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# Emotional labour in digital diplomacy: perceptions and challenges for European diplomats

## Introduction

The diplomatic profession is defined by competent and skilful interactions. Diplomats are mediators of their states but may greatly influence the way in which a state message is delivered and perceived through their personal ability to navigate tact, tone and timing. Diplomats must therefore pay attention to and use emotional cues (Wong, 2016) and participate in emotional performances of diplomatic decorum (McConnell, 2018). Emotions are thus essential to the diplomatic game of managing perceptions, conveying signals and safeguarding state reputation. As such, the strategic use of emotions is recognized among diplomats as part of the toolkit they use to manage their states' international relations. Diplomats as servants of the state thus perform emotional labour (Hochschild, [1983] 2012; Nair, 2019). The emotional dynamics of diplomacy have however been both amplified and transformed through digitalisation. Most notably, there are now more ways in which emotions can be used to send diplomatic signals through social media (Duncombe, 2019a). In addition to new opportunities for skilful communication, digitalisation has therefore created new demands and forms of diplomatic communication and in effect, new arenas for managed emotions. The profound influence of social media communication in everyday life, on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, has therefore expanded the emotional dynamics of diplomacy.

The gradual digitalisation of diplomacy has led practices of communication and representation on social media to become expected of diplomats as part of the job. In addition to managing the emotions of others in their offline relations, diplomats must project a version of the self online, that depend on new norms of emotion-laden discourse and visual representations (Bergman Rosamond and Hedling 2022). Social media and the specific socio-political affordances they offer, have greatly contributed to the commodification of emotions in political communication (Stark, 2020). In this context, performing 'digital diplomacy' requires a different mode of managed emotions from diplomats. In addition to accounting for others' emotions, or strategically deploying emotions of state personhood on the international stage,

diplomats are now required to display personal emotions or induce emotions in others, to perform competent diplomatic practices online (Hochschild, [1983] 2012). As a result, online/offline boundaries have become blurred and the display of appropriate emotions can cross between the professional and the personal with no clear distinction between the two (cf. Bridgen, 2011). In addition to expectations of displayed emotions on social media, digital diplomacy creates challenges for the competent performances of diplomacy that takes place offline and through (often confidential) face-to-face interactions that become a 'backstage of online performance' (Goffman, 1959; Adler-Nissen et al. 2021). In this article, I therefore argue that digital diplomacy produces new demands of managed emotions that add an additional layer to the ways in which emotions are 'put to work' in the diplomatic profession. The research questions that guided this study were: How do diplomats perceive demands of digital diplomacy and how are emotions engaged in the online performance of diplomacy?

I draw on the writings of Arlie Russell Hochschild ([1983] 2012), to suggest that expectations to perform a diplomatic persona online while also enacting a competent diplomatic-self offline result in tensions and challenges in the emotion management involved in digital diplomacy. Emotion management refers to efforts to change emotions and emotional labour is the management of expression of emotions in a professional context according to 'display rules' and 'feeling rules' in order to produce emotion in others ([1983] 2012). I suggest that demands of digital diplomacy produce new routines for emotion management made visible through display rules on social media and experienced through feeling rules stemming from online/offline tensions. The management of emotion in digital diplomacy involves displaying the right tone in practices of outreach, where positive messaging through images and symbols such as emojis are encouraged to convey emotions and meanings that will resonate in online audiences (Duncombe, 2019a; Cornut, 2022). At the same time, it also involves restraint in dealing with digital disinformation to prevent affective polarisation, through skilful display of competent online countering practices (Serrano-Puche 2021). These countering practices instead require diplomats to display suppressed emotions (Hedling, 2021). Demands of digital diplomacy have therefore led diplomats to perceive tensions in the way that emotions are expected to be displayed, as well as the challenges of being seen as competent among organisations and peers in both online and offline social spaces.

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The study draws on field work and 13 interviews among European diplomats between 2019-2021. In addition to the interviews, inspired by Hochschild's ethnographic work, I also draw on instructive documents used in the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) to transfer digital diplomacy skills to diplomats. These documents reflect similar guidelines across diplomatic organisations but Sweden was an early adopter of introducing social media in the working routines of its diplomats.

