

Digital Diplomacy and African Countries:

Opportunities, Challenges, and Future Prospects

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DIGITAL
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"Digital Diplomacy and Statecraft" is part of DigiTraL, a research project funded by the Federal Foreign Office. It explores how digitalisation offers new opportunities, challenges, and instruments for foreign policy. By bringing together international experts, it identifies prospects and threats of digitalisation. Digital technologies are fundamentally transforming societies worldwide. The Global South is an important shaper of this change. The project analyses drivers and consequences of digitalisation across the world regions and delivers useful impulses for German foreign policy and for timely responses of (digital) diplomacy.

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Abstract

International relations have changed as a result of the intersection of diplomacy and digital tools. This has given rise to digital diplomacy. This paper examines the embrace of digital diplomacy by African countries. The integration of digital tools in diplomatic practices offers African countries an array of opportunities to enhance their international engagement. These countries can use social media and online platforms to showcase the diversity of their cultures and their ample potential. However, despite these opportunities, African countries confront a myriad of challenges in fully harnessing the promise and capacity of digital diplomacy. To this end, embracing digital innovation, investing in infrastructure, and fostering digital literacy programmes is vital for African countries, as are, in addition, effective regulatory frameworks and concerted efforts across the continent.

Policy Implications

- Prioritizing investments in digital infrastructure by African governments and international organizations, including the expansion of broadband access, improving connectivity in remote areas, and strengthening cyber security frameworks are necessary steps towards effective digital diplomacy.
- Establishing regional norms and regulations governing digital diplomacy is essential. This involves crafting agreements on cyber security, data protection, and ethical conduct in online diplomatic interactions. Collaboration by African countries can fortify diplomatic efforts, ensuring a unified approach to digital engagement while safeguarding against potential risks.
- African governments should prioritize digital platforms as integral tools for cultural exchange and diplomatic outreach. Establishing and promoting official diplomatic channels on social media platforms and utilizing digital content can facilitate dialogue, promote cultural exchange, and attract investment and tourism opportunities.

Introduction: The Digital Age and Industrial Revolutions

The digital age has altered our world. It has brought about dramatic change in every aspect of our interconnected global society. Its rise has significantly impacted global communication, business, and culture. This revolution has not only increased information dissemination but has also fostered unprecedented global innovation and connectivity (Asaju and Ogar, 2022).

The digital age can be linked to the industrial revolutions, which are periods of profound social and economic changes that transformed the way people lived and worked. Four industrial revolutions are widely recognised, each marked by significant technological advancements and changes in manufacturing, transportation, communication, and several other areas. The First Industrial Revolution, starting in the late 18th century, introduced the steam engine, mechanized textile production, and established extensive factories by transitioning from manual labour to mechanized manufacturing. The Second Industrial Revolution followed in the late 19th century, bringing electricity, assembly lines, and mass production techniques, giving rise to industries like automobile and steel.

The Digital Revolution, known as the Third Industrial Revolution, began in the 1950s with electronic advancements like transistors and microprocessors, automating manufacturing, deeply integrating computers into industries and commerce, and establishing the World Wide Web, leading to the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Now, the Fourth Industrial Revolution, Industry 4.0, marks the current frontier by integrating digital technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and robotics, fostering smart factories where interconnected machines, sensors, and devices communicate via the internet. Among the initial three industrial revolutions, in my view the Digital Revolution stands as the most influential, ushering in the Information Age.

The digital revolution has significantly influenced the landscape of international relations. In an age characterized by immediate connectivity and the rapid dissemination of information, the dynamics of international relations have undergone profound transformations. Jovan Kurbalija has identified three primary domains where digitization has impacted diplomacy (Kurbalija, 2021). Firstly, there have been notable shifts in the political, social, and economic milieu within which diplomacy operates. This encompasses changes in the nature and distribution of power, the emergence of new forms of conflicts, and the evolving concepts of sovereignty and interdependence in international relations. Secondly, there is the rise of new policy issues in foreign affairs, including cyber security, cybercrime, e-commerce, privacy, and data governance. Lastly, there is the integration of digital tools into

diplomatic practices, such as the utilisation of social media, online conferencing, negotiation, and messaging, as well as big data analysis, which is known as Digital Diplomacy.

Digital diplomacy, also called e-diplomacy or cyber diplomacy, refers to the use of digital technologies, such as social media, online communication tools, digital platforms, and information and communication technologies (ICTs), to conduct diplomatic activities and achieve diplomatic goals in the furtherance of foreign policy (Adesina, 2017). It involves employing digital tools for diplomatic outreach, communication, information dissemination, and engagement with foreign audiences, governments, and international organizations. It revolves around leveraging digital technology and online platforms for diplomatic activities, engaging stakeholders, and pursuing diplomatic goals.

