the practices of digital diplomacy. Meanwhile, the EU will constantly focus on strengthening digital resilience and counter disinformation, aiming to reduce external dependence and maximize its benefits of digital diplomacy.

7. Conclusion

This paper discussed the evolution of the EU's digital diplomacy, which can be divided into three stages. In the first stage, the EU's digital diplomacy was immature, which gave priority to the use of traditional diplomacy. And then, with the establishment of the EEAS, the supranational organization started to attach importance to digital diplomacy and established accounts on major social media platforms. In the third stage, "digital diplomacy" has become a crucial role in the EU's diplomatic agenda, and the pandemic accelerated its development. The EU's digital diplomacy revolved around four aspects: strengthening participation in international affairs to enhance its influence, promoting relationships with partners, emphasizing a human-centric environment and enhancing its digital presence on social media platforms. However, the EU faced some challenges in digital diplomacy practices. Problems like dissonances between member states, inefficient values dissemination and a lack of digital leadership make the EU's digital diplomacy more "reactive" rather than "proactive".

This study systematically discusses the development and practices of the EU's digital diplomacy, but there are some aspects that need to be improved. This paper pays more attention to descriptive analysis and is short of quantitative evidence of multi-actors and practical effects in the practice of digital diplomacy. Digital technologies is playing an increasingly important role in politics; more and more states are making it a priority, which means the study of digital diplomacy will be richer in the future.

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