The findings contribute to existing knowledge on social media use as a diplomatic practice and advance the understanding of managed emotions in this new context. Moreover, the findings shed light on the importance of emotions in the digitalisation of diplomacy; findings which may also be applicable to more general discussions on the role of emotions. This study may also be instructive in other professional vocations. Diplomacy is a farsighted political activity and diplomats are seen as particularly reluctant to systems-transforming innovation (Neumann 2002, 639). The findings are therefore indicative of the profound influence of the commodification of communication online.

## Emotions in diplomacy

Emotions are central to the competent and skilful communication in diplomacy but traditionally conceptualized as transactional communicative practices of state behaviour on a global stage (Hall, 2015) or on the micro-level of face-to-face diplomacy (Holmes, 2018). In both these instances, diplomats embody state personalities and must manage their emotions in the mediation of estrangement (Der Derian, 1987). In traditional understandings of emotions in diplomacy, emotional mechanisms are thus either conceptualized as a form of strategic action or in relational interactions between leaders or diplomats in their everyday life. Although social media brings specific emotional dynamics, the broader role of emotions in diplomacy serves as a baseline for how emotions are performed and 'put to work' in the diplomatic profession (cf. Jones and Clark, 2019). For instance, diplomats perform discourses 'that are meant to be judged as valid articulations of states' claim making' (Ng and Kidder, 2010: 197). Diplomats display of emotions must therefore be perceived as both credible and valid reflections of state interest. At the same time, strong personal relationships that depend on personal emotions can influence how diplomats pursue state interests (Keys and Yorke, 2019).

State actors deploy emotional behaviour as a form of communicative power to shape the perceptions of others on the global stage (Hall, 2015). Most notably, diplomatic signalling is the practice in which state leaders and diplomats convey messages that for different reasons are not (or cannot be) articulated directly (Hall and Yahri-Milo, 2012; Danielson and Hedling 2022). Managed emotions may also contribute to the constructive ambiguity that allows these actors to conceal information from each other (Jönsson and Hall, 2003). For instance, state actors use emotional frames to establish, maintain or alter their states' image or to transform the character of specific relationships to other states. This is particularly common in times of uncertainty and heightened political stakes, in times of elections or during crises (Hall, 2015; Deutsch et al., 1957).

Emotions in diplomacy have also been studied at the micro-level of diplomatic interactions. Drawing on insights from psychology and neuroscience, emotions are prevalent in face-to-face encounters, where they enable practitioners to exchange expressions of intentions (Holmes & Wheeler, 2020). Emotional expressions, including verbal content, facial cues, and body language, are informative about one's goals, preferences, and beliefs because they reflect one's appraisal of an ongoing interaction (Wong, 2016). A positive personal relationship between state leaders may for instance, contribute to generate understanding and trust depending on both the situation and on the interpersonal interaction.

Digitalisation has had a profound impact of the role of emotions in political communication in general and on diplomacy in particular. Social media has therefore been studied as a new arena and new methods of projecting state identity and conveying signals. This perspective, although relevant to our increased understanding of social media in diplomacy, focuses on the power of emotion to cultivate identities. Growing attention to the digitalisation of diplomacy has also highlighted the emotional dynamics of online interactions both in relation to high stake signalling (Duncombe, 2019b) and in the transformation of face-to-face interactions through screen-based technologies (Eggeling and Adler-Nissen, 2021). The latter inquiry into professional interactions assisted by digital technologies draws on Knorr Cetina's rethinking of Goffman's interactionism in the 'synthetic situation' (2009). In this revision of the theoretical construct of an interaction order, digital encounters can at least partially, replace face-to-face encounters in terms of fulfilling the conditions for a positive social bond. Beyond the scope of synthetic situations, social media also offer new ways of connecting and fostering

