

# The rise of hybrid diplomacy: from digital adaptation to digital adoption

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Almost two years have passed since the COVID-19 pandemic first compelled diplomacy to move online. Beginning in March 2020, the doors of ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) and multilateral institutions were closed, embassies were urged to lie dormant, and diplomats were subject to social isolation and quarantine. Despite the suddenness of the transition, the process appears in retrospect to have worked surprisingly well. ‘Zoom diplomacy’ has by now become a routinized extension of face-to-face diplomacy, being used for convening high-level meetings between world leaders,<sup>1</sup> for organizing sessions of the UN General Assembly,<sup>2</sup> or for arranging bilateral engagements at the MFA level.<sup>3</sup> As physical diplomacy is becoming feasible again, the question that diplomats now face is whether virtual meetings will become a permanent feature of diplomacy. Diplomats want to know whether the skills they have struggled to learn over the past two years will be of any use once the pandemic is over. In other words, is there life for virtual engagement after the pandemic? Specifically, we ask, how have diplomats adapted to the transition to the virtual medium, what lessons have they learned from doing so, and how might these lessons inform the conduct of diplomacy in the post-pandemic period?

In our answer, we argue that diplomacy is about to enter a new phase of digital transformation: one of what we call *hybrid diplomacy*, in which physical and virtual engagements are expected to integrate, complement and empower each other. We contextualize the argument by tracing the evolution of the previous two waves of digital transformation of diplomacy (social media and strategic communication), and examining the similarities and differences between past patterns of digital adaptation and the current wave. The pace and shape of hybrid

<sup>1</sup> Julian Borger, ‘Biden–Xi virtual summit: leaders warn each other over future of Taiwan’, *Guardian*, 16 Nov. 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/nov/16/xi-biden-virtual-summit-us-china-conflict-taiwan-hong-kong>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 6 Jan. 2022.)

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Wintour, ‘Bye bye bilaterals: UN general assembly to embrace Zoom diplomacy’, *Guardian*, 19 Sept. 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/19/bye-bye-bilaterals-un-general-assembly-embrace-zoom-diplomacy>; Isabel Bramsen and Anine Hagemann, ‘The missing sense of peace: diplomatic approachment and virtualization during the COVID-19 lockdown’, *International Affairs* 97: 2, 2021, pp. 539–60.

<sup>3</sup> United Arab Emirates MFA, ‘UAE and Greece host virtual edition of their 2nd Strategic Cooperation Forum’, 25 July 2020, <https://www.mofaic.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2020/7/25/25-07-2020-uae-greece>.

diplomacy will depend on how well MFAs manage the transition from adaptation to adoption; that is, from learning how to integrate physical and virtual presences under pressure, by trial and error and improvisation, to doing so in a more deliberative, strategic and systematic manner. For some, hybridity will probably remain a desirable aspiration hindered by technical challenges and institutional resistance. For others, hybrid diplomacy may well become second nature, allowing them to pursue their foreign policy goals fast, effectively and with confidence. Yet our results suggest that the transition from digital adaptation to digital adoption is hardly linear, which means that most diplomats will probably locate themselves somewhere in between these two positions.

To gauge diplomats' reactions to the arrival of hybrid diplomacy, the study follows a survey-based inductive methodology designed to gather data about the professional virtual experiences of the responders during the pandemic, to identify possible patterns in the observed data and to use these patterns to construct generalizable theoretical insights. An inductive approach is particularly suitable for this type of research for a very practical reason. Just as governments and the general public failed to anticipate the seriousness of the pandemic in its early stages, one would also expect diplomats to have been taken largely by surprise by its sudden arrival and the abruptness of the transition to the virtual medium. Consequently, their reactions were inevitably organic, with no predefined reference points, and focused on learning how to adapt to the new circumstances. Creating meaning from such complex data is a task that inductive analysis is designed to do well.<sup>4</sup>

To this end, we collected responses from 105 diplomats representing about 30 countries around the world. The survey sample included 45 per cent women and 55 per cent men with the following age distribution: 25 per cent under 35, 61 per cent between 35 and 50, and 14 per cent above 50 years of age. About 31 per cent of responders were senior diplomats at the rank of ambassador or minister counsellor, 15 per cent were senior MFA officials (head of division/department, chief digital officer), and the remaining 54 per cent were of lower rank (first, second or third secretaries or attachés). Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method, between October 2020 and January 2021, and those preferring not to be identified by name were given the opportunity to remain anonymous. The survey was conducted online, in full compliance with the relevant academic ethical guidelines. The survey data were processed using the analytics software Tableau, which allowed us to generate analytical insights from visual representations of the entire dataset.

The article is structured in four parts. First, we review previous studies examining the impact of digital technologies on diplomats' work and their institutions. Second, we introduce the concepts of digital adaptation and adoption, and trace their recent evolution within MFAs. Third, we discuss our methodology and present the findings of our survey of 105 diplomats who discussed their experiences of conducting virtual meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fourth,

<sup>4</sup> David R. Thomas, 'A general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative evaluation data', *American Journal of Evaluation* 27: 2, 2006, pp. 237–46.

building on these findings, we examine two key dimensions of digital adoption, technological and social, and reflect on how they may facilitate or hinder MFAs' efforts to embrace hybrid diplomacy in their future work. We conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of the 'third wave' of digital adoption in international affairs. The study makes three distinct contributions to the literature on digital diplomacy: methodologically, it draws on data gathered from a much larger and more diverse sample of diplomats than previous studies; conceptually, it offers a novel framework (adaptation vs adoption) for understanding the process by which digital technologies are absorbed into diplomatic practice; empirically, it offers unique findings about the areas in which hybrid diplomacy is perceived to be most effective.

### **Going digital: what does it mean?**

The past decade has seen diplomats' growing use of digital technologies in a process often referred to as 'digital diplomacy'. Since 2008, diplomatic services have experimented with establishing virtual embassies, creating social media channels to interact with foreign populations, launching smartphone applications, establishing new digital task forces, assembling big data units, revamping communication procedures in multilateral organizations and writing their own algorithms.<sup>5</sup> Evidence of how well digital diplomacy has entrenched itself in the work of MFAs is apparent in the routine use by diplomats of social media, websites and smartphone applications to comment on, and attempt to shape, public perceptions of crises as they unfold.<sup>6</sup>

Scholarly work has attempted to illustrate the process by which digital technologies affect diplomats and their institutions. For some, this relationship is shaped by the digital functionalities and affordances that enable or constrain diplomatic action, for instance in the context of international negotiations.<sup>7</sup> Studies examining social media have also focused on the type of content that diplomats can publish, or how social media helps overcome the limitations of offline diplomacy during peace negotiations.<sup>8</sup> For others, social media have altered the space within which diplomats communicate, engage and collaborate with each other—or even the logic and working procedures of diplomatic institutions, which now seek to copy those of media institutions.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Corneliu Bjola and Marcus Holmes, eds, *Digital diplomacy: theory and practice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015); Ilan Manor, *The digitalization of public diplomacy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> See Philip Seib, *The future of diplomacy* (Cambridge: Wiley, 2016); Efe Sevin, 'Digital diplomacy as crisis communication: Turkish digital outreach after July 15', *Mexican Journal of Foreign Policy*, vol. 113, 2017, pp. 185–207.

