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Social Media Influencers and Diplomacy's Evolution

Diplomacy is the conduct and management of international affairs according to a foreign policy, with instruments based on negotiation and exchange. It is a social practice through which states interact with other states and new actors.¹ As the international system has expanded to include oversight of more issues—such as the global economy, poverty, pandemics, and climate change—the number of actors involved has increased. The plurality of topics at issue multiplies the voices, the attribution of legitimacy, and the desire to influence the outcome of international debates. At the same time, digitalization has affected the basic definitions of authority, power and influence. Diplomats, journalists, and governments now compete for audience attention on a wide range of issues in a hybrid political and media system. Audience fragmentation coincides with the low credibility of the media, the emergence of personalized channels (instant messaging, social networks), and the digitalization of communication. The impact on global communication is immediate.

It is a moment of disruption in the diplomatic world. Celebrities can give their opinion on political and diplomatic issues, influencing the shape of public opinion. But anonymous citizens can also become authoritative voices by creating exclusive videos or original narratives. In the case of Israel-Palestine, the absence of independent journalists on the ground has multiplied the visibility

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of local influencers who broadcast their lives in real time, without filters. These influencers often serve to inform, documenting pain and human rights violations, but they can also serve to disinform, as creators of misinformation. Influencers are sources of open-source intelligence—or obfuscation.

These new actors, voices, and mediums are weaving their way into a traditional tapestry of diplomats, international politicians, multilateral organizations, and foreign ministries. Diplomacy has been effective in fostering peaceful resolutions, building alliances, and promoting mutual understanding between nations. Politics and power now hybridize professional and amateur communication campaigns and strategies. The dynamics favor a 24/7 connection with the audience without the mediation of fact checkers or a formal news industry. There is show, spectacle, and a combination of public and private channels, which allows the use of memes, emojis, and other communication techniques outside more traditional written, verbal, and imagery cues. Governments can now use this hybrid logic to distribute their narratives. Without the formality of institutional communication or the rigorous gatekeeping of traditional journalism, politicians and diplomats can now engage in real-time debates or redistribute disinformation. But it also comes with certain risks, such as becoming embroiled in potential controversies which governments cannot control, offending cultural sensitivities, and raising ethical considerations which diplomats must carefully consider. There is also the risk that authoritarian governments win in this new digital “Wild West.” Without adequate counterweights or the burden of democratic norms, authoritarian regimes can introduce their narratives in the digital scenario. If it’s not obvious, they are already capitalizing on it; Argentina can be seen as a prime example of this attitude.

Diplomats, spies, foreign correspondents, NGOs, local journalists, and politicians must now learn to coexist with these new online influencers. Their voices are more powerful than they used to be, and although we do not yet quite understand the extent of their power, we cannot underestimate their ability to impact the agenda. They often act as activists and spokespersons for political causes. At other times, they are creators of disinformation, whether in the pay of authoritarian regimes or not. In short, the diplomatic world is learning—in real time and via continuous digital exposure—to converse with, persuade, dissuade, or model these influencers and their tactics. So how does diplomacy function in this new world?

Who Wants to be an Influencer?

Influence is not simply acquired by possessing a digital audience, but is an aggregate of authority, capacity, legitimacy, and status. This new role of digital

influencers in a hybrid political-media environment represents a substantial doorway to elevate celebrity diplomacy, a long-established diplomatic tactic. Celebrity diplomats have long promoted campaigns and guided public opinion (AIDS concerts, goodwill ambassadors, etc.) based on their reputations and long-standing careers. However, today's digital celebrities, the so-called influencers, do not necessarily come just from traditional entertainment businesses like music and film, but often carry weight in the digital worlds themselves, operating through memes, online performances, and other digital content creation. Instagram, TikTok, Twitch, and other platforms create their own celebrities who most readers probably have never heard of despite their global audience. It is not appropriate to expect journalistic professional standards like objectivity and veracity from those who do not identify themselves as journalists or reporters—and have not been trained as such—but as content creators for their audiences.