social relationships. Duncombe has suggested that digital platforms such as Twitter can both represent emotions and provoke strong emotional reactions that become integrated into offline political outcomes (2019a). In this context, social media provide new stages on which to signal intention through emotional expressions. Digital interactions are thus more than adaptations or translations of previous offline activities, the socio-technical affordances of digital platforms condition the ways in which emotions are perceived and shared among users (Duncombe, 2019b). This also has implications for the way that diplomats are instructed to learn and maintain social media presence which requires understanding and 'ease' of social media use. Similar adaptations to new 'scopic systems' mediated by technology have resulted in significant change in other professions that in similarity with diplomacy must monitor and respond to international patterns of digital change in areas such as finance, global health and security (Knorr Cetina and Bruegger, 2002). Some of these professional adaptations also include emotion management through interactions mediated by technology that have resulted in new expectations in the appropriate display of emotions (Toubiana and Zietsma, 2016).

Attention to how social media have become accepted and even expected in the diplomatic toolbox, therefore requires further interrogation of the ways in which digital tools are perceived to change the diplomatic profession and the ways in which emotions are engaged in this change (cf. Cornut, 2022; Adler-Nissen and Eggeling 2022). This study contributes to the field by providing an analysis of shared perceptions of the demands of digital diplomacy in the professional field through the lenses of emotion management. In contrast to previous research on emotions in diplomacy that focuses on the state level or the micro level, this study advances a meso-level perspective by considering the role of emotions in scripted performances online and the way that diplomats experience performing them. By advancing an analysis of the lived experiences of diplomats, this study provides an account of how online performance both reproduce and challenge diplomatic professional norms.

## Emotion management online

The term 'emotional labour' was coined by sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild and foremost associated with her seminal book *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Hochschild described the term as 'management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display ... sold for a wage' ([1983] 2012: 7). The book draws on Hochschild's

substantial ethnographic study of the growing service sector that includes both 'nice' flight attendants and 'nasty' bill collectors. In Hochschild's terminology 'emotion work' is the act of trying to change in degree or quality, an emotion that is 'appropriate' for a given situation (such as grief after the loss of a family member) in the self or in others (Hochschild 1979, 561). Emotion work is thus the result of society embedded 'feeling rules' that can be recognised across human interactions. 'Emotional labour' refers to emotion work done for payment, the professional management of emotions that can be either required or encouraged by a public or private employer. Drawing on Marx, Hochschild suggests that emotional labour is therefore a result of an increasing commodification of emotions in the interactions with others (Hochschild ([1983] 2012: 186).

Building further on the symbolic interactionism of Erving Goffman, Hochschild argues that individuals perform social roles by managing their emotions so that their performances come across as sincere and 'real'. Still, these emotions are displayed, enacted and assessed in specific social and cultural contexts between people. In managing emotions, individuals therefore also contribute to create and accept what is appropriate. To Hochschild, managing emotions is one side of the presentation of the self that individuals do to enact a competent social role. Whereas Goffman considered how emotions are used in impression management where actors perform roles (1959), Hochschild also moves beyond 'surface acting' to consider the codified 'feeling rules' where manipulated emotions serve a 'signal function' to appropriate behaviour through 'deep acting'. In a 'feeling culture', feeling rules are accompanied by 'display rules' of informal norms about how to appropriately express emotions in different social context according to gender, age, profession etc. The norms of a group not only identifies when and where it is appropriate to express emotions, but also the extent to which these emotions are expressed. It is by managing emotions that individuals interact through appropriate emotional performances (display rules and feeling rules), and are seen as competent enactments of professional roles.

Diplomacy is not a customer-service based occupation per say, but it does depend on commodified social interactions. In fact, in the preface to her book from 1983, Hochschild reflects on the origins of her interest in managed emotions that she traces to having observed her diplomat father and his colleagues personify relationships between states. Diplomacy as the previous section has already discussed, depends on the skilful management of emotions in

the mediation between states. This is true even in the seemingly less exciting and routinized interactions of international bureaucracy where a majority of diplomatic work is carried out. For instance, in his effort of theorizing the emotional labour of international bureaucracy, Nair has demonstrated how bureaucrats in international organizations are under pressure to render their emotional labour as they serve state delegates (2020). Demands of activities of digital diplomacy represents another area where professional expectations are governed by an 'emotions culture' that expects the discursive and visual display of emotions. This emotions culture, unlike international bureaucracies, is linked to a specific social structure that has resulted from a broader intersection of professional and political norms in digital society (Boler and Davis, 2018). For journalists and politicians engaged in political communication, social media are new favoured arenas governed by algorithms known to favour content that will produce emotions (Papacharissi, 2015). It is against this background of a professionalisation of social media communication that new demands have materialised in digital diplomacy.