<sup>7</sup> See Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Alena Drieschova, 'Track-change diplomacy: technology, affordances, and the practice of international negotiations', *International Studies Quarterly* 63: 3, 2019, pp. 531–45.

<sup>8</sup> See Emily T. Metzgar, 'Is it the medium or the message? Social media, American public relations and Iran', *Global Media Journal* 11: 21, 2012, pp. 1–16; Lina Khatib, William Dutton and Michael Thelwall, 'Public diplomacy 2.0: a case study of the US digital outreach team', *Middle East Journal* 66: 3, 2012, pp. 453–72.

<sup>9</sup> See Constance Duncombe, 'Twitter and transformative diplomacy: social media and Iran–US relations', *International Affairs* 93: 3, 2017, pp. 545–62; James Pamment, 'Digital diplomacy as transmedia engagement: aligning theories of participatory culture with international advocacy campaigns', *New Media and Society* 18: 9, 2016, pp. 2046–62.

From a normative perspective, Hopke and Hestres have argued that digital technologies even ‘democratize’ diplomacy, as they empower non-state actors and the public at large to challenge the authority of diplomatic institutions and the state, a view also shared by Bos and Melissen.<sup>10</sup> In the same vein, Bjola, Manor and Adiku have argued that social media have had an ‘empowering effect’ on diaspora communities in their relationship with the diplomatic institutions of countries of origin, leading them to develop variable configurations of political, economic and cultural engagement with MFAs and embassies.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the democratization thesis requires strong qualification, given the efforts made by state and non-state actors to weaponize social media for political purposes,<sup>12</sup> and the difficulty that governments and MFAs have experienced in their attempts to contain the toxic effect of digital disinformation.<sup>13</sup>

Importantly, digital technologies also have the power to prompt certain behaviours among users, thus changing the patterns by which they interact. These behaviours permeate into MFAs once diplomats adopt digital technologies to organize their daily routines. Hedling and Bremberg have observed, for instance, that digitalization has led to a change of expectations in respect of both what counts as diplomatic action and who counts as a diplomatic actor.<sup>14</sup> On a more critical note, Bramsen and Hagemann have challenged the ability of virtual platforms to shape behaviour in peace negotiations. While they agree that technical affordances are crucial for conducting Zoom diplomacy effectively, they nevertheless see little potential for virtual meetings to replace physical meetings in peace diplomacy. In their view, the key ingredients for creating a ‘sense of peace’, such as trust, understanding and togetherness, cannot be fostered by virtualization. The latter can help increase accessibility, equalize interaction and enable more frequent meetings, but it can also disrupt interaction and challenge confidentiality.<sup>15</sup>

While these works have merit, their focus is on researching how digital technologies inform and shape the conduct of diplomacy. The fact that digital technologies can constrain or enable diplomatic tasks and objectives, alter the landscape in which diplomacy takes place or induce behavioural change speaks volumes about the multifaceted and incisive effect these technologies increasingly have on diplomatic practices and institutions. What is less clear, however, is how these digital technologies capture MFAs’ attention in the first place, and why some of them are subsequently selected to become part of the repertoire of instruments through

<sup>10</sup> Jill E. Hopke and Luis E. Hestres, ‘Visualizing the Paris climate talks on Twitter: media and climate stakeholder visual social media during COP21’, *Social Media and Society* 4: 3, 2018, pp. 1–15; Michèle Bos and Jan Melissen, ‘Rebel diplomacy and digital communication: public diplomacy in the Sahel’, *International Affairs* 95: 6, 2019, pp. 1331–48.

<sup>11</sup> Corneliu Bjola, Ilan Manor and Geraldine Asiwome Adiku, ‘Diaspora diplomacy in the digital age’, in Liam Kennedy, ed., *Routledge handbook of diaspora diplomacy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Spencer McKay and Chris Tenove, ‘Disinformation as a threat to deliberative democracy’, *Political Research Quarterly* 74: 3, 2020, pp. 703–17.

<sup>13</sup> Edda Humprecht, Frank Esser and Peter Van Aelst, ‘Resilience to online disinformation: a framework for cross-national comparative research’, *International Journal of Press/Politics* 25: 3, 2020, pp. 493–516; Corneliu Bjola, ‘The ethics of countering digital propaganda’, *Ethics and International Affairs* 32: 3, 2018, pp. 305–15.

<sup>14</sup> Elsa Hedling and Niklas Bremberg, ‘Practice approaches to the digital transformations of diplomacy: toward a new research agenda’, *International Studies Review* 23: 4, 2021, pp. 1595–618.

<sup>15</sup> Bramsen and Hagemann, ‘The missing sense of peace’.

which diplomats carry out their tasks, activities and strategies. In this article, we argue that offline events play an important role in shaping the trajectory of digital diplomacy.

More specifically, we describe the evolution of digital diplomacy as a two-stage process consisting of digital adaptation and digital adoption. External events sharpen MFAs' interest in the power of digital technologies; their use generates new and potentially disruptive methods of diplomatic engagement, and this in turn inspires MFAs to selectively adopt and institutionalize the newly discovered digital approaches in their work. *Digital adaptation* is an externally induced process in which offline events require that diplomats embrace new digital technologies. Adaptation is a rapid process that brings about great change immediately. *Digital adoption*, on the other hand, is an internally reflective process by which diplomats and diplomatic institutions try out and assess digital technologies, and choose which ones to embrace in support of their foreign policy goals. By unpacking the conceptual difference between digital adaptation and digital adoption, and explaining how the interplay between them shapes the evolution of digital diplomacy, this study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of how MFAs function in the digital age and, within this context, how the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to the rise of hybrid diplomacy as a novel method of diplomatic engagement.

## From digital adaptation to digital adoption

The past decade has demonstrated that digital adaptation develops in the shadow of offline events. The enthusiasm of the early digital adopters<sup>16</sup> was not shared by many MFAs before 2010. The Arab Spring, however, forced diplomats to reconsider their views of social media. They realized that offline protest movements were moulded and shaped in online arenas. Thus being on Facebook suddenly meant that one could monitor online conversations in real time and learn to anticipate possible shocks to the international system.<sup>17</sup> By 2012, the US State Department was already managing a social media empire of 288 Facebook pages, nearly 200 Twitter accounts, and 125 YouTube channels.<sup>18</sup> Yet it was between 2012 and 2015 that the State Department moved from adaptation to adoption—that is, from experimentation to strategy. It was during these years that the State Department adopted a more professional approach. It issued guidelines for embassy use of social media, established standard working routines for sharing information online and offered digital training to those diplomats looking to make use of social media in public engagement. It also started to embrace other social media platforms—Snapchat, Medium—so that it could engage with more diverse audiences.

