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UDC: 341.24:327(100)
341.76:[316.776:07
DOI: 10.5937/MegRev2501205B
Original scientific paper
Received 16.06.2025.
Approved: 12.08.2025.

FROM LIKES TO LEVERAGE: NAVIGATING THE DIPLOMATIC POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE CHALLENGES OF LEGAL OVERSIGHT*

Abstract: *This paper dives into the increasingly important role social media plays in modern diplomacy, highlighting both its empowering aspects and the tricky legal challenges it brings along. By looking through the lens of digital diplomacy, it explores how platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Meta have changed the way states, diplomats, and citizens communicate. While these platforms can really boost influence, they also bring along some new challenges, such as misinformation, political divides, and a decline in the traditional roles of gatekeepers. Additionally, the study highlights the democratising potential of real-time interaction by shedding light on the role social media plays in disaster response and humanitarian activities. However, it stresses the urgent need for clearer legal oversight, especially when it comes to jurisdictional conflicts, content moderation, and holding platforms accountable. This paper takes a close look at regulatory efforts like the EU's Digital Services Act and points out the flaws in voluntary governance. It argues for a global legal framework that's sensitive to different cultures, aiming to encourage the responsible and ethical use of social media in the realm of diplomacy.*

Keywords: Digital Diplomacy, Social Media Regulation, International Law, Public Communication

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**** The paper presents findings of a study developed as a part of the research project "Serbia and challenges in international relations in 2025", financed by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia, and conducted by Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade during year 2025.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media and Internet access have introduced citizens to the diplomatic scene, allowed them to interact with diplomats in person or virtually, increased the diplomatic space, and created new avenues for citizens to exert influence on a national and international level. Through technology, citizens can influence social movements and policy direction by bringing attention to issues of particular interest at the national or international level. However, when governments are confronted with new civic demands that shape how citizens interact with the state, this shift towards citizen participation frequently causes issues.

A new kind of social organising is developing on social networks. Thanks to the availability of contemporary technologies, a virtual society has emerged where people may connect and communicate over time and location barriers. So, when enough people communicate with each other frequently enough in cyberspace, doing nearly everything that people do when they get together, but using words on screens instead of their bodies, regardless of local time or location, internet communication turns into a cultural fusion.¹

The public are persuaded by the media these days to shape politics and constantly advertise themselves through their comments. One way that public opinion might grow is in relation to the government, which it closely observes, and the other is in relation to the broader populace.² Constant technological development helps to push the limits of political communication. The Internet's status as a vital communication tool suggests that media technology is undergoing a revolution that will have an impact on politics, a long-standing profession that seeks to maximise political support.³

People use political blogs or other online forums to voice their thoughts, engage in debates, and connect with like-minded individuals. Professional journalists' privilege is diminished in this setting since they have no say in what material is made public. Therefore, the relevance of online public discourses in some nations' political environments is significantly impacted by the use of social media, which enables avoiding the "gatekeepers."⁴

The usage of social media, which opens up a new audience and facilitates public relations, is typically the only technique taken into consideration when

¹ Rheingold, H. (1996): "A Slice of Life in my Virtual Community", in: *Highnoon on the Electronic Frontier: Conceptual Issues in Cyberspace*, Edited by Peter Ludlow, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 413-444.

² Habermas, J. (2005): "Concluding comments on empirical approaches to deliberative politics", *Acta Politica*, No.40, 384-392.

³ Mirer, M.L. & Bode, L. (2015): "Tweeting in defeat: How candidates concede and claim victory in 140 characters", *New Media & Society*, Vol. 17(3), 453-469. DOI: 10.1177/1461444813505364.

⁴ Tewksbury, D. (1996): "Exposure to the New Media in a Presidential Primary Campaign", *Political Communication*, 23(3), 313-332.

discussing digital diplomacy. However, since no one is immune to assaults or unwelcome conversations on social media, it is always advisable to utilise it with prudence.⁵

Social networks are one of the primary ways to learn about specific occurrences in other countries because messages on these platforms appear more quickly than news in the media.⁶

Globalisation, migration, and growing multilingualism in the legal field are some of the issues that affect communication in the virtual world of legal informatics and the administration of justice. This difficulty is especially noticeable when it comes to diplomatic social media use, where it can be difficult to balance local laws with worldwide exposure.⁷

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Public diplomacy is sometimes described as the fundamental public relations and communication activity carried out by states, i.e., as a collection of various direct communication contacts between states and citizens.⁸ The evolution of digital communication technology gave rise to digital diplomacy, an improvement on public diplomacy that states can use to better understand cultures, attitudes, and behaviours, build and manage international ties, and influence the public.⁹

Social media is a computer technology that makes it easier to share information, ideas, and thoughts by creating online communities and networks. Social media is web-based and provides users with rapid electronic content communication by definition. Content includes things like documents, pictures, videos, and personal information. Through web-based software or applications, users engage with social media on computers, tablets, or smartphones. They frequently use these platforms to send messages.¹⁰ Social media has recently made it possible for

⁵ Costa, V. (2017): "Shaping public diplomacy through social media networks in the 21st century", *Romanian Journal of History and International Studies*, 4(1), 139–154.