In the translation of Hochschild's framework to the context of digital diplomacy, two clarifications are in order. First, digital diplomacy is thus far foremost associated with the use of social media in diplomacy and social media platforms are owned by private corporations with commercial interests in making profits. Before considering how social media condition the norms of interaction on social media, the mere use of social media in diplomacy represents a commodification that is problematic and in tension with ideals of diplomacy.<sup>1</sup> Second, social media are 'social' because they enable social interaction through connection, communication and the building of virtual communities. To participate in these social processes, users of social media manage emotions through appropriate emotional performances, for instance by 'liking' or 'loving' content. When professional groups, such as diplomats are instructed and encouraged to use social media these performances are gradually accepted as display rules that become recognized as competent performances of 'digital diplomacy'. Adopting a 'social media logic' therefore, always include some form of (thin) emotion management in the display of appropriate discursive and visual interactions (e.g., making the author of a social media post feel something by seeing a codified visual reaction or by feelings resulting from the absence of such reactions). Digital diplomacy in this sense is not publicly observable as managed emotions

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<sup>1</sup> It is problematic for many reasons since governments and MFAs increasingly depend on social media as favored communication channels that they have no control over or ownership of, and that may change their governing logics for commercial interests.



in facial and bodily display per se (although it may be since digital diplomacy is increasingly visual and backstage reporting can capture moments such as 'taking a selfie' or 'reacting to a tweet'). Still, diplomats to some extent embody their social media accounts when required to perform an online persona in a professional capacity. Moreover, while the dichotomy between online and offline social worlds is not necessarily clear cut, professional adaptation and institutional instructions to perform a (personal) role on social media introduces a new and offline 'backstage'. This backstage is however not a private or secluded space but instead refers to the offline professional space where social media performances are planned and expected and content is produced and assessed by peers (cf. Adler-Nissen et al., 2021).

## Methodology

The study is based on field work and 13 interviews among diplomats from different European states between 2019-2021.<sup>2</sup> The field work took place within the context of a larger study of the digitalisation of diplomacy, where more than 50 interviews with diplomats were conducted. These diplomats were all stationed in Brussels or Stockholm at some point during the time of the research. The 13 interviewees for this particular part of the study, were selected on the basis of being recognized as prolific users of digital diplomacy (most often this meant that they were very active on Twitter) or having specific insights into processes of digitalisation in their respective MFAs. They were identified through suggestions from other contacts made during field work. This strategic sample hence consisted of a group of diplomats that were most likely to have internalised a digital emotions culture and was chosen with the aim of reaching conceptual depth (Nelson 2017). The interviews were semi-structured, each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. The interviewees were guaranteed anonymity on the basis that their names would not be included in the study but that they could be represented by their nationality in specific quotations. The fact that all diplomats belonged to EU member states implies that they cannot be identified based on the fact that they were stationed in Brussels or Stockholm, these are both capitals with a large presence of a European diplomatic corps (especially in the former capital where a majority of the interviews were conducted). 9 of the interviews were recorded

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<sup>2</sup> Including France, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, United Kingdom, Estonia, Czech republic, Netherlands and Belgium.

and transcribed.<sup>3</sup> During the field work, I also immersed myself in the field by conducting participant observations of digital diplomacy on Twitter and in panels, workshops and training sessions on the topic of digital diplomacy. After each participation I wrote field notes reflecting on the emphasis on emotions in what was learned. These field notes served to inform the thematic interview guide aimed at exploring digital professional emotions that was used in the 13 interviews.