<sup>16</sup> The US State Department created its account in 2007, UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Brazil MFA in 2009, Swedish and Indian MFAs in 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Lina Khatib, William Dutton and Michael Thelwall, 'Public diplomacy 2.0: a case study of the US digital outreach team', *Middle East Journal* 66: 3, 2012, pp. 453–72; Philip Seib, *Real-time diplomacy: politics and power in the social media era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Craig Hayden, 'Social media at state: power, practice, and conceptual limits for US public diplomacy', *Global Media Journal* 11: 21, 2012, p. 10.

Similar practices were soon adopted by other MFAs and even international organizations (IOs). By 2018, 93 per cent of heads of government and MFAs around the world had social media accounts, along with over 4,600 embassies and 1,400 ambassadors.<sup>19</sup> The Lithuanian MFA opened its LinkedIn account to connect with academic and business expatriates and reverse the nation's 'brain drain'.<sup>20</sup> Twitter has been used by European MFAs as an elite-to-elite medium to facilitate interaction between diplomats and their peers, journalists and policy-makers.<sup>21</sup> Facebook has been deployed as an elite-to-public medium through which diplomats have been encouraged to interact with foreign populations and distant diasporas.<sup>22</sup> Recent studies also show that an impulse for self-legitimation has driven IOs to open digital channels of communication with online audiences, in the belief that greater transparency will translate into greater support for them. While most IOs started with a single social media presence for the entire organization, many of them have diversified their presence on Facebook and Twitter over time.<sup>23</sup>

By 2015–16, the Syrian conflict and the Russian annexation of Crimea had created conditions for a second major drive towards digital adaptation. The toxic digital propaganda campaigns conducted by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS),<sup>24</sup> as well as the alleged Russian interventions in the Brexit referendum and the 2016 US elections, forced diplomats to adapt yet again. Entire populations were targeted by ISIS or Russia without anyone in western governments being the wiser. Millions of Americans were exposed to Russian Facebook ads without the knowledge of the US State Department or other government ministries.<sup>25</sup> Equally disturbing was the fact that online disinformation might have shaped offline beliefs, attitudes and behaviours.<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere online, countries such as Iran, China and North Korea all created networks of fake social media accounts to drive disinformation campaigns targeted at other countries.<sup>27</sup>

MFAs reacted to the challenge posed by the 'dark side' of digital technologies by establishing new strategic communication units, either alone or in partnership with other governmental agencies. Their role was to monitor, refute and proactively counter digital disinformation and influence campaigns sponsored by

<sup>19</sup> Matthias Lüfkens, *Twiplomacy Study 2018*, 10 July 2018, <https://twiplomacy.com/blog/twiplomacy-study-2018/>.

<sup>20</sup> Manor, *The digitalization of public diplomacy*.

<sup>21</sup> Melissa D. Dodd and Steve J. Collins, 'Public relations message strategies and Public Diplomacy 2.0: an empirical analysis using central-eastern European and western embassy Twitter accounts', *Public Relations Review* 43: 2, 2017, pp. 417–25.

<sup>22</sup> Damien Spry, 'From Delhi to Dili: Facebook diplomacy by ministries of foreign affairs in the Asia-Pacific', *Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 15: 1–2, 2020, pp. 93–125.

<sup>23</sup> Matthias Ecker-Ehrhardt, 'IO public communication going digital? Understanding social media adoption and use in times of politicization', in Corneliu Bjola and Ruben Zaiotti, eds, *Digital diplomacy and international organisations: autonomy, legitimacy and contestation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 21–51.

<sup>24</sup> Maura Conway, Moign Khawaja, Suraj Lakhani, Jeremy Reffin, Andrew Robertson and David Weir, 'Disrupting Daesh: measuring takedown of online terrorist material and its impacts', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42: 1–2, 2019, pp. 141–60.

<sup>25</sup> Kathleen H. Jamieson, *Cyberwar: how Russian hackers and trolls helped elect a president: what we don't, can't, and do know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Corneliu Bjola and Ilan Manor, 'Digital propaganda as symbolic convergence: the case of the Russian ads during the 2016 US presidential elections', in Gary Rawnsley, Yiban Ma and Kruakae Pothong, eds, *Handbook of political propaganda* (Cheltenham and Northampton: Edward Elgar, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard, *The global disinformation order: 2019 global inventory of organized social media manipulation*, working paper (Oxford: Project on Computational Propaganda, 2019).

state and non-state actors. For instance, the US State Department launched the Global Engagement Center in March 2016, initially to counter ISIS propaganda and later to handle Russian, Iranian and Chinese disinformation efforts aimed at undermining or influencing US policies.<sup>28</sup> The European External Action Service set up a task force in March 2015 to build societal resilience by monitoring and documenting Russian disinformation.<sup>29</sup> In the UK, the role of countering state-sponsored disinformation has been delegated to a sub-network of governmental agencies and units. This currently comprises the government's Russia Unit, based in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO); the National Security Communications Team (NSCT), a national security unit dedicated to combating state-led disinformation campaigns, based in the Cabinet Office and established in 2018;<sup>30</sup> and the 77th (Army) Brigade, which specializes in 'non-lethal' forms of psychological warfare using social media.<sup>31</sup>

Looking at this picture, then, we argue that digital adaptation is triggered by a confluence of geopolitical shocks alongside new patterns of usage of digital technologies. We do not conceptualize adaptation as a response to a 'cognitive punch' or, in Adler's terminology, to a shocking event that proves that the 'old way' of doing things is obsolete and must be replaced with new tools through which the world may become intelligible once more.<sup>32</sup> Rather, it is the geopolitical shock that first attracts the attention of diplomats, be it the speed with which Arab revolts spread through the Middle East in 2011, the ease with which hostile groups may use digital technologies to shape public perceptions, or to prepare the stealth invasion of Crimea in 2014. Next, diplomats become aware of the role that digital technologies played in these shocks. It was, after all, the mass media which argued that the Tahrir revolution was tweeted.<sup>33</sup> Finally, diplomats seek to make use of these digital technologies in new ways to advance their foreign policy priorities. Therefore, it is the confluence of events that triggers the process of adaptation.

### **The third wave of digital diplomacy**

The mass migration of MFAs to virtual platforms following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic invites the question whether a new wave of digital adaptation and adoption is under way. Observing the conditions that facilitated the previous two waves (social media and strategic communication) can help us understand why

<sup>28</sup> US State Department, *The Global Engagement Center*, <https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-public-diplomacy-and-public-affairs/global-engagement-center/>.

<sup>29</sup> Corneliu Bjola and James Pamment, 'Digital containment: revisiting containment strategy in the digital age', *Global Affairs* 2: 2, 2016, pp. 131–42.

<sup>30</sup> Natasha Lomas, 'UK to set up security unit to combat state disinformation campaigns', *TechCrunch*, 24 Jan. 2018, <http://tcrn.ch/2n8iyRo>.

<sup>31</sup> Carl Miller, 'Inside the British Army's secret information warfare machine', *Wired*, 14 Nov. 2018, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/inside-the-77th-brigade-britains-information-warfare-military>.

<sup>32</sup> See Emanuel Adler, *Cognitive evolution: a dynamic approach for the study of international relations and their progress* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

<sup>33</sup> Heidi A. Campbell and Diana Hawk, 'Al Jazeera's framing of social media during the Arab spring', *CyberOrient* 6: 1, 2012, pp. 34–51.