Digital diplomacy is becoming increasingly important in today's international relations. The global presence of social media has altered how international players interact, not only between countries but also with businesses, international organizations, and other entities in the international arena. The COVID-19 epidemic accelerated the adoption of virtual summits, fundamentally transforming how high-level diplomatic meetings take place. Leaders from all around the world now meet virtually, which reduces the logistical challenges, costs, number of personnel needed, and environmental effects of conventional face-to-face meetings. This shift has expanded diplomatic engagements while also making dialogues more inclusive. The 2020 G20 Summit held virtually, showcased the effectiveness of digital diplomacy. Leaders connected seamlessly from their own countries, engaging in collaborative discussions on urgent global issues. The virtual setup allowed broader participation, with experts, civil society representatives, and business leaders joining in, enriching the diplomatic conversation.

Africa, a vast continent, comprising 54 countries, is also affected by the digitalisation of diplomacy. The diplomatic landscapes of African countries have undergone many major changes as a result of digitalization. Digital platforms have empowered citizens, enabling increased political awareness and participation (Muswede, 2022). These platforms have also offered individuals and grassroots organizations a voice, challenging traditional power structures and hierarchies in many African countries.

African countries, despite varied development levels, embrace digital tools, particularly social media and online platforms, amplifying their global engagement and sharing their narratives directly and authentically. Though Africa is a latecomer to digitalisation, it is a rather fast adopter of technology.

Between 2010 and 2021, the internet penetration rate across the region grew from 9.6% to 33% (Teleanu and Kurbalija, 2022). Many African diplomats, Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs), Presidents and governments use social media platforms to engage with global audiences, promote foreign policy objectives, and build international partnerships. Twitter (now X) and Facebook are currently the most popular social media platforms used by African MFAs.

Digital Profile of a Range of African Countries

| | Population Estimate 2022 | Internet Penetration Dec. 2021 | Internet Users Dec. 2021 | Internet Growth 2000-2021 | Facebook Subscribers Apr. 2022 |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| Kenya | 55,752,020 | 85.2% | 46,870,422 | 23,335% | 12,445,700 |
| Nigeria | 211,400,708 | 73.0% | 154,301,195 | 101,484% | 31,860,000 |
| South Africa | 60,041,994 | 75.5% | 34,545,165 | 1,339% | 24,600,000 |
| Senegal | 17,196,301 | 56.7% | 9,749,527 | 24,273% | 3,802,000 |
| Namibia | 2,587,344 | 52.1% | 1,347,418 | 4,391% | 792,000 |
| Ghana | 32,154,245 | 45.9% | 14,767,818 | 49,126% | 9,163,200 |
| Rwanda | 12,276,513 | 45.1% | 5,981,638 | 119,532% | 806,200 |
| Côte d'Ivoire | 27,473,629 | 44.6% | 12,253,653 | 30,534% | 6,554,100 |

Source: Teleanu and Kurbalija, 2022

Opportunities of Digital Diplomacy for African Countries

In the African context, digital diplomacy can magnify previously marginalized voices in the global conversation. It can be an effective (and resource-conscious) tool for countries to assert their presence on the international scene. It opens up a world of possibilities for African countries, which, when properly used, can define diplomatic agendas, boost global involvement, and drive progress in a variety of areas. Some of the opportunities provided by digital diplomacy include:

1. Cultural Diplomacy and Heritage Promotion

Cultural diplomacy involves “the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding” (Cumings, 2003, p. 1). It

is a vital tool in the conduct of a country's soft power strategy. In today's digital landscape, African countries can use online platforms to showcase their rich cultural heritage. Virtual cultural festivals and online exhibitions serve as forums for countries to engage and create relationships. Digital tools conserve and promote cultural heritage, allowing African countries to share their unique identities with the rest of the world. Initiatives such as virtual reality experiences facilitate the exploration of African heritage sites without the need for physical presence, thereby contributing to their preservation. Digital media is used, for instance, by organizations such as the African Union and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to advocate for cultural preservation. Platforms such as South Africa's virtual safaris and Nigeria's digitally distributed Nollywood films demonstrate how digital pathways may connect cultures around the world. These strategies, utilizing social media, digital storytelling, cross-border collaborations, and immersive technologies, present significant opportunities for Africa to leverage cultural diplomacy and heritage promotion within digital diplomacy.

2. Economic Diplomacy and Trade Promotion

Digital diplomacy will drive the economic progress of African countries by highlighting trade and investment prospects via online platforms. These avenues will attract foreign investors, fostering global trade partnerships. Platforms like LinkedIn serve as global centres for African professionals and entrepreneurs to interact, generating numerous chances for business collaboration. These platforms enable the global promotion of goods and services, moving beyond local markets. Virtual events will increase engagement by reducing barriers and encouraging greater participation. Data-driven insights influence policymaking and improve economic policies (Chaudhary, 2023), and transparent internet policies by African countries will foster trust among global investors. Entrepreneurs and diplomats can better navigate global trade with the help of digital literacy.