The choice of semi-structured elite interviews in addition to observations during field work was based on the wish to get access to how diplomats themselves perceive demands of digital diplomacy. Their perceptions were essential to understand how they reflect on their own everyday professional performances online and offline. This perspective is known as the internalist view of professional practices and emphasizes understanding what a group's practices are by using their own descriptions of their practices (Lechner and Frost, 2018: 88). The perspective of the practitioners themselves was particularly important since digital diplomacy have become accepted in the profession through experimentation and improvisation (Cornut, 2022: 7). Access to the way in which the script for 'good practice' is negotiated and reflected upon is therefore crucial to understanding the perceived demands and their effects in the diplomatic profession.

The adoption of digital diplomacy has been a global phenomenon in the last decade. In fact, as I collected guides and manuals across MFAs, I discovered that they were strikingly similar and that European diplomats often participate in joint training events or have often been instructed by the same experts. I therefore further complemented the material with instructive documents

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<sup>3</sup> I only asked questions about professional activities in relation to other diplomats and a general public, no sensitive personal data was collected. For ethical reasons I have however refrained from including illustrative examples from social media posts even when provided and approved for use by the informants. The reason for this is the risk that they would become traceable even if anonymised. Further, all interviewees were given the option of not recording the interview and when this was requested, I engaged in extensive note taking during and after the interview. In these cases, approval of exact quotes used in the analysis were obtained via e-mail after the interview.

from the Swedish MFA. These documents are not considered to offer context-specific insights but instead illustrate a general trend of instructing social media activities in diplomacy.<sup>4</sup>

The analysis of managed emotions as a result of digitalisation in this study thus draws on a combination of reflective accounts and observations. All material gathered was coded in relation to professional demands (whether or not digital diplomacy was seen as changing diplomatic work and how, motivations behind online engagement and results of good/poor online performance). I also asked questions implicitly aimed at understanding how emotions were involved in expectations of online conduct and in experiences of online/offline tension. It was however after the initial coding of all the material that perceived changes to the management of emotions in diplomacy appeared as strong pattern. The training sessions instructed diplomats to evoke or manage emotional reactions as a goal of digital diplomacy, the instructional documents prescribe what they refer to as 'emotion-laden discourse' and most importantly, all diplomats interviewed spoke about demands of performing in digital space as influencing how they feel about the challenges to being seen as 'a good diplomat'. These findings warranted attention to Hochschild's terminology and theory of emotional labour.

## The role of emotions in digital diplomacy

The use of social media among diplomats has emerged in a broader context of gradually democratising foreign policy and embracing transparency. This is in part a reaction to the impossibility of elite secrecy in digital society following leaks such as the Wikileaks and the Panama papers (Seib, 2016). This process of 'opening up' has therefore entailed challenging longstanding norms in elite interactions. Many MFAs have dealt with this by introducing expectations on embassies and diplomats to be active, transparent and engaging on social media. There is now therefore a shared understanding among MFAs that digitalisation has brought 'profound change' to the profession (Document 3, p. 3). Because of the nature of social media, this change is however not foremost directed to organisational communication

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<sup>4</sup> A key reason for selecting Swedish documents was access, as these documents were thus to some extent publicly available. The training material, in-house 'netiquette' and handbooks were obtained through personal contact with the MFA.

channels, social media depends on the 'personal brand' of the professionals that embody the diplomatic organisations. While offering diplomats new opportunities to self-narrate their work in the implementation of their state's foreign policy, social media thus also demand the performance of an 'online persona' that at least seemingly abide to commercial rules of engagement (cf. Pearce, 2019). Despite recognition of the profoundness of such change and the evident challenges in the erosion of the public and private role of diplomats, social media is now part of the script for how to be a European diplomat (Eggeling and Adler-Nissen, 2021). This top-down embrace of profound change thus situates the institutionalisation of digital diplomacy in an international context where European states (and many others) are responding to changed international norms and diplomatic hierarchies where 'digital diplomacy' has become a new way to display sociability, manage reputation and increase one's status.