⁶ Manor, I. (2014): "Exclusive interview with the director of Israel's Digital diplomacy unit", *Exploring Digital Diplomacy*, <https://digdipblog.com/2014/03/30/exclusive-interview-with-the-director-of-israels-digital-diplomacy-unit/>.

⁷ Baltezarevic, I. & Baltezarević, R. (2020): „Uticaj komunikacije u virtuelnom okruženju na pravnu informatiku“, *Megatrend Revija*. Vol. 17, № 4, 2020: 27-40. DOI: 10.5937/MegRev2004027B

⁸ Bjola, C. & Kornprobst, M. (2013): *Understanding International Diplomacy: Theory, Practice and Ethics*, London, Routledge.

⁹ Melissen, J. (2013): "Public Diplomacy", in: *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*, 436–452, Oxford, Oxford, University Press.

¹⁰ Dollarhide, M. (2019): *Social Media Definition*. Investopedia, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/s/social-media.asp>.

diplomacy to gain a deeper understanding of the civic sector through the establishment of constant, open, and transparent communication.

Initially, the goal of social media diplomacy was to overcome the constraints of traditional diplomacy and combat online extremist recruitment attempts.¹¹ The possible use of diplomatic prestige, digital diplomacy, and social media to interact with connected publics are the main areas of focus for public diplomacy today.¹² However, the Dunning-Kruger effect asserts that people with excessive self-confidence can have a powerful social influence. This proves that people with little knowledge but a lot of confidence can influence public opinion in a way that is detrimental to the legal system and diplomatic relations.¹³ Another issue is that people frequently don't realise they are being exposed to commercial advertising, which makes it obvious how dangerous it is to utilise social media for diplomatic goals without proper legal or ethical oversight.¹⁴

Nevertheless, digital diplomacy makes it possible to modify the country's foreign policy and brand messaging to the particular traits of the local populace, which serves as the target audience, based on the situation on social media. Prior knowledge of the history, culture, and traditional values of the host nation is crucial for these reasons. Lewis defines digital diplomacy as the use of social media and other digital communication tools to facilitate contact between diplomats and the general public.¹⁵ Cultural differences influence how governments function, as noted by Ćurčić (2024). This helps us understand that digital diplomatic communication is strongly embedded in the cultural environment and does not function universally.¹⁶

Among the branches of public diplomacy, digital diplomacy aims to include large swaths of the populace in diplomatic activities. Its foundation is the use of social networks, which facilitate contact and link Internet users and diplomats. Social networks can serve as a platform for diplomatic missions in two ways: either as a tool for democratisation or as a tool for bolstering authoritarian tendencies that restrict citizens' freedom.¹⁷ We live on a continent that has greatly expanded human

¹¹ Pamment, J. (2012): *New public diplomacy in the 21st century: A comparative study of policy and practice*, Oxon, Routledge.

¹² Metzgar, E. (2012): "Is it the medium or the message social media American public diplomacy", *Global Media Journal*, 11:21.

¹³ Baltezarević, R. & Baltezarević, I. (2021): "Daning-Krugerov efekat: Uticaj iskrivljene realnosti na percepciju potrošača prema luksuznim brendovima", *Baština*, 31(55), 237-253 DOI: 10.5937/bastina31-33832

¹⁴ Baltezarević, I. & Baltezarević, R. (2019): "Prikriveno oglašavanje u novim medijima", *Baština*, 48, 171-179. DOI: 10.5937/bastina1948171B

¹⁵ Lewis, D. (2014): *Digital Diplomacy*, <http://www.gatewayhouse.in/digital-diplomacy-2/>.

¹⁶ Ćurčić, S. (2024): "Cultural dimensions of safe cities", *Politika nacionalne bezbednosti*, 27(2), 183-208. DOI: 10.5937/pnb27-43653

¹⁷ Melissen, J. (2005): "The new public diplomacy: Between theory and practice", in: J. Melissen (Ed.), *The new public diplomacy: Soft power in international relations* (pp. 3-27), Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

technological growth, but it has also failed to sustain this dominant position to this day, as Vacarelu (2023) cautions.¹⁸ This instinct makes it easier to see why Europe needs to shift its social contacts and diplomatic tactics to focus on swift, digitally mediated influence, even while its regulatory structure might impede that change.