MFAs may feel compelled to adapt to the rise of new digital technologies and how the transition to digital adoption may then occur. First, perceptions of emergent technologies representing a new source of power with the capacity to exercise substantial influence on governmental policies is clearly a determining factor. The Arab Spring showed, for instance, that social media could precipitate the fall of authoritarian governments by amplifying latent social and political tensions.<sup>34</sup> In a similar fashion, the Syrian conflict and the post-Crimean geopolitical context demonstrated that digital disinformation could be highly effective in distorting users' perceptions and altering their behaviour in a predetermined direction.<sup>35</sup> The lesson that MFAs have learned from this is that the influence of digital technologies in global affairs cannot be ignored. Doing so may have detrimental effects on MFAs' capacities to pursue and implement their foreign policy objectives.

Second, the success of digital adoption also depends on the extent to which the new technologies may prove able to enhance rather than threaten established methods of offline diplomacy. Social media, for instance, have been quickly embraced by MFAs as these channels have allowed them to pursue their public diplomacy and crisis communication strategies more effectively than their analogue versions. Digital strategic communication, on the other hand, has complemented the efforts made by embassies to dispute or debunk negative stories published in the print media.<sup>36</sup>

Third, the costs associated with the transition from adaptation to adoption matter. Opening social media accounts, and training diplomats to use them, require much less effort and resources than establishing strategic communication ('stratcomm') units; hence the lower rate of adoption of the latter by MFAs. In addition to knowhow and technical issues, the creation of stratcomm units inevitably activates inter-institutional frictions, budgetary disputes and potential jurisdictional conflicts, which generally take time and political capital to address.

It is the contention of this article that the COVID-19 pandemic has initiated a third major process of digital adaptation, which is responsible for the rise of hybrid diplomacy. This combines face-to-face, physical diplomacy with virtual engagement via video-conference platforms such as Zoom, Teams or Webex. Unlike the previous two stages, the latest form of digital adaptation has been swifter and more direct. While the Arab Spring in 2010 and the actions of ISIS and Russian operatives in 2015–16 created effects that took months if not years for western MFAs to absorb and adapt to, the COVID-19 pandemic forced all MFAs to switch to the online medium almost overnight. That being said, the conducive conditions that had informed the evolution of the first two phases of digital adaptation made their presence visible in the third phase as well: the growing power of virtual platforms to shape global affairs, the ability of virtual meetings to

<sup>34</sup> Eva Bellin, 'Reconsidering the robustness of authoritarianism in the Middle East: lessons from the Arab Spring', *Comparative Politics* 44: 2, 2012, pp. 127–49.

<sup>35</sup> Corneliu Bjola and James Pamment, *Countering online propaganda and extremism: the dark side of digital diplomacy* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>36</sup> Ilan Manor and Corneliu Bjola, 'Public diplomacy in the age of "post-reality"', in Pawel Surowiec and Ilan Manor, eds, *Public diplomacy and the politics of uncertainty* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 111–43.



complement face-to-face interactions during the pandemic, and the surprisingly smooth and cost-effective transition to the virtual medium.

The fact that these facilitating conditions have again converged suggests that a third wave of digital adaptation is already under way. The claim we advance here is not that the 'third wave' can be fully explained by previous patterns of digital transformation, but rather that those patterns can provide a plausible explanation for the *arrival* of the 'third wave'. From a methodological perspective, our approach aligns well with Eckstein's 'heuristic' case-study approach, which is recommended for situations in which the researcher uses the case as a means to identify themes or concepts that may be helpful beyond the specific case.<sup>37</sup> This is exactly what we do here: we trace and identify past patterns of digital adaptation and adoption which we then use to probe the rise of the 'third wave'.

What is less clear is whether the second part of the process, the digital adoption of virtual platforms, will also come about. In other words, will MFAs' adaptation to hybrid diplomacy be followed by a sustained process of adoption? Markedly, adaptation rests on learning basic skills through experimentation, and trial and error. Embassies and ambassadors often serve as digital mavericks who innovate and demonstrate new usages of digital technologies. At times, these mavericks are successful, at other times they fail; but the success stories are emulated by other actors hoping to obtain similar results. Digital adoption, on the other hand, involves more complex learning processes. Once an MFA decides to adopt a new digital technology, special departments are created, new employees are recruited and trained, and new skills are mastered, until finally the MFA has accumulated the knowledge necessary to obtain offline diplomatic goals using digital technologies.

To investigate the scope, intensity and feasibility of the third wave of digital adaptation and adoption, the article draws on the results of a survey that the authors of the study designed and disseminated to 105 diplomats during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey questions covered the following topics. First, we were particularly interested in understanding how diplomats had experienced the arrival of the third stage of digital adaptation. How did they handle the transition to the virtual medium, to what extent did the transition help them carry on their functions and activities, and what challenges did they face during this process? Second, we examined the potential changes that the adaptation to the virtual medium introduced to diplomatic practice: what lessons did diplomats draw from their recent experience, and what areas of diplomatic activity might benefit from the transition to hybrid diplomacy? Third, we probed diplomats' willingness to complete the transition from digital adaptation to adoption and potentially to embrace hybrid diplomacy in the long term: how did they see the future of hybrid diplomacy in the post-pandemic period, and under what conditions could they see themselves combining face-to-face and virtual interactions in their work?

<sup>37</sup> Harry Eckstein, *Regarding politics: essays on political theory, stability, and change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 143.

## Diplomacy in the age of the pandemic

### *Experiencing virtual diplomacy*

The pandemic found most of the diplomats in our sample relatively well prepared to handle the shift from face-to-face to virtual meetings, arguably at least partly owing to the training programmes, including in digital media, introduced by the two previous stages of digital adaptation. About 40 per cent of responders claimed to have an expert level of digital skills in using social media and 47 per cent an intermediate level; only 12.4 per cent of responders ranked themselves at the basic level. While thorough institutional training on how to use virtual conferencing applications was offered to only 10 per cent of the diplomats in our sample, the vast majority (73 per cent) nevertheless found it fairly easy to master the settings necessary for conducting virtual meetings, whether they took place on Zoom (33 per cent), Teams (27 per cent), Webex (25 per cent) or other platforms (15 per cent). Moreover, participants felt that the transition to the virtual medium did not affect their ability to engage with their peers. Roughly equal percentages (17–18 per cent) felt less/more confident speaking online, while 65 per cent felt equally confident participating in both physical and virtual environments.