Digital influencers have become important actors in the media and political ecosystem, and not just for their entertainment value. The generations who developed and came of age in the new influencer culture also experienced conflict and global affairs through this lens, especially considering that many contemporary conflicts have coincided with the rise of social media. For example, Facebook and Twitter played a critical role in elevating the Arab Spring to the world.² However, there remains some debate as to whether the contribution of social media was in organizing protests or in facilitating information-sharing with the world from the then-newly dubbed “citizen journalists.” Understanding the Open Society Foundation’s definition of a “citizen journalist” as someone who collects, reports, and disseminates information and tends to participate in the story, it becomes clear that today’s digital influencers on the frontlines of conflict and political issues can fit this definition. People creating and distributing information using digital platforms present a challenge to legacy media. The traditional value of the press has been its ability to define the agenda, to filter information, or to point out political priorities. These functions of access and gatekeeping have vanished.

The traditional media functions of access and gatekeeping have vanished

This is the key to the new diplomacy. People outside traditional political or diplomatic activity now have an impact on public opinion and force governments to explain policies in digital semiotic language, complicating the traditional channels of diplomacy. The influencer has a legitimacy of their own, not dependent on governments or newspapers, and has gained credibility with the audience because of their amateurism (real or fake), or their direct dependence on the audience and not on politicians or advertisers. In fact, the amateurism and activist

enthusiasm is a value, if not a sign of distinction, for the audience due to the overall lack of trust in formal institutions. Governments do not know how to, or cannot, respond to this culture of digital amateurism.

Hot-button issues, from wars to immigration, generate polarized debates and radical positions. Influencers in the polarization business post quick, unverified and emotional comments. There is no time for nuance or corrections. Radical discourse circulates at high speed, whether true or false. Diplomats cannot counter disinformation because they lack the material means (verification or on-the-ground activity) and have no audience of their own, but must bend to political activity or the pace of journalistic news. For example, The British Conservative government's decision to fund influencer campaigns on TikTok in February 2024 to explain the risks of crossing the English Channel was part of a broader strategy to address the growing issue of dangerous, unauthorized migrant crossings.³ In recent years, thousands of people, mostly from conflict zones and economically distressed regions, have attempted to cross the Channel from France to the United Kingdom in small, often overcrowded boats, risking their lives in the process. The government subcontracted influencers to distribute some messages. The Home Office reportedly paid \$675,000 for campaigns targeting Albania, Egypt, Iraq, Vietnam, Türkiye and India. It remains to be seen if these digital actions were enough to reduce the promotion of illegal routes and smugglers.

Herein lies another complexity for the diplomatic response. The influencer generates their authority and audience based on a sociodemographic segment or set of interests but maintains some perceived legitimacy to give opinions on any matter of public interest. For example, Kim Kardashian is an activist for Armenian culture and heritage. On her social networks, she shares the baptism of her children in the Yerevan Cathedral, visits the national archives, tells the story of her grandparents, or visits different memorials. But her engagement advances into other more controversial political spaces. Kim and her sisters are activists for the recognition of the Armenian cause (e.g., the qualification of genocide) and the war with neighboring Azerbaijan. These political causes are mixed with the sale of their products, personal photographs, or superficial comments. This is how hybridizations between the public and the private, the professional and the amateur, the serious and the amusing, take place.

How can a diplomat articulate a sustainable response to a celebrity who mixes issues, narratives, seriousness, and modeling? Kardashian's celebrity jumps from one topic to another, while the diplomat has to go by a playbook. The rapid nature of message proliferation impacts the effectiveness of diplomatic priorities. Exposing audiences to key messaging faster can decrease the resources necessary for any particularly diplomatic strategy. Immediate negative feedback can also act as a check on strategy, increasing the risk for widespread negative reactions which require further effort and resources to retract and repair messaging.

In authoritarian regimes, political influencers legitimize the official discourse, bypass mainstream journalism, and simulate an open public sphere. In Russia, the so-called “Z-bloggers” support Putinism by broadcasting exclusive images from the front in Ukraine or touting the advantages of enlistment. They call themselves journalists, but frequently distribute fake videos on the social media and instant messaging network Telegram. Their success is widespread—and not only among young audiences—so much so that President Putin has received a group of them for a two-hour conversation to thank them for their contribution.⁴

While authoritarian regimes may exploit influencers for propaganda, the rise of grassroots influencers in conflict zones, such as the war in Ukraine, highlights the positive side of this trend, where individuals can directly shape narratives and raise morale among supporters. Search “#ukrainewar” on TikTok and you may find a handful of Ukrainian soldiers dancing to James Brown’s classic “I Feel Good” on a side road. Meanwhile, Ukrainian tour guide Olena Gnes turned her Ukrainian tourism page into daily updates at the onset of Putin’s invasion.⁵

