Chapter 2

Technological Determinism and African Public Diplomacy:
A Conceptual Perspective on African e-Diplomacy in the Post-COVID-19 Era

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ABSTRACT

Although a galaxy of research works have focused on diplomacy in the COVID-19 period, very little attention has particularly been given to the idea of comparing the state of African digital diplomacy in the pre and the post COVID-19 period. Also, the literature available suggests that most studies on digital diplomacy in the COVID-19 period are Eurocentric and the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity for the future growth of digital diplomacy in Africa is still virtually understudied. In view of filling the above-mentioned gap in knowledge, this chapter deploys secondary sources and observations to attain three principal objectives. First, the chapter explores the state of digital diplomacy before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, it examines how the pandemic positively affected the conduct of digital diplomacy in Africa, putting to question the myth of digital divide between the West and Africa. Lastly, the chapter explores implications for the practice of public diplomacy in post-COVID Africa as well as for future research on African digital diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic has engendered a huge wind of change which has swept across all human industries in the world. The pandemic has actually given birth to a complex and difficult international environment, thereby justifying the adoption by governments of very radical policies (such as the lock-down of cities, travel restrictions and quarantine systems) to enable both human survival and industrial production in their respective territories. The outbreak also enabled the explosion of various digital cultures (notably e-administration, e-government and virtual meeting) which themselves have profoundly revolutionised almost all facets of life on planet earth. In tandem with this, one may observe that the COVID-19 created conditions favourable for almost all human activities to migrate online thereby enabling an explosion of cultures such as smart-cities, e-banking, e-administration, e-learning, e-commerce, and online advocacy among others. The above-mentioned developments have motivated many scholars to describe the COVID-19 period and the post-COVID period as an era of the new or next normal (Peru, 2022).

Like all the above-mentioned human industries, public diplomacy has been seriously affected by the pandemic. This is evidenced by at least two things; the first is the fact that embassies intensified their online presence with trepidation, in order to provide consular services to stranded nationals, strengthen bi-and-multilateral cooperation, and maintain their diplomatic footprint. The second evidence is that most of the international government summits, conferences, and gatherings organised during the outbreak were held through teleconferencing and other digital platforms. The option of using such tele-conferencing and digital platforms for international gathering has since then remained popular and a normality. According to the UN headquarter in Geneva, the United Nation Organisation ran over 1200 important international conferences online between March and the end of the year 2020 (United Nation Organisation, 2021).

A plurality of scholars have sought to show how the pandemic redefined the conduct of diplomacy in the world (Abdelhafidh, 2021; Internet Governance Forum, 2021; France Diplomatie, 2022). According to Labott (2022), the pandemic caused the diplomatic crossroads of the world to go into "hibernation". With close reference to the American experience, Labott (2022) explains that the culture of flocking to Washington for meetings at the White House, State Department or World Bank suddenly gave way to diplomacy enabled by video-conferences and phone calls. In her words, "world leaders

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