Importantly, responses to our survey confirmed that the transition to virtual meetings was abrupt and intense, as one would expect given the shock produced by the pandemic. Seventy per cent of the diplomats in our sample had attended more than 25 virtual meetings in the preceding six months, taking part in both bilateral and multilateral meetings. The purpose of these meetings varied: 34 per cent focused on matters of internal management, 30 per cent were policy-related, 21 per cent involved professional networking, while the remaining 15 per cent covered other issues. Regardless of the goal of the virtual meetings they attended, diplomats expressed relatively high levels of satisfaction with the use of video-conference platforms. On a scale from 1 (not useful) to 5 (very useful), they rated virtual meetings as high as 3.80 for their role in assisting them to fulfil their functions and activities. As one of the responders confessed, ‘If it weren’t for the virtual environment, day-to-day work would have largely remained in halt.’<sup>38</sup> Another participant was even more appreciative of the change: ‘As now all meetings moved to video platforms, I have a unique opportunity to take part in meetings in the three more countries where I am non-residing ambassador.’<sup>39</sup>

When asked to compare their participation in physical and virtual meetings, responders expressed mixed views about the ability of video-conference platforms to convey a similar sense of social presence in their interactions. Among the interactive features offered by virtual platforms, polling questions and breakout rooms were less used, while the chat application proved the most popular. The use of interactive features has implications for how well diplomats are able to perform their functions in the virtual medium. Notably, 53 per cent of respondents stated that they could ‘read’ a virtual room (e.g. work out who is paying attention to

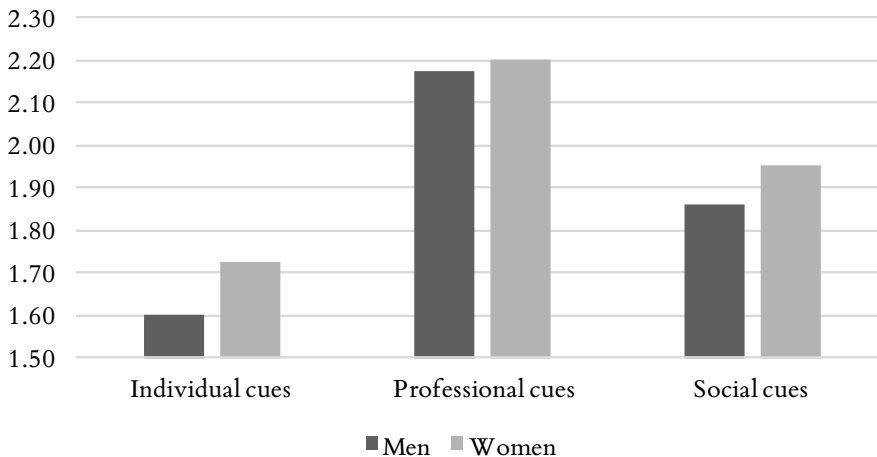
<sup>38</sup> Survey response, 20 Jan. 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Survey response, 1 Dec. 2020.

the discussion, what issues resonate with whom) and thus understand their peers' stance on the issues being debated. That said, being able to read the room depended on several factors. For example, respondents noted that when participants blocked their cameras, their reactions could no longer be gauged. Moreover, blocking the camera was interpreted as a sign that a participant was multitasking and therefore not fully engaged in the meeting. Diplomats also stated that 'reading' a virtual room was easiest in small settings. The larger the meeting, the less a diplomat would be able to pick up on peers' non-verbal signs.

As diplomats continued testing the communicational capabilities of the virtual platforms, they developed their own techniques to help them improve their digital experience, often through a process of trial and error. Non-verbal signalling is a case in point (see figure 1). Asked to rate such signals on a scale from 1 (not important) to 3 (very important), respondents agreed that virtual interaction would particularly be enhanced by participants displaying professional cues (institutional affiliation, rank, area of expertise) on their screens. In contrast, social (country, communication style) or individual cues (age, appearance, dress style) were considered to be much less relevant for facilitating online conversations, especially by men. Diplomats' ability to improve their digital experience substantially informed their views regarding the contribution that virtual platforms made to their work. As shown in table 1, the more immersed diplomats felt in the virtual medium, the more positive the views they developed about the work they accomplished online. This is an important finding, but it invites the question of what else, aside from technical conditions and interactive features, may facilitate virtual engagement and thus increase the effectiveness of virtual meetings. This topic will be explored in the next section.

**Figure 1: Rating of non-verbal cues to facilitate virtual engagement, on a scale of 1 (not important) to 3 (very important), by gender**



**Table 1: The relationship between virtual immersion and perceptions of usefulness of online meetings**

Rating of usefulness of virtual meetings (1 = low, 5 = excellent)	Level of immersion		
	<i>I am usually fairly active in online meetings</i>	<i>I follow online conversations reasonably well</i>	<i>I often find it difficult to follow online meetings</i>
1			1
2		4	4
3	4	12	11
4	9	25	6
5	11	15	
<i>Total</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>22</i>

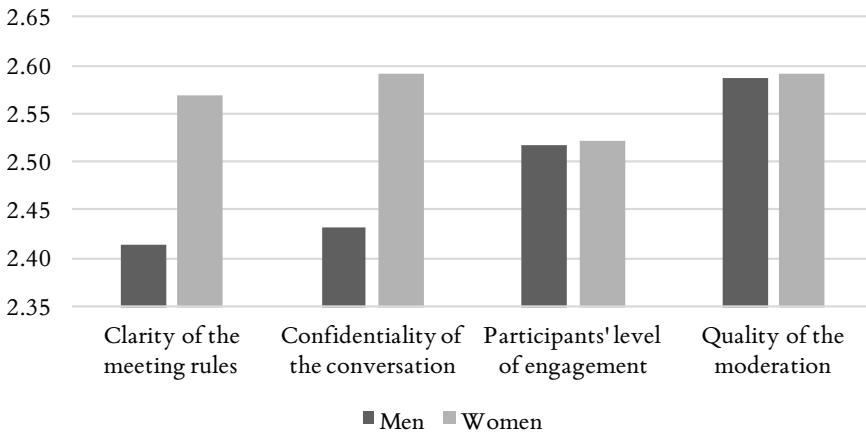
*Lessons learned*

When asked ‘What makes a virtual meeting successful?’, respondents mentioned three types of factors: technical, procedural and substantive. On the *technical side*, stable and secure internet connections as well as active participation were viewed as the main contributing factors. Connectivity issues, such as the inability to enter the meeting or to stay connected for the duration of the meeting, or the low quality of image and sound, tended to undermine the effectiveness of virtual meetings. Security concerns over awkward intrusions and unauthorized participants also hindered the discussion of sensitive issues. ‘Zoom fatigue’, a phrase used by several diplomats to describe a seemingly endless sequence of online meetings over the course of a single day, also reduced the efficacy of virtual meetings as diplomats became disengaged and lowered their level of participation in discussions. Importantly, respondents stated that virtual efficacy rested on the duration of meetings, with brief meetings working best. That said, only 21 per cent of respondents stated that they could not follow a virtual discussion, while 79 per cent stated they found virtual meetings reasonably immersive in that they were not easily distracted during the meeting.

*Procedural matters* constituted a second category of factors that influenced the success rate of virtual meetings. As might be expected in the adaptation stage, diplomats stated that they faced a challenge in learning new protocols, as the conduct of virtual meetings did not necessarily mirror that of offline meetings: the order of speakers, the amount of time allocated for each speaker and even the mechanism for responding to comments made by others all had to be learned ‘on the go’. Informality was praised as one of the added benefits of virtual meetings. This may not be surprising as diplomatic protocol often favours larger or more

dominant states in offline meetings, while virtual informality tends to create a more level playing-field. When asked to rank the importance of a range of technical and procedural factors, respondents stated that good moderation was the key factor to ensure the success of online meetings, even more important than active participation, although confidentiality and the clarity of the meeting rules were particularly highly valued by women (see figure 2).

