

Chapter 8

Dehumanising and De-Africanising Public Diplomacy: A Philosophico-Cultural Perspective on the Digitalisation of African Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore not only the centrality of Western digital technologies, but also a number of philosophico-cultural issues. Two of such cultural issues in the domain of digital diplomacy have been the de-Africanisation and dehumanisation of African digital diplomacy. These two issues have partly stemmed from the popular African myth that cybercultures in general and the digitalisation of African diplomacy in particular are disruptive forces that could negatively affect the traditional African values that have since independence been upheld by African governments in their conduct of public diplomacy. A related theory states that digitalisation may only de-humanise and de-Africanise public diplomacy. Using secondary sources and critical observations, this chapter examines the extent to which the above-mentioned fears are justified. The chapter specifically explores how digitalisation could affect specific African traditional values. It also examines the extent to which digitisation is susceptible to de-humanise or/and de-Africanise African public diplomacy.

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INTRODUCTION

Many schools of thought have construed digital diplomacy essentially as a technological revolution, giving little or no attention to the human or socio-cultural dimensions of the phenomenon. It is, in effect, common to come across both African and non-African critics who merely regard e-diplomacy as the “banal” application of ICTs in the conduct of public diplomacy. Viewed from this standpoint, digital diplomacy is most often construed as a technology-driven paradigm which only or mainly facilitates old behavioural models in public diplomacy or again, as a force which disrupts analogue practices in public diplomacy but still leads to the same finality as in “non-digital” or “classical” diplomacy. Besides these observations, there are sceptical critiques which even totally negate the influences and potential longevity of digital diplomacy. A case in point is Former US Secretary of State John Kerry who in 2012 sounded as though, digital diplomacy is a not-too-new concept and a phenomenon which does not deserve a special consideration. In a reaction which many critics viewed as hastened, Kerry claimed that “the term digital diplomacy is almost redundant - it’s just diplomacy, period” (cited in Bjola 2018). Similar sceptical and reductive perceptions of digital diplomacy were expressed by some Kenyan diplomats in a more recent survey conducted by Waithaka (2018). The survey concretely revealed that a number of staffers at Kenyan MFAs categorically disregard the digital diplomacy concept, viewing it simplistically as “a passing wind that will, [in] no way change the conduct of diplomacy” (Waithaka 2018: 113).

Meanwhile, the influences of the digital technologies on the practice of public diplomacy are not only real; but go beyond the simple transition from one technology to the other (analogue to digital). Indeed, the influences entail a deal of revolution in diplomats’ world views, systems of values and ideology. This is so as diplomats are first and foremost social beings, in the same way foreign ministries are social institutions. This also follows the logic that digital technologies definitely influence the norms, values and working philosophies of diplomatic institutions. No doubt, terms such as “diplomatic norms”, and “norms of diplomatic culture” have since become aphorisms in the public diplomacy sphere. Thus, as a process and paradigm which impacts the African society, digital diplomacy is bound to affect African public diplomacy not only from the technological, but also ideological and cultural points of view. In other words, digitalisation is likely to affect some of the socio-cultural values African governments have upheld since independence in their conduct of public diplomacy.

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