Social networks facilitate information sharing and direct diplomatic interactions with network users. The most widely utilised social network in diplomacy is Twitter (now X), which enables real-time, unfiltered information transmission. Twitter's biggest strength is its capacity to record a brief conversation with anyone, anywhere in the world, at the very moment the question is posed.¹⁹

For example, Ghana's "Year of Return" campaign in 2019 effectively leveraged social media. In addition to increasing tourism, they promoted cultural ties by interacting with the African diaspora worldwide on social media sites like Instagram and Twitter. This effort beautifully illustrates how digital diplomacy can go beyond borders and resonate on an emotional level with audiences everywhere.²⁰ In 2018, a fascinating instance of digital diplomacy occurred during the cave rescue in Thailand. The U.S. Embassy utilized Twitter to provide real-time updates on the mission, showcasing how social media can facilitate quick communication and improve transparency during crises.²¹

Chinese diplomats and embassies have been actively using Twitter to defend their national interests, frequently sharing abrasive and confrontational content aimed at critics. This tactic, known as "wolf warrior diplomacy," is an example of a more aggressive digital approach. This demonstrates how geopolitical messaging can be used on digital platforms, which occasionally leads to tension in international relations.²²

Social networks have become vital in humanitarian contexts, especially during crises in conflict zones such as Yemen and Syria. For instance, social media and real-time data mapping have made it easier for NGOs, governments, and humanitarian actors to coordinate their responses. At the same time, citizens have taken to these platforms to document atrocities and call for international action, showing

¹⁸ Vacarelu, M. (2023): "Evropa, drugorazredna sila u svetu veštačke inteligencije", *Politika nacionalne bezbednosti*, 25(2), 99-115. DOI: 10.5937/pnb25-47325

¹⁹ Fenton, N. (2012): "The Internet and Social Networking", in: *Misunderstanding the Internet*, ed. Natalie Fenton, Des Freedman, and James Curran, Communication and Society, London, New York (etc.), Routledge.

²⁰ Thebftonline (2024): *Digital diplomacy: The new frontier in international relations*, <https://thebftonline.com/2024/11/07/digital-diplomacy-the-new-frontier-in-international-relations/>.

²¹ Aseannow (2018): *Messages, sketches and hashtags: Thai cave rescue dominates social media*, https://aseannow.com/topic/1047796-messages-sketches-and-hashtags-thai-cave-rescue-dominates-social-media/?utm_source=chatgpt.com#google_vignette.

²² Allen-Ebrahimian, B. (2020): *China's "Wolf Warrior diplomacy" comes to Twitter*, <https://www.axios.com/2020/04/22/china-diplomacy-twitter>.

just how powerful digital tools can be in promoting cooperation in diplomacy and humanitarian work.²³

Looking at the challenges of legal oversight, it's evident that platforms like Meta and X have a lot of influence, but states are increasingly taking charge of regulation. Recent incidents, such as the pushback from these platforms against takedown orders from Brazilian courts, followed by their eventual compliance, demonstrate how governments are enforcing legal standards on social media within their jurisdictions.²⁴

When we look at it through the lens of security and regulation, the 2020 Twitter hack that affected high-profile accounts was a clear demonstration of how platform vulnerabilities can be exploited. This incident not only spread disinformation but also damaged public trust. It underscored the necessity for legal reforms, technological safeguards, and global cooperation to protect digital platforms from being weaponised.²⁵

The patchwork of national laws governing platform accountability and content moderation is a major concern when it comes to legal oversight in digital diplomacy. The Digital Services Act (DSA) of the European Union, for instance, mandates that large platforms manage unlawful content, increase transparency, and protect users' rights. On the other hand, Germany's Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) requires that illegal posts be taken down immediately, which raises questions about the possibility of over-censorship because platforms may wind up serving as judges in these cases.²⁶

The term "legal imperialism" describes the belief that companies headquartered in one nation (typically the US) should apply their content standards worldwide, which might conflict with local traditions and free speech. This raises a host of legal issues. Legal scholars warn that enforcing US-based First Amendment principles in different international environments could weaken diplomatic cultural sensitivity and the idea of legal pluralism.²⁷

Furthermore, the transnational nature of social media makes it more difficult to enforce accountability and diplomatic standards. Reliance on national or

²³ Sakhri, M. (2024): *Diplomacy in the Digital Age: Opportunities, Challenges, and Profound Transformations in International Relations*, <https://worldpolicyhub.com/diplomacy-in-the-digital-age-opportunities-challenges-and-profound-transformations-in-international-relations/>.