Such trends are not exclusive to the Ukrainian war zone. In Gaza, the content creator Medo Halimy narrates his ordinary life to an audience of 200,000 daily followers, cooking, washing clothes, or walking through the refugee camp.⁶ The Mohammed and Omar Show (@omarherzshow) on Instagram chronicles the “ordinary” lives of two young Gazan boys within the war zone. Global public opinion is not prepared to see war through the eyes of its participants and victims. The convergence between personalized content, Instagram photos, and news sources blurs the boundaries between news and entertainment. Disintermediation facilitates a casual view of reality, the convergence of genres (information, entertainment, documentation), and the distribution of disinformation in equal proportion. Even as diplomats and spies argue about how to classify these sources, the audience has no time—or interest—in checking their reliability.

Digital and social media are now mainstream media. The audience produces and consumes through screens, without a clear differentiation between content creator and consumer. As more people have moved and will continue to move to digital platforms for ease and speed, they seek their news through and from them. What was understood as a pathway to more traditional news sources digitally a decade ago has become a destination for news seekers and eventually a platform to distribute information (or disinformation) and disguise it as news. In some ways, traditional news outfits have accepted these platforms as the

Grassroots influencers in conflict zones can positively shape narratives and raise morale

way contemporary consumers prefer to obtain their information and have tweaked their distribution strategies accordingly.⁷ The Reuters Institute, for example, suggests that media organizations have adapted their strategies and digital narratives to regain audience trust, especially among young audiences.⁸ Softer formats are identified, news is distributed with a more informal tone, and independent content producers are added. New platforms (TikTok, Discord, Snapchat), formats (Instagram Reels or YouTube Shorts) and media personalities do attract young people. As audiences have been pulled from conventional news to social media platforms—often threatening, if not eliminating other traditional sources—news is coming full circle to join the world of digital influencers. Will diplomats follow? Should they?

Professional “critical distance” is what distinguishes traditional diplomats from influencers

Case Studies of Influencers in Diplomatic Affairs

The lack of traditional professional “critical distance” from the subject is what distinguishes traditional diplomacy and influencer culture. Diplomats take distance from what they see. They are not partisan, but act with a certain degree of objectivity. Amateurism is not acceptable. Influencers, on the other

hand, are not beholden to these same principles. To explore the range of outcomes that can occur when influencers take on diplomatic functions, we examine six case studies. The first two are driven by individuals’ own motives; the remaining four are cases of state and government interests employing influencer mechanisms.

These six case studies also illustrate the great problem for states: no particular outcome is guaranteed. In some cases, governments contract known influencers to promote specific messages in exchange for payment. Despite such a hierarchical structure, governments maintain little control over how influencers’ promotional campaigns will be received by the public, bringing efficacy into question. Furthermore, one must consider the role of authenticity in this dynamic. Social media influencers who maintain some level of trust with their public audience also knowingly operate as paid actors promoting foreign narratives. Is the audience looking for content that reinforces their point of view? How can a diplomat counter the viewpoint of someone determined to believe otherwise? What is clear throughout these cases, regardless of the type of influencers and state actors involved, is that the unaffiliated public is the intended audience central to influencer strategies of diplomacy.

Nas Daily: One Minute Videos to Change the World

Influencers are able to act as cultural bridges, introducing people from different countries and cultures to each other, helping to foster a sense of understanding between them. Nas Daily, a popular social media influencer, travels to different countries to showcase their culture, history, and interesting facts through his videos, ultimately creating moments of cross-cultural understanding. What began as a goal to create 1,000 daily one-minute educational videos has now captured a global audience of over 4 million followers open to imbibing information about other cultures and countries. Part of his success is rooted in the short and catchy nature of his clips, as well as the social media algorithms that amplify this type of content. Daily reaches individuals who were not necessarily seeking out this specific information or his specific page, but who the algorithm assessed would like it. As an Arab-Israeli, he has used his platform to discuss topics ranging from complex international affairs, like advocating to bring people together to resolve the conflict between Israel and Palestine, while also providing quick details on interesting national policies, like Grenada's lack of an army.