3. Public Diplomacy and Image Enhancement

One of the objectives of foreign policy is the protection of national prestige or the promotion of a positive image. African countries can use digital diplomacy to shape their global image and battle negative stereotypes or narratives. A country's brand image is viewed as vital for its positive functioning in international affairs, which is increasingly reliant on the online flow of information. Social media and other internet platforms can help public diplomacy initiatives, such as the promotion of educational opportunities or healthcare initiatives. African governments can use digital platforms to showcase their achievements, share development narratives, and interact with foreign audiences.

This enables African countries to take the lead in crafting their global narrative, going beyond historical prejudices to demonstrate their progress and potential.

4. Diaspora Engagement

Engagement with the diaspora is an important component of diplomacy for many countries, and harnessing digital diplomacy gives African countries numerous opportunities to carry this out effectively. The African diaspora is a major asset for the continent, and digital diplomacy provides a unique means of communicating and interacting with this population through digital platforms, promoting contributions to national development, investments, and knowledge transfer. Initiatives such as “Diaspora Days” are becoming regular practice, in which African embassies host events to foster engagement with their diaspora groups (for example, Nigeria’s NIDCOM Diaspora Day). This type of engagement not only helps progress in the country but also gives diaspora members a better sense of belonging. Direct avenues of communication, including via social media platforms, dedicated websites, and mobile applications, create immediate and direct interactions between governments and their overseas citizens. These platforms provide real-time engagement, allowing for the exchange of information, policies, and updates, as well as the collection of vital feedback and insights from the diaspora. Furthermore, virtual town hall meetings, webinars, and online forums provide avenues for diaspora-centric discussions such as investment opportunities, consular services, legislative reforms, and cultural exchanges, transcending geographical barriers and enabling direct interaction.

5. Crisis Management and Humanitarian Diplomacy

African countries can use digital diplomacy to help with crisis management and humanitarian assistance. During a crisis, whether a natural disaster or a public health issue such as the COVID-19 epidemic, digital diplomacy assists in giving rapid support and information by leveraging social media and official channels for effective crisis management and support dissemination. African governments can employ digital tools to coordinate international aid, disseminate safety precautions, and engage with the global community. Social media and applications, in particular, can be useful for distributing important information and combating misinformation. During a crisis, real-time information allows for quick updates, which improves cooperation. Digital tools enable remote collaboration among diverse stakeholders, which aids in resource allocation.

6. Multilateral Diplomacy and Regional Collaboration

Regarding multilateral diplomacy and regional collaboration, digital diplomacy offers a wide range of opportunities for Africa. To engage with the global community, virtual summits, regional forums, and international conferences are now readily accessible to African countries via digital platforms. This reduces the need for physical presence while facilitating communication and collaboration among varied stakeholders. These platforms serve as catalysts for regional collaboration and mutual understanding. For example, platforms like the African Union's virtual summit meetings have become essential tools for regional cooperation. Digital diplomacy tools, offer secure communication channels and virtual meeting platforms, empowering diplomats from different African countries to engage in real-time collaboration. This aids diplomatic negotiations, allowing for the drafting of agreements and treaties. Additionally, these platforms promote cross-border collaboration by enabling information sharing, joint initiatives, and the formation of virtual task forces to tackle regional challenges. This digital realm supports efforts for regional economic integration, cultural exchanges, conflict resolution, and consular services, ultimately fostering deeper collaboration among African countries.

Challenges Faced by African Countries in Implementing Digital Diplomacy

While the opportunities for digital diplomacy are immense, African countries face several challenges in effectively exploiting these opportunities. These include:

1. Digital Infrastructure and Connectivity

The digital divide is a major obstacle to African digital diplomacy. Although there has been progress, only 36% of Africa had broadband internet access in 2022 – much less than other regions (World Bank, 2023). Also, the issue of affordability persists, with Africans spending a greater percentage of their income on internet access than people in other regions. This challenge necessitates substantial investment, estimated at 100 billion USD for high-quality, universal internet access, including new infrastructure deployment and the shift to 5G technologies (World Bank, 2019). The investment could come from government funding, international aid, and public-private partnerships. Foreign direct investment, development finance institutions, and impact investors can also contribute significantly. Regional cooperation through bodies like the African Union can further pool resources for large-scale infrastructure projects.

2. Cyber Security and Data Privacy Concerns

Due to inadequate legislation and weak digital infrastructure, expanding digital diplomacy exposes African countries to cyber threats. Inadequate cyber security safeguards endanger sensitive diplomatic information. This necessitates investment in robust cyber security and data protection regulations.