**Figure 2: Rating of factors perceived to increase the effectiveness of virtual meetings, on a scale of 1 (not important) to 3 (very important), by gender**



More critically, diplomats noted that virtual meetings favoured a dynamic that was somewhat detrimental to advancing issues on the negotiation agenda and to building relationships. As one participant pointed out, ‘Conversations can be very directed, very linear. There is no opportunity for the kind of discussion or negotiation that happens on the side-lines of meetings.’<sup>40</sup> By creating fewer opportunities for diplomats to engage in unofficial talks via ‘corridor conversations’, the virtual medium presumably constrains their ability to creatively explore shared ways of resolving pressing issues, an approach that is particularly relevant in multilateral forums. Furthermore, relationships built virtually are perceived to be mostly superficial, as creating new ties, and building trust opposite new peers, is much harder in virtual settings. As another responder acknowledged, ‘Informal discussions and networking over coffee breaks have disappeared. This means that it is harder to create bonds with people that you are not as familiar with.’<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Survey response, 25 Nov. 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Survey response, 5 Nov. 2020.

**Table 2: The relationship between the purpose of online meetings and perceptions of their usefulness**

Purpose of virtual meetings	Rating of usefulness (1 = low, 5 = excellent)					Total
	1	2	3	4	5	
Internal management	1	5	17	18	15	56
Professional networking				6	1	7
Public diplomacy					1	1
Trade promotion			1			1
Policy development		3	2	10	1	16
<i>Total</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>81</i>

From a *substantive perspective* (see table 2), respondents strongly supported the use of virtual meetings to continue routine diplomatic work (e.g. weekly embassy meetings), intra-organizational decision-making within the MFA (e.g. information-sharing, briefings), policy formulation via small working groups focused on advancing a specific policy issue, and remote participation in multi-lateral and regional events. Surprisingly, public diplomacy and trade promotion, on the other hand, were viewed as less amenable to being managed via virtual meetings. This might be explained by the fact that these two issues were not top priorities for MFAs during the pandemic. Predictably, junior diplomats, who generally enjoy high levels of digital literacy, found it easier to adapt to virtual meetings and to articulate the possible benefits of virtual meetings.

Respondents were less enthusiastic, on the other hand, about using virtual meetings for conducting negotiations, on the grounds that these require modes of social interaction that are not available online. As one diplomat pointed out, 'In high-level meetings of negotiations it is crucial to have face-to-face meetings because a lot of work is going on behind the scenes.'<sup>42</sup> Responders also stated that the use of virtual meetings for negotiations, or high-level policy issues, demanded increased levels of cyber security, which existing platforms such as Zoom or Teams might not be able to deliver to the level required. As noted above, finding the means through which diplomats may converse one to one before or after virtual meetings was deemed critically important. Respondents insisted that such side

<sup>42</sup> Survey response, 19 Nov. 2020.

conversations are essential for the negotiation and policy formation process. That said, negotiations that begin offline could potentially migrate to virtual settings at a later stage once a certain degree of trust between interlocutors is established. For example, diplomats may seek to start their negotiations face to face so that they can set the right direction and tone for what is to follow. They may then choose to engage in technical conversations online and fine-tune the remaining differences in high-level offline meetings. This is exactly what hybrid diplomacy is about.

### *Adoption prospects*

As the pandemic begins to subside, the stage of adaptation to the virtual medium, that is, the experimental phase during which MFAs have tried and tested virtual solutions to the inhibitions on offline activity caused by the spread of COVID-19, is also about to conclude. With physical, face-to-face diplomacy slowly returning in bilateral and multilateral settings, the key question that comes to the fore is whether diplomats are able or willing to go beyond adaptation and formally adopt hybrid diplomacy by combining physical and virtual interactions in a more systematic fashion in their work. If so, what conditions may facilitate this transition?

We find that our respondents can be classified into three camps. Echoing some of the findings in Bramsen and Hagemann's article,<sup>43</sup> the *pessimists* doubt that hybrid diplomacy has a future as they see little added value in virtual meetings. As indicated in table 2 above, almost 10 per cent of our sample ranked the usefulness of virtual meetings as low or very low (that is, one or two on a five-point scale). They argued that the absence of 'corridor talks' prevented meaningful interactions; that there were fewer opportunities to network with peers through side conversations; that there were more distractions in the form of technical difficulties or participants who turn their cameras and microphones on and off; and that relationship-building, a core function of diplomacy, was hardly possible in virtual settings. As one of the responders noted, in the absence of physical meetings 'diplomacy loses its purpose—to create close contacts, get confidential information, deal in the shadow'.<sup>44</sup> In the same vein, another diplomat remarked that without face-to-face meetings, diplomacy becomes 'less effective, as we have been stripped of the social component of diplomatic practice, which is one of our core tools'.<sup>45</sup> That being said, the depth of opposition to virtual meetings should not be overstated. When asked to give an example of how virtual meetings helped them with their diplomatic work, only 5 respondents out of 100 plainly stated that virtual meetings were a poor substitute for offline diplomacy.

The *optimists*, on the other hand, believe that virtual meetings may evolve and come to play a substantial role in advancing hybrid diplomacy. About 22 per cent in our sample ranked the usefulness of virtual meetings for diplomatic work as very

<sup>43</sup> Bramsen and Hagemann, 'The missing sense of peace'.

<sup>44</sup> Survey response, 19 Nov. 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Survey response, 20 Jan. 2021.

high (five on a five-point scale). These diplomats felt that virtual meetings became more effective over time, ‘once everybody learned the new tools and codes’,<sup>46</sup> a sentiment consistent with passage through the adaptation stage, in which diplomats learn to use new technologies through trial and error. These respondents also found concrete benefits in virtual meetings: they saved time (especially in multilateral hubs, where diplomats can spend hours travelling from one location to another), made it easier to communicate with national capitals and missions in other cities, and helped mainstream the multilateral agenda by focusing more ‘on the substance and content to be addressed’ rather than on ‘fanfare, ceremonial aspects and protocol’.<sup>47</sup> Several respondents also stated that virtual meetings enabled embassies to continue public and cultural diplomacy activities even in times of social isolation. For some, virtual meetings offered remote participation in diplomatic summits, a feature most likely to benefit smaller states with limited resources. Others noted that virtual meetings enabled them to communicate easily with peers in the region and jointly promote regional foreign policies.