While his videos may spur followers to travel to certain destinations, they do not contain a consistent call to action. Instead, the goal is to bring different kinds of people together. Building public understanding of others can ultimately help to reduce tensions between countries and can even lead to advocacy for diplomatic solutions.⁹ Daily thus wields influence in ways that range from measurable to soft power. He brought attention to endeavors to eradicate tropical diseases, including the efforts of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to eliminate African river blindness.¹⁰ His videos aim not to sway international lawmakers but to change how people view specific issues—such as Israel-Palestine—thus impacting rhetoric and personal opinions. Through his platform, Nas Daily has built a community of people from different backgrounds who come together to appreciate and learn about each other's cultures. The existence of this community generates opportunities for diplomacy. Educational videos are distributed, spaces for conversation and trust are generated, classes and formal education can incorporate this content, and the news agenda can be influenced. The commitment to the video community cannot be built on propaganda, but on building a space for accelerating cultural relations (language or culture courses), improving communication (information or interviews with leaders), and promoting issues relevant to each foreign affairs ministry.

Celebrity Involvement in the Israel-Palestine Conflict

While Nas Daily seeks to elicit cultural understanding, the discourse around the decades-long conflict between Israel and Palestine has long drawn attention from diplomats, lawmakers, companies and academia. More recently, however, more

prominent international pop culture celebrities with personal connections to the region have spoken out on their stances via social media as well as traditional media. Model Bella Hadid has been relatively open on her Instagram account about her support of Palestine, calling attention to colonization practices by the state of Israel.¹¹ Her social media comments around the conflict began garnering attention in 2021 after she attended a pro-Palestine march in New York City.¹²

Despite public backlash which has reportedly cost her friendships and work opportunities due to her outspokenness, Bella Hadid has continued to share information and educate her followers about the conflict, as well as join her sister Gigi, also a model, in donating their Fashion Week earnings to support refugees of Palestine and Ukraine.¹³ While both Hadid sisters have triggered public discourse around a contentious issue, in doing so they have also delivered information to more than 59 million followers worldwide who were not necessarily seeking out such content when visiting the Hadids' pages. Unlike politicians or diplomats, celebrities' comments have caught the attention of imperative voices, forcing commentary—though not necessarily constructive—from both US Senator Ted Cruz and the son of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu on the world stage of social media platforms.¹⁴

The Hadid sisters represent only part of the celebrity influence on the issue of Israel-Palestine. Movie star Gal Gadot, who was born in Israel and served in the Israel Defense Force, has also spoken out about the problem from a different perspective. Following a rise in violence between Israel and Palestine in 2021, Gadot posted on her Instagram about her anguish and desire for Israel “to live as a free and safe nation.”¹⁵ Though Gadot's remarks on the issue have not been as frequent or as activist in nature as Bella Hadid's, her voice on this issue also reaches over 100 million followers. By virtue of their fame, both stars also draw significant social media engagement and conventional media attention. Without engaging in conventional diplomatic avenues, both Gadot and the Hadids elevate the issue and their perspectives on it to a global audience, bringing awareness of a certain kind to the general public and capturing the attention of media. Such earned media presence captures the eyes of public figures, allowing them to capitalize and respond strategically—if they have the presence of mind to do so.

Saudi Arabia: A Tale of Uneven Blowback

While the first two cases are both examples of social influencers taking their own initiative, states can also employ influencers for their own purposes. Saudi Arabia has increasingly used public relations campaigns to boost its soft power influence, most notably in attracting tourist visas.¹⁶ One such campaign endorsed travel to

Saudi Arabia for a 2019 music festival, paying influencers to attend and tout their experience just one year after the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi by his own government.¹⁷ As a public relations campaign, however, it was not especially successful, leading to considerable backlash.

Soon after influencers posted from Saudi Arabia, others who were offered the opportunity but declined due to the regime's poor human rights record criticized the paid influencers and Saudi Arabia's effort to erase its record from the collective memory. Influencers and influencer accounts—from model and author Emily Ratajkowski to fashion Instagram account Diet Prada—called out the mercenary nature of the industry and affirmed their support for women's rights and LGBTQ communities, as well as for freedom of the press.¹⁸ Much of the backlash was directed at the influencers who accepted payment to post messages in line with Saudi state narratives about “social evolution” in the country.¹⁹ While the celebrity status of many of those criticized for posting has since waned for various reasons, media coverage of the scandal did not blame Saudi Arabia itself for embarking on a strategic public relations campaign to distract from their human rights record.