The digital diplomacy that we see on social media and that diplomats are instructed to do through training, handbooks and evaluation, therefore reveals a new set of display rules in the ways that diplomats manage emotions in the projection of the self online. Specifically, diplomats use emotional language to promote positive connotations on social media and they appear to suppress emotions when responding to digital disinformation. Hochschild suggests that display rules become commonsensical and expected from competent performances in a given profession. In the case of digital diplomacy, new display rules are sometimes at odds with traditional and still valid routines of displaying managed emotions. The gradual professionalisation of digital diplomacy therefore results in situations when diplomats must navigate the inherent tensions between digital enactments and face-to-face interactions which results in changing dynamics in the emotional labour of diplomacy. In the following sections I elaborate on these dynamics by discussing perceived areas of challenges. These areas revolve around changes to expectations of emotional display, audience engagement and online restraint. I then move beyond perceptions of the observable practices of digital diplomacy to discuss the experience of tensions that arise in the online-offline divide.

### *Professional adaptations and new display rules*

On first glance, diplomats' use of social media may come across as a shallow form of public engagement that seeks to activate 'positive' emotions through recognition of the work they do to promote state image and sustain international friendly relations. Diplomats include publics

in their professional life by sharing the visible contrasts of the job – glamorous state dinners with world leaders, long nights stuck in the negotiation rooms and moments of success when agreements are reached. Diplomats follow and share news on political developments, repeat their capital's messages in times of crises and they represent their states by posting interesting content that aligns with their states' image. For instance, French diplomats make references to the French cuisine, Italian diplomats post images of renaissance art and Swedish diplomats share stories about the success and impact of tech start-ups in Stockholm. The language and tone are generally upbeat in communicating the fast pace, the positive energy, and at times the sense of urgency of the work that diplomats do in the quest for peace and security. Two reflections from diplomats illustrate how social media changes the expectations of their communication:

French diplomat: 'It's basically about making it engaging, dynamic and relatable through a 'narrative style'. We need to make our work more visible through a softer approach. Social media is great for that – to say that this is really important but to use emotional appeal to make people feel that this is important'.

Danish diplomat: 'Yes, we have to do social media now but it's just about adapting to a new format, to make it fit, it has to be short and catchy and emotions are great hooks, they draw people in. We don't need that sort of engagement in all that we do but if we can be more proactive in communicating our job, than sure no problem'.

These accounts reflect a rather trivial role of social media and the use of 'narrative style', a 'softer approach' and 'emotional hooks' to compete for attention in more strategic forms of communication. The two diplomats appear to have accepted the use of emotion-laden language on social media as a mere adaptation to a new communication channel. These discursive displays of emotions are not perceived to be 'real' emotions but refer to instructions for 'acted' expressions of emotions to perform a service (outreach) that has become an increasingly valued part of the job (Hochschild, [1983] 2012:133). Important in the second statement is how the need for engagement is seen as something new and foreign to traditional practices of diplomacy. The Danish diplomat is seemingly somewhat indifferent to the impact of digital diplomacy, emphasising that digital

diplomacy is not strictly the result of digitalising previous practices. This view of online performance as a new communicative and outreach-oriented side of the profession is evident in how digital diplomacy has been integrated into diplomatic organisations. Instructive documents and training sessions are used to quickly transfer skills about how diplomats can communicate more effectively on social media by adopting strategies of lighter communication that favour emotional expressions. In many ways, this training amounts to no more than establishing quick 'how to guides' of using communicative promotion and advocacy on social media. The instructions follow similar patterns across organisations that are involved in some form of public relations (Bridgen, 2011). You would find similar guides in corporate organisations or even in public institutions. In just a decade social media have become an accepted part of the job, several of the interviewed diplomats expressed that they no longer remembered how they first started:

Swedish diplomat: 'I don't even remember how or why I started doing this. I guess it was a mix of instructions coming from Stockholm that was pretty early in adopting this, and just seeing others in the field doing it at least that is how it has evolved for me. We are instructed to do it but also everyone else is doing it so you keep up'.