²⁴ Green, A. D. (2025): *The coming battle between social media and the state*, <https://www.ft.com/content/917c9535-1cdb-4f6a-9a15-1a0c83663bfd>.

²⁵ Gerstell, G. (2020): *The National-Security Case for Fixing Social Media*, <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/the-national-security-case-for-fixing-social-media>.

²⁶ Leloup, D. (2025): *Social media regulation: Between the rock of criminal justice and the EU's hard place*, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/pixels/article/2024/09/03/social-media-regulation-between-criminal-justice-s-rock-and-the-eu-s-hard-place_6724545_13.html.

²⁷ Celeste, E., Palladino, N., Redeker, D., Yilma, K. (2023): "The Content Governance Dilemma", in: *The Content Governance Dilemma. Information Technology and Global Governance*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-031-32924-1_2

regional laws is insufficient because there is no single international body that can arbitrate cross-border disputes. Though they provide inclusive forums for dialogue between states, civil society, and platforms, multi-stakeholder initiatives like the proposed “content congresses” currently lack the binding authority to resolve legal contradictions in digital diplomacy.²⁸

CONCLUSION

Social media’s rise to prominence in diplomacy brings with it both exciting potential and difficult problems. On one side, it has created new ways for governments to connect with people around the world, broadened the reach of diplomatic messages, and enabled quick reactions during crises. On the flip side, it has also revealed the weaknesses in diplomacy, exposing it to problems like algorithmic bias, misinformation, and unclear legal boundaries.

These days, when we talk about digital diplomacy, influence seems to boil down to likes, shares, and how visible you are, metrics that don’t necessarily match up with truth, legality, or ethical norms. With platforms like X and Meta playing such a big role in shaping global conversations, the boundary between public diplomacy and propaganda is getting increasingly fuzzy. Moreover, the dominance of a few tech giants from specific areas brings up serious worries about digital sovereignty and the risk of foreign legal standards being imposed on different political and cultural contexts.

In this area, legal oversight can be pretty inconsistent and often takes a reactive approach. Although there are national and regional regulations, such as the EU’s Digital Services Act, that seek to foster accountability, they often run into conflicts with broader international norms or miss the mark when it comes to addressing the global dynamics of digital diplomacy. The absence of a solid, multilateral regulatory framework leaves diplomats, states, and citizens to navigate a digital world that’s mostly shaped by the rules of private companies instead of international legal standards.

To evolve from just having a digital presence to making a significant and responsible impact, nations must prioritise the creation of clear legal frameworks. These frameworks should guarantee transparency, uphold human rights, and encourage fair involvement in global discussions. If we fail to put these systems in place, the role of social media in diplomacy may continue to advance faster than the regulations intended to control it, potentially leading to diplomatic friction, a decline in democratic practices, and an increasing distrust in both institutions and the information they provide.

²⁸ Nieminen, H., Padovani, C., & Sousa, H. (2023): “Why Has the EU Been Late in Regulating Social Media Platforms?”, *Javnost - The Public*, 30(2), 174–196. DOI: 10.1080/13183222.2023.2200717

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OD LAJKOVA DO UTICAJA: UPOTREBA DRUŠTVENIH MREŽA KAO DIPLOMATSKOG ALATA I IZAZOVI PRAVNE REGULATIVE

Sažetak: Ovaj rad se bavi sve važnijom ulogom koju društveni mediji igraju u modernoj diplomatiji, ističući kako njihove osnažujuće aspekte, tako i teške pravne izazove koje donose. Posmatrajući kroz prizmu digitalne diplomatije, istražuje se kako su platforme poput X (ranije Tviter) i Meta promenile način na koji države, diplomate i građani komuniciraju. Iako ove platforme zaista mogu povećati uticaj, one takođe donose neke nove izazove, kao što su dezinformacije, političke podele i pad tradicionalnih uloga čuvara kapija. Pored toga, studija ističe demokratizacioni potencijal interakcije u realnom vremenu bacajući svetlo na ulogu koju društvene mreže igraju u reagovanju na katastrofe i humanitarnim aktivnostima. Međutim, naglašava se hitna potreba za jasnijim pravnim nadzorom, posebno kada je reč o jurisdikcijskim sukobima, moderiranju sadržaja i pozivanju platformi na odgovornost. Ovaj rad detaljno razmatra regulatorne napore poput Zakona EU o digitalnim uslugama i ukazuje na nedostatke u dobrovoljnom upravljanju. Zalaže se za globalni pravni okvir koji je osetljiv na različite kulture, sa ciljem da podstakne odgovornu i etičku upotrebu društvenih medija u oblasti diplomatije.

Ključne reči: Digitalna diplomatija, Regulacija društvenih medija, Međunarodno pravo, Javna komunikacija