In some respect, this seems to demonstrate that social media influencers can unwittingly absorb criticism while shielding their state clients. Yet, while some influencers who see an opportunity to earn income and enjoy a music festival must weigh the potential for blowback, the state apparatus also weighs costs and benefits. The non-financial cost to the state, however, seemed to be low in the case of the music festival backlash. If criticism is directed toward those accepting payment for campaigns, and not the states offering it, the blowback for said state is ultimately minimal. Feeling safe from public criticism, this could further encourage states to attempt such practices. It begs the question: Who accepts risk when influencers conduct public relations campaigns on behalf of states?

States can also employ influencers for their own purposes

K-Pop Stars, A Key Korean Cultural Asset

States have also used influencers to accomplish other objectives. K-pop music, and the stars and culture associated with it, have rapidly grown into a global phenomenon. However, its emergence has not been completely organic, and is partly thanks to the strategic input of South Korea's Ministry of Culture. Investing in concert venues, relevant technology, karaoke bars, and other ways to support K-pop artists' interests, Korean leaders laid the foundation for the long-term strategy of K-pop as part of Korean culture.²⁰

For example, as YouTube and changing perceptions of local society opened the door for K-pop to reach Japan, new and relevant links were created between South Korea and Japan, two countries with a historically challenging relationship. As early as 2003, the Japanese Foreign Ministry invited a famous K-pop artist to attend a diplomatic dinner with the then-South Korean President.²¹ Thus it is no surprise that, in 2019, one K-pop group was announced as the first “promotional ambassador” for the Korean Culture and Information Service, tasked with spreading Korean culture across the globe.²² In 2021, another K-pop group was appointed to the same ambassadorship to promote Korean cultural content abroad.²³ Today, South Korea’s efforts have saturated the global public. K-pop continues to break records in X (formerly Twitter) traffic and enjoys strong popularity in countries throughout Asia and South America.²⁴

In other words, K-pop culture has diffused to many corners of the planet. This exercise of soft power has quantifiable economic results; the foreign market for South Korean music and pop culture has nearly doubled between 2015 and 2019.²⁵ The wildly popular group BTS has raised billions for the South Korean economy, collaborated with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on several initiatives, and met with the US White House in 2022 to combat anti-Asian hate and promote Asian inclusion—a White House priority that developed out of an onslaught of xenophobia against Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁶ Seoul also uses K-pop in other official capacities to impress soft power, in promoting efforts “to improve relations with North Korea” and supporting “covid-19 vaccination and sustainable development.”²⁷ K-pop groups have permeated across cultures and borders to introduce Korean culture to music fans while promoting issues important to both their fans and the South Korean political agenda. For example, BTS contributed to UNICEF’s “Love Myself” campaign in 2017. Additionally, the group Seohyun of Girls’ Generation flew to North Korea for a performance in 2018. The pop concert took place ahead of bilateral talks as a symbol of inter-Korean understanding and common language. K-pop groups also participated in official activities in the Philippines in 2019, helping to spread a charming nation-branding image while promoting the creation of Korea Town in Manila. In 2021, BTS participated in the 76th UN General Assembly. South Korea’s success leveraging this platform for soft power demonstrates just how much its initial investment in building the K-pop industry has paid off.

China: The 2022 Winter Olympics and Beyond

China, too, has incorporated influencers into its digital communication campaigns, many of whom promote anti-hegemonic narratives and veiled accusations

against the United States. Sima Naim is the most popular blogger who espouses this anti-American sentiment. With more than 40 million followers, he finds faults with the United States vis-à-vis NATO, the Ukraine-Russia War and more. To Chinese domestic audiences, meanwhile, influencers spread official narratives about Xinjiang and other sensitive issues.²⁸ Local stars like Shenshang make videos dressed in Hanfu, the traditional clothing of the Han majority, presenting a patriotic approach to history and national pride.

During the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, China tapped foreign influencers to market specific pro-China messaging. Its strategy, more similar to a sponsored-product marketing campaign than conventional diplomatic communications, paid an American-based firm to contract celebrities and influencers to promote positive messaging on their social media platforms during the Winter Olympics.²⁹ Most of the paid content involved portraying ceremonial events, explaining Chinese cultural traditions, and sharing personal memories.