The remaining segment of respondents can be assigned to the *undecided* camp, those having mixed views about the future of hybrid diplomacy, either slightly optimistic (40 per cent) or slightly pessimistic (24 per cent), and preferring to adopt a ‘wait and see’ attitude. One possible explanation is that those who are undecided see virtual meetings as a balancing act. As one responder noted, ‘A mix of the current experience with previous physical meetings would be positive. Before, we travelled too much—now too little ... there have to be physical meetings—especially to establish relationships [which] can be followed by virtual meetings.’<sup>48</sup> The view arising from this perspective is that, on the one hand, diplomats could continue meeting online to pursue shared goals; but, on the other hand, a lack of clear objectives, long meetings and large settings reduce the efficacy of virtual meetings. While virtual meetings save time, they limit diplomats’ ability to build or strengthen relationships with peers. Also, while virtual meetings ensure that the mechanisms of routine diplomacy keep functioning, they are potentially less confidential and thus less useful for facilitating substantive discussions on sensitive topics. As one of the undecided diplomats concluded, ‘We can’t judge the effect just yet, we are under very specific circumstances that must be taken into account. However, “Zoom diplomacy” is here to stay.’<sup>49</sup>

When asked what technological features might improve the effectiveness of virtual meetings, most respondents focused on better internet connectivity and better security. Others, who were slightly more practically orientated, spoke of the need for automatic translation into UN members’ languages, as well as improvement of participants’ digital skills. A few others still, mostly junior diplomats, favoured the creation of a more stimulating and immersive environment through the possible use of virtual reality apps such as 360-degree virtual spaces or even 3D holograms. These answers are all indicative of hybrid diplomacy slowly

<sup>46</sup> Survey response, 18 Nov. 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Survey response, 4 Nov. 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Survey response, 12 Nov. 2020.

<sup>49</sup> Survey response, 5 Nov. 2020.



moving towards digital adoption as diplomats are actively reflecting on how to make physical and virtual integration more effective in their work, for example, through standardization (UN languages), training (better digital skills) and greater interactivity (virtual reality). As has been the case with the previous two waves of digital adoption, confirmation that MFAs were formally embracing hybrid diplomacy would come in the establishment of training programmes, the drafting of digital hybrid strategies, the negotiation of intra-institutional mechanisms of coordination and the design of codes of digital practice to be shared across all embassies.

## **Theoretical reflections**

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about the third wave of digital adaptation, which has obliged MFAs to improvise and develop solutions that can substitute virtual engagement via video-conference platforms for face-to-face, physical diplomacy. Crucially, this third wave of digital adaptation does not imply that virtual meetings will come to replace and eliminate physical interactions. Yet virtual meetings are likely to integrate with, complement and empower physical, face-to-face diplomacy. Our results suggest that diplomats have already started the transition towards a model of 'hybrid diplomacy' that merges virtual meetings with offline, face-to-face diplomacy. Through virtual meetings, routine embassy functions may be maintained even in times of crisis; small working groups may collaborate virtually, regional policies may be jointly pursued, and negotiations that begin offline can, at a later stage, migrate to virtual settings.

The survey responses offer a complex and fascinating picture of the issues that diplomats have experienced during the transition to the virtual medium; the technical, procedural and substantive lessons they have drawn from this experience; and the level of confidence they have developed in the future of hybrid diplomacy in the post-pandemic period. The emerging picture shows that diplomats have managed to adapt reasonably well to the virtual medium. The transition from adaptation to adoption has thus made a promising beginning, but is nevertheless yet to happen in full. The survey responses also highlight a series of challenges the process of digital adoption is likely to face once it begins to accelerate; so it is important to have a theoretical discussion of the possible conditions that may influence the trajectory of digital adoption and its rate of success. We focus our attention here on two key dimensions, technological and social adoption, and discuss the influence these two conditions may have on MFAs' efforts to embrace hybrid diplomacy in their future work.

The crux of the matter for many respondents to our survey is that technology can only take you so far. Direct human interaction may be difficult, if not impossible, to replace, they argue, owing to obstacles to establishing the level of trust necessary to sustain diplomatic engagement. As Holmes and Wheeler insist, social bonding primarily relies on face-to-face communication, and the possibility of

reading and understanding the non-verbal signals of one's interlocutors.<sup>50</sup> That being said, it is not entirely clear whether the problem of trust-building is a matter intrinsically connected to technology or rather to how well the technology is used. Social presence studies suggest the answer is somewhere in the middle. Social presence, or the feeling of being there with a 'real' person, was first conceptualized by Short and colleagues, and was defined as the salience of the people interacting and their interpersonal relationships during a mediated conversation. Short and his colleagues argued that some media were better than others at increasing the feeling of connectedness between communicators, thus suggesting that social presence was a 'quality of the medium itself'.<sup>51</sup>

A recent review of 233 separate findings from 152 studies has investigated the key factors (immersive qualities, contextual differences and individual psychological traits) that determine the level of social presence experienced. It found that immersion (achieved through, for example, audio and video quality, interactivity) and context (e.g. physical proximity, identity cues and the personality/traits of the virtual human) both have a positive effect on social presence, whereas demographic characteristics (age, gender) were inconclusive.<sup>52</sup> These findings align well with some of the responses to our survey, such as the importance of professional cues in enhancing virtual interaction (see figure 1), and the connection between interactivity and diplomats developing positive views about the effectiveness of virtual meetings (see table 1). In other words, the effectiveness of virtual communication depends not only on the technical properties of the supporting platforms, but also on how skilfully they are used. Sustained and creative practice is therefore the key ingredient of the success of hybrid diplomacy, alongside the intrinsic properties of the technology.

A second prevailing consideration that many diplomats in our sample shared referred to the unique nature of diplomacy as a profession. For some, 'real' diplomacy can only be physical, with diplomats ceremoniously meeting, face to face, in specially designated venues, to discuss serious matters, preferably 'behind closed doors'. Virtual meetings, by contrast, project to some an air of superficiality, excessive transparency and awkward informality, which dilutes or even removes the layer of sobriety and professionalism that confers on diplomacy its special status. As one critic observed, 'virtual meetings are much more meaningless and open, their content is less sincere and productive'.<sup>53</sup> Another diplomat also wanted to make clear that 'there is no substitute for physical meetings. Virtual diplomacy is a necessity, not the ideal situation.'<sup>54</sup> The relegation of virtual meetings to a subordinate position relative to face-to-face interactions is not exclusively informed by

<sup>50</sup> Marcus Holmes and Nicholas J. Wheeler, 'Social bonding in diplomacy', *International Theory* 12: 1, 2020, pp. 133–61.

<sup>51</sup> John Short, Ederyn Williams and Bruce Christie, *The social psychology of telecommunications* (London and New York: Wiley, 1976), p. 65.

<sup>52</sup> Catherine S. Oh, Jeremy N. Bailenson and Gregory F. Welch, 'A systematic review of social presence: definition, antecedents, and implications', *Frontiers in Robotics and AI*, publ. online Oct. 2018, DOI: 10.3389/frobt.2018.00114, p. 25.

<sup>53</sup> Survey response, 20 Nov. 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Survey response, 3 Nov. 2020.

instrumental reasons, as discussed above. It is also inspired by deep-seated assumptions about the nature and status of the diplomatic profession.