3. Cultural and Linguistic Barriers, Limited Digital Literacy and Skills, Disinformation, Regulatory Frameworks, and Resource Constraints

These challenges include diverse cultural and linguistic contexts, a shortage of digital expertise, widespread disinformation and misinformation, regulatory complexities, and limited resources. Addressing these issues requires tailored digital content, digital literacy programmes, strategies to counter disinformation, the allocation of financial and human resources for digital diplomacy initiative, and regulation. National governments, the African Union, and the African Telecommunications Union can lead in establishing robust regulatory frameworks. By forming regional coalitions, engaging in diplomatic advocacy, participating in global forums, and leveraging international partnerships, African countries can assert their needs and influence international regulation effectively.

In the following, I am giving some examples of what is already being implemented.

The African Union's Digital Diplomacy Initiatives

The African Union (AU) is an important case study for regional digital diplomacy collaboration. The AU has launched different digital initiatives, including virtual summit meetings and social media campaigns. It developed a Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020-2030) to harness digital technologies and innovation to transform African societies and economies to promote Africa's integration, generate inclusive economic growth, and address the digital divide (African Union, 2020). Most African countries have keyed into the elements of the strategy and the hope of implementation is high. The AU seeks to ensure that by 2030, every resident of the region has stable internet access. It has also developed the AU Digital Diplomacy Platform, which intends to strengthen digital diplomacy in Africa by providing an avenue for African countries to share information and best practices.

South Africa's Cultural Diplomacy Initiatives

South Africa uses platforms such as social media, websites, and virtual exhibitions to showcase its rich cultural heritage. However, more can be done in this regard. For instance, The National Arts Festival is one of the largest events in South Africa. It begins around the end of June and runs for 10 days in Grahamstown, Eastern Cape. The programme includes drama, dance, physical theatre, comedy, opera, music, jazz, visual art exhibitions, film, student theatre, street theatre, lectures, craft fairs, workshops, heritage tours, and a children's arts festival. There is also the Cape Town International Jazz Festival. The South African government could promote these events more broadly through social media platforms, particularly Twitter (X) and YouTube.

Kenya's Economic Diplomacy and Trade Promotion

Kenya's emphasis on economic diplomacy and trade promotion is a useful case study. Economic diplomacy is a critical component of Kenya's foreign policy (Republic of Kenya, 2014). Kenya has promoted foreign capital and investment flows for socio-economic development since independence. The country's foreign policy has been the main tool for mobilizing required capital. The government continues to use digital platforms and e-commerce hubs to highlight its economic potential and attract foreign investors. Today, Kenya's missions abroad employ economic diplomacy more than ever before to draw in finance, boost industrialization, and encourage trade. Kenya's efforts and successes demonstrate how African countries may effectively use digital platforms to engage in economic diplomacy, create business possibilities, and attract investment.

Nigeria's Diaspora Engagement

Nigeria's diaspora engagement offers a fascinating case study. The Nigerian government uses digital channels to communicate with its large diaspora community, encouraging contributions to national development and strengthening ties. The government established the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NIDCOM) in 2019 to promote contacts with nationals outside the country for mutual development advantages of the diasporans and the Nigerian motherland (Adesina, 2020). Nigeria's strategy highlights how other African countries could also effectively engage their diaspora through digital tools, creating a network of resources and skills.

Future Prospects and Strategies for Enhancing Digital Diplomacy in Africa

There is an enormous prospect for African countries in digital diplomacy if the highlighted challenges are addressed and strategic approaches are adopted. The rapidly evolving digital landscape provides chances to strengthen diplomatic efforts by prioritising infrastructure, internet connectivity, and digital literacy. Providing specialized training facilities for diplomats and MFA staff can help to strengthen skills necessary for effective engagement, global partnerships, and localized communication. Crisis communication strategies, data protection legislation, and emerging technologies such as AI and blockchain will go a long way to support the continent's diplomatic efforts.

In essence, the future of digital diplomacy in Africa is dependent on multifaceted activities including infrastructure provision, capacity building, regulatory frameworks, and technology innovation in order to establish a strong global footprint.

Conclusion

The embrace of digital diplomacy presents a unique opportunity for African countries in various spheres. Traditional diplomatic norms are transformed by this new force, making engagement more accessible and dynamic. Considering its several challenges like infrastructure gaps and cyber security complexities, African countries can advance their diplomatic objectives through digital development. This would need to include enhancing digital infrastructure and building capacity, strengthening cyber security frameworks, implementing robust data protection laws, and developing clear digital diplomacy policies. Also, leveraging international support through technical assistance and regional cooperation can accelerate progress in this direction. Continuous monitoring with clear performance indicators and stakeholder feedback will ensure the effectiveness and adaptability of digital diplomacy initiatives, enabling African countries to fully harness the potential of digital tools for diplomatic engagement.

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