While the influencers themselves hailed from various digital backgrounds and veiled their posts in messages pertaining to travel, fun facts, and the excitement of the games, China's overall goal was to distract from news coverage of allegations against China regarding human rights abuses by promoting positive content about the country's culture, history, and relations with the United States. Influencers hired for the campaign included American stars like a reality TV celebrity, a former Paralympic athlete, and a TikTok star.³⁰

To this day, TikTokers continue to produce videos about hot topics in Chinese politics under strict surveillance. The official response to issues like COVID-19 and the protests in Hong Kong is commonly distributed through paid influencers, while any reference to the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre is systematically removed. Payment for distribution confirms that these creators are merely pretending to be spontaneous amateurs; in fact, they distribute an official government position because otherwise their content is censored. Such a campaign also aligns with objectives and strategies put forth by the head of the China Media Group under the Central Propaganda Department: "telling China's story well" and showing "a true, three-dimensional and comprehensive China," suggesting that the use of influencers is crucial to such a strategy.³¹

China has also utilized "wolf warrior" diplomacy in the influencer space, a term that describes China's increasingly assertive and confrontational approach to international relations. There is no improvization, but an imitation of spontaneous behavior. China's adoption of this approach reflects its more aggressive and unapologetic stance on foreign policy matters.³² The use of influencers impacts Chinese diplomacy. Diplomats are unfamiliar with and typically do not know how to respond to an aggressive strategy; it's considered tactless style in diplomacy. As the attacks have multiplied, foreign ministries have preferred to remain silent rather than respond in the same tone.

Russian Propaganda and Spanish Influencers

Sometimes, rather than posing as or hiring social influencers, a state may coopt them

Sometimes, rather than simply posing as or hiring social influencers, a state may coopt them. Granting special privileges to disseminate state-curated narratives is a common tactic among states looking to utilize digital influencers and their platforms. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, as part of its disinformation campaign targeting Spanish-speaking countries, Russia invited Spanish YouTubers to film and post from the Russian-controlled Donbas region, typically closed to Western media.³³ Though influencers may market themselves as independent journalists providing coverage and content, they sometimes mislead their audience to promote particular messages. It may appear that they have cutting edge information because they have access to restricted regions or conflicts, but this access is often in exchange for skewed content.

Liu Sivaya, one such influencer, repeatedly posts videos from the front line and “reports” rhetoric in line with Russian disinformation on Ukraine, NATO, the death toll, and the war. Sivaya is a YouTuber who has become popular in Spain for her anti-government positions and attacks on the more traditional left. In her interventions, she defends the rights of Russia above any other argument, despite having no other recognized profession.³⁴ Thus, while this influencer is not affiliated with any widely recognized news outlets, she utilizes her platform to label herself as a journalist and roots her legitimacy in covering topics she claims mainstream news does not.

Cooperating with, rather than resisting, influencers may yield more soft power

Such an influencer, one with thousands of followers, provides the infrastructure for Russia to push its narrative to Spanish speakers across the globe. A study from the Brookings Institute shows that “independent Spanish-language influencers” who regularly tweet “conspiratorial, anti-Western views” don’t necessarily enjoy massive digital followings, but are part of a strategy to “amplify authentic voices” to elevate, strengthen, and add legitimacy to their messaging.³⁵ The reduced presence of independent correspondents and analysts is a fact that affects the quality of information. Most Latin American countries are no longer a priority for international information and the local press, and are immersed in a structural crisis. With no readers and no

business model, this represents a great opportunity to disseminate the Russian narrative.

Sputnik and Telegram viral-ize messages suited to anti-US propaganda, such as the false denunciation for electoral manipulation promoted by candidate Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. Bolsonaro's electoral manipulation tactics, particularly during the 2018 and 2022 presidential campaigns, included spreading misinformation and disinformation via social media, particularly WhatsApp, to attack opponents and sow distrust in Brazil's electoral system. He leveraged his position as president to use state resources for campaigning, undermined the credibility of the electronic voting system, and discredited the media by labeling them as biased. Bolsonaro's rhetoric also fueled political polarization by aligning with conservative cultural values and portraying his opponents as threats to national identity. His tactics, which included manipulating public opinion through false narratives and inciting distrust in democratic institutions, deepened divisions in Brazilian society and posed significant challenges to the integrity of the country's electoral process. Because digital tech companies often lack enough investment in content moderation, the anti-imperialist narrative can be distributed on Facebook without counter-balance. News coverage with a professional appearance and an anti-US narrative has multiplied amidst the war in Ukraine. The language of invasion is normalized, and NATO and the European Union labeled as expansionist entities.