'Doing this' here refers to the use of Twitter and to some extent, Facebook as a daily activity of producing content (tweets or posts) and reacting to others' activities. The Swedish diplomat's account reflects 'knowing how to act' to fit in within the professional community. He had accepted these display rules as part of the job and considered the social media activities of others as 'rule reminders' (Hochschild, [1983] 2012:58). He no longer remembered how or why he began performing his digital persona, indicating that he had been socialised. Moreover, the origins did not seem to matter to him any more since this was now a way of displaying professionalism in relation to his peers in the field (Hochschild, [1983] 2012:103). Following the rules thereby also served to avoid the social repercussions of breaking a professional norm.

In addition to expectations of displaying online sociability, performing a digital persona entail being instructed to 'erase the lines between private and professional life' which 'places higher demands on the employee's integrity' (document 1, p. 4). Integrity in this understanding reflects expectations that employees will present themselves online in more personal ways but

still adhere to the principles and values that comes with the diplomatic role. Hence, diplomats are instructed to display an online persona as 'if they were personal'(Hochschild, [1983] 2012:106). This understanding of integrity reflects the enhanced public role of the diplomat which produces new challenges in balancing the display of private and the professional that can be seen by anyone at any time on the Internet. The expectations of such display of value alignment and 'digital loyalty' were stressed many times in training sessions and across guidelines and 'netiquette' documents (Document 4). Diplomats are thus expected to put on a digital front, appearing to be communicating in a personal capacity while still competently performing professional roles (cf. Hochschild, [1983] 2012:96). As a result of a gradual standardisation of professional social media communication similar 'integrity statements' can be found in most social media guidelines in both private and public sector. It is however striking how in an MFA, integrity online is talked about in terms of challenging the boundaries between private and professional life since diplomacy is a vocation that has always commodified the private. For instance, the erosion of private and professional life happens in 'the field' where ambassadors are expected personify and embody the state both in formal settings and through hospitality in private spaces of home and family (Domett, 2005). The erosion of the public-private boundaries is thus instrumental to diplomatic interactions. But discussion of a transgression into the private life of diplomats online is still noteworthy in these generic training sessions and guidelines because it implies a perceived different form of intimacy and new ways of acting on the personal as political.

First, it is a different form of intimacy because it takes place in the open and unmediated transparent space of the Internet rather than the exclusive and secretive institutional halls or homes of career diplomats. Intimacy in the open, demands a different management of emotions that do not serve to develop trust in a face-to-face situation, but to sustain trust in the state through personal representation online. Hence digital professional emotions constitute appearing to be personal in a non-personal setting. While a traditionally intimate tête-à-tête during a dinner party requires diplomats to manage personal emotions to represent the state, social media presence requires diplomats to perform a personal role with seemingly private emotions. This places higher demands on the individual diplomat's integrity because of the task of being personal and intimate in a 'professionally unintimate' space. Moreover, the emphasis on the public display of 'values' requires managed emotions since emotions are

invested when an individual 'values something' (compared to values that are shared within a diplomatic community) (Graham, 2014: 524). In this context, diplomats are instructed to share values by both actively manifesting them in their personal brand online, but also by engaging in collective sharing through online persuasion and appeal. For instance, diplomats are instructed to 'use an informal and personal tone and write in ways that are engaging and encouraging' and to 'always react (through liking and sharing) when someone else posts something interesting' (Document 1, p. 9). While the instructions may be similar to displaying professional emotions offline (that are tacitly understood and learned in the profession), online emotions are hence more regulated and visually codified habits. Submitting a 'like' or an emoji to someone's post on social media is more technical and observable (in the sense that it is a direct instruction and it becomes a record that can be looked at repeated times) compared to a polite smile as you are passing a colleague in a corridor. This results in the individual diplomat's social role becoming an increasingly large part of the MFA's digital footprint and subsequently integral to organisational social media success.