The idea of privileging diplomacy as an exclusive face-to-face activity enjoys a long and venerable tradition. Cardinal Richelieu of France, who established the first modern foreign ministry in 1626, was adamant about the need for ‘continuous negotiations’ in foreign affairs, which could only be achieved, in his view, by having diplomatic agents everywhere and at all times.<sup>55</sup> More recently, the British diplomat Harold Nicolson insisted that improvements in the means of communication (in his time, the telegraph or telephone) did not alter the nature of the ambassador’s functions. According to him, ‘the best instrument at the disposal of a Government wishing to persuade another Government will always remain the *spoken* words of a decent man’.<sup>56</sup> The notion that diplomacy is fundamentally a physical profession has remained largely unchallenged to the present day—but perhaps not for much longer. Constantinou and colleagues have cautioned, for instance, against the ‘professional solipsism’ of equating diplomacy with whatever traditional methods deliver positive results. For them, it is the complementarity of skills, together with the fruitful combination of diverse types of knowledge, and the cultivation of innovation and creativity that drive diplomatic practice.<sup>57</sup>

Echoing Constantinou and his colleagues, Manor insightfully observed that diplomacy could be better practised if it were ‘imagined’ in the minds of diplomats<sup>58</sup> by removing the air of exoticism and unfamiliarity that novel approaches often inspire. One important finding of our study is that diplomats’ imaginary now includes virtual alongside physical meetings, and so a change of perspective is already under way. The idea that ‘real diplomacy’ can only be conducted face to face is clearly contested by diplomats in the optimistic and undecided camps. Furthermore, the debate has already moved on. The issue of concern for our responders is about identifying suitable combinations of virtual and physical interaction that can support diplomatic tasks and objectives, rather than pondering on whether hybrid diplomacy is or is not ‘real’ diplomacy. Commenting on this issue, one diplomat in our sample anticipated, for instance, that ‘in the future, virtual meetings could be organised alternately with physical meetings and can be designed for preparation of physical meetings, for discussion of secondary issues in order to focus physical meetings only to the major topics’.<sup>59</sup>

Hybrid diplomacy, then, is here to stay; but its rate of adoption by MFAs will depend to a great extent on how they decide to tackle its technological and social dimensions. While stronger efforts are needed to help diplomats master the immersive features of virtual platforms, technology is unlikely to generate a similar level of social interaction as face-to-face meetings. However, the issue at

<sup>55</sup> Geoff R. Berridge, ‘Richelieu’, in Geoff R. Berridge, Maurice Keens-Soper and Thomas G. Otte, eds, *Diplomatic theory from Machiavelli to Kissinger* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 71–87.

<sup>56</sup> Harold Nicolson, *The evolution of the diplomatic method* (London: Cassell, 1954), p. 84 (emphasis added).

<sup>57</sup> Costas M. Constantinou, Noé Cornago and Fiona McConnell, ‘Transprofessional diplomacy’, *Brill Research Perspectives in Diplomacy and Foreign Policy* 1: 4, 2016, pp. 1–66.

<sup>58</sup> Ilan Manor, ‘Are we there yet: have MFAs realized the potential of digital diplomacy? Results from a cross-national comparison’, *Brill Research Perspectives in Diplomacy and Foreign Policy* 1: 2, 2016, p. 37.

<sup>59</sup> Survey response, 3 Nov. 2020.

stake is less about how genuine these interactions may feel, more about what types of bilateral or multilateral subject-matter can be effectively addressed virtually, and what others may require face-to-face interaction. Second, the privileging of face-to-face interaction as ‘real diplomacy’ at the expense of virtual engagement is likely to hold back the process of digital adoption, but perhaps not for long. The experience of the previous two waves of digital adoption could be instructive in this regard. In the same way in which the work done by digital diplomats in public diplomacy, crisis communication or strategic communication has gradually come to be seen as indispensable for achieving diplomatic objectives, hybrid diplomacy may also receive recognition for its contribution to advancing MFAs’ diplomatic strategies.

Also, and especially for the undecided camp, time is a central issue, and one influenced by the results of the previous two waves of digital adoption. These diplomats experienced the mass migration to social media a decade ago, the hyperbolic discourse surrounding the potential of social media to effect change in the international system, and the ultimate reduction of social media to a public diplomacy channel. Similarly, they recall the fear that struck MFAs when they first faced the effectiveness of digital disinformation and the amount of time that was necessary for MFAs to spend contending with this challenge. They may still recall how phrases such as ‘echo chambers’ and ‘targeted campaigns’ dominated diplomatic conversations, ultimately leading to a new *Zeitgeist* that viewed social media and digitalization with suspicion rather than euphoria. Thus, the undecided camp may be termed ‘digital vigilantes’—diplomats who are waiting for the dust to settle before they can more objectively assess the potential contribution to diplomacy of online platforms. For them, the pendulum is still swinging between the hyperbolic discourse of innovation and the deterministic discourse of digital cataclysm.

## Conclusions

As we have argued in this study, MFAs’ embrace of digital technologies is not a linear process in which diplomats continuously test, study and employ sophisticated technologies in an effort to incrementally improve the effectiveness of their strategies. Disruption in diplomatic settings follows a different pattern. We have distinguished between digital adaptation, a forced process brought about by external changes, and digital adoption, a strategic decision by MFAs to use specific technologies in the pursuit of specific goals. Adaptation aims to *capture* disruption through improvisation and experiment in an attempt to control its impact on diplomatic practice. Adoption, on the other hand, seeks to *tame* disruption through the establishment of new working routines, the acquisition of new skills and the creation of new units dedicated to mastering new technologies.

Notably, our results suggest that diplomacy is still in the process of digital adaptation. Guidebooks have yet to be issued, best practices have yet to be identified and special training has yet to be offered by foreign ministries. Meanwhile,

over the past months, physical diplomacy has slowly returned to the fore, with foreign secretaries meeting at global summits, world leaders addressing the UN General Assembly, and NATO ministers meeting to coordinate actions and policies, thus demonstrating the growing role that ‘hybrid diplomacy’ plays in international affairs. The question on diplomats’ minds is not the Shakespearian ‘To Zoom or not to Zoom?’ but ‘When is it best to Zoom?’, as suggested by the results displayed in table 2. We conclude by suggesting that *hybrid diplomacy* may be more than a new method; it could actually constitute a new phase in diplomacy, in which the digital does not compete with or replace offline diplomacy, but rather augments it. Put differently, the third stage of digital adoption may be informed by the two previous waves, which have proved that digital diplomacy cannot be separated from offline diplomacy. Offline events shape the trajectory of digitalization, while digital tools are used to influence offline processes—such as using Zoom to continue negotiations during a global pandemic.

Future studies should seek to examine whether hybrid diplomacy advances differently in different diplomatic settings. While in the past MFAs have led the process of digital adoption, which then permeated into multilateral organizations, in the case of hybrid diplomacy the opposite may be true: it was virtual meetings that enabled multilateral organizations, such as the WHO, to coordinate action on a global scale at a time of quarantine and social distancing. Studies may also seek to examine how hybrid diplomacy affects the dynamics of international negotiations. While the previous two stages of digital adoption have primarily influenced the diplomatic function of communication and to a lesser extent that of representation, the main contribution of hybrid diplomacy will likely be in the realm of negotiations. Yet little is known at this stage about how hybrid diplomacy may influence negotiation tactics (information-sharing, coalition-building, backchannelling, etc.), and what configurations of hybrid diplomacy may prove most instrumental for the success of negotiations.