In some cases, as with Russia and other sophisticated global disinformation campaigns, utilizing influencers is part of a greater strategy. To this end, Russia has installed Spanish-language media outlets in parts of South America to distribute and normalize its anti-Western narratives. In this context, influencers grow in popularity and credibility. With narratives suited to TikTok or YouTube, videos are produced which mimic the pro-Russian narrative in the war against Ukraine. While these influencers are not affiliated with state media, these media outlets take care to amplify their voices and legitimize their discourse in a way that makes them seem like citizen voices without intersecting interests. Affiliated media provide and create the status of an expert whose commentary aligns with Chinese or Russian foreign policy.

Implications for Future Campaigns

Essential questions remain around the risks and potential blowback of utilizing influencer figures to deliver messages pertaining to diplomacy and international politics. The key differentiating factor between democratic and authoritarian regimes is accountability. The use of influencers pretending to be independent journalists undermines the quality of public information and therefore

democracy. Although the Saudi Arabia and China cases show that any risk of blowback to authoritarian states using “pay-to-play” tactics in digital influence may be minimal—with criticism instead being projected onto those willing to accept payment to shill for a state—democratic states may be subject to more criticism of hypocrisy if they were to use such tactics.

Once affinity for risk is considered, the next great frontier for states, ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) and diplomats is navigating how to operate in shared space with influencers of all types. Cooperation with, rather than resistance to, the trend may yield more effective results for soft power campaigns. Diplomats and MFAs should be equipped to manage relationships with influencers, as well as the language and style of the digital influencer. Hiring their services can be an evolution in communication strategy, but the results are bound to be unexpected. The speed of digital communication is incompatible with the play-book of diplomatic hierarchies. This is not to suggest that foreign ambassadors should start recording TikTok dances or that states should begin employing brand ambassadors. However, there is something to learn from the style and strategy of those influencing their audience on international issues. There are opportunities for diplomats to meet with influencers to cover important, relevant issues with their governments and audiences. Such a meeting is neither an endorsement nor a contract, but something similar to a town hall or press interview. Identifying the right person for such a task requires research, just like a public affairs team strategically selects the proper journalist from the right outlet to grant an exclusive. Conventional public affairs concepts and public diplomacy are still alive but must be repurposed for the current terrain.

Much can be learned from the style of digital influencers. Their content and approach are more relatable, personal, digestible and accessible than formal press conferences or political meet-and-greets. Infusing a professional approach to this style with educational and on-message content can allow diplomats greater exposure and open doors to new audiences. A lack of understanding of a platform is not a justification for not effectively using it. States, MFAs, and diplomats should leverage these spaces to be more efficient and effective, and to progress toward soft power objectives. It is unnecessary to fight fire with fire by aggressively and potentially unethically employing influencers for misinformation. There is a valuable space in the middle for states, but to remain behind now by continuing to ignore social media influencers would put states at a competitive disadvantage.

To effectively engage with influencers, diplomats and MFAs need to understand the digital influencer community’s culture, language, and style. Each platform has its own norms, trends, and communication styles which diplomats should familiarize themselves with to ensure their messages resonate with a target audience. Diplomats need to be adaptable and open to using more

informal, relatable, and engaging communication styles which align with influencers' approaches. Building authentic and respectful relationships with influencers involves approaching content creators as partners rather than tools for disseminating information. Engaging with influencers can enhance a country's soft power by showcasing its culture, values and policies in a relatable and engaging manner. This approach can contribute to positive perceptions and a favorable image on the global stage. However, engaging with influencers also presents challenges such as potential controversies, cultural sensitivities, and ethical considerations that diplomats must carefully consider.

To navigate this landscape, diplomats and MFAs should receive training and skill development in digital communication strategies and social media management. It is essential to strike a balance between traditional diplomatic practices and modern digital diplomacy. Diplomats and MFAs must be equipped to engage with influencers in ways which resonate with their audiences while maintaining the values and objectives of their country's foreign policy.

Notes

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