Second, it is a different form of intimacy because it requires managing emotions at a different level and speed of communication. The speed in which the online communication is formulated and published sometimes results in dissonance with the diplomatic virtue of (offline) tact. This means that digital diplomacy is more risk prone (Hedling and Bremberg, 2021). Being first to comment on matters of international affairs may be rewarded through attention and circulation but it may also result in premature assessment, political damage and feelings of shame. There is awareness of these risks but they are not seen to be in conflict with intimacy (Interviews 1-13). In the instructions, intimacy is not about 'real' feelings of being close, it is seen as a 'goal' that is politically instrumental through logics of connectivity and popularity on social media (van Dijck and Poell, 2013). Diplomats on social media are expected to participate in public discourse in their personal capacity and according to a social media logic known to be more interactive and instantaneous around the clock. Intimacy is measured in terms online presence and reactivity. Being seen as reactive and 'first' to comment on news is symptomatic of the 'always on' culture that has resulted from real-time social media (Turkle, 2006). Diplomats are instructed to ensure resources for regular social media activity through 'daily activity and speedy response' (Document 2, p. 18, interviews 1-13). For instance, during training sessions diplomats were instructed to have a plan for how to keep up activity and monitoring during



weekends and holidays. The always-on script therefore results in new forms of intimacy where the traditional backstage to plan performances is effectively removed and replaced with the constant trade-off between being first and being right.

### *Engaging an audience*

Engagement on social media matters because it is measurable (to a certain extent) and therefore embraced as new opportunities to 'track international influence' (Interviews 1-13). This view of engagement and influence is in stark contrast to the traditional long-term efforts of building diplomatic relationships, not least with foreign publics. While such efforts have not been replaced, the emphasis and instant rewards of engagement encourages diplomats to display emotions in ways that will result in a 'good digital track record'. For instance, diplomats are instructed to use analytics tools to track their social media engagement (views, likes, shares, comments etc.), to assess which tweets that generated large engagement to learn what engages followers and set up regular engagement goals (Interview with Swedish diplomat). This is particularly relevant to press attachés and diplomats with mandates from the communication unit (such as public diplomacy officers) that are entrusted to proactively promote a nation brand. Analytics of engagements are also performed by the communications unit that compares the efforts and tracks the collective digital effort. In order to do 'well' and reach engagement goals, diplomats are instructed to contribute to the MFA's digital presence through 'fun' and 'informal content' rather than posting information (Interview Danish diplomat). Visual content such as photographs are highly encouraged – a photograph or a video is said to increase the chance of being shared by others on social media by 94% (Document 1, p. 10). In the Swedish instructions for how to take photographs for a social media account, diplomats are instructed to be 'playful and relaxed in ways that will spread to the person(s) being photographed' and to 'avoid office interiors or conference rooms' (Document 1, p. 6). These instructions are clearly stressing the management of emotions by requesting diplomats to put an unknown, invisible and transnational public 'to ease' (Hochschild, [1983] 2012:133). The idea is that diplomats appearing to be naturally 'fun' and 'unforced' will generate a narrative representation of the state that they embody

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(Keys and Yorke 2019: 1239). The goal of this narrative representation is for the diplomat and by extension the state, to be seen as 'good', 'sincere' and 'trustworthy'.

The personal approach is furthered by instructions and training to focus on 'persons rather than the policies'. During an online training session in 2020, the instructor stressed that communication should focus on the 'who and why rather than the when, where and how?' because 'persons activate emotions in other persons'. Diplomats reflected on these display rules:

Czech diplomat: 'The instructions are pretty clear, it's supposed to be engaging and some diplomats are really good at developing a personal approach to that, it may even come naturally to them. But others just follow the instructions and look at what others are doing and copy what seems to be working'....'Yes it's acting but not to everyone'

British diplomat: 'It did feel a bit silly in the beginning, I mean what we do is so much more complex than what you could ever communicate on social media. But it's not like we are lying, we are just communicating it in a lighter way so that it will gain traction. I mean we follow all these social rules and rituals in real life for the purpose of reaching a certain goal, it's the same on social media - you do what you have to do'.

The diplomats' reflections on whether or not these new display rules came naturally or were acted reflects a perceived difference between 'real' and 'fake' online role performance (cf. Hochschild, [1983] 2012:108). Some diplomats were seen as intuitively better at performing their online persona while to others the repetition of instructions and peer performance had led to a gradual acceptance of the need to 'put on a show' in institutionally approved ways. Interestingly, all interviewed diplomats were able to give examples of peers that were 'naturally good' in their performances online indicating awareness of principles of social stratification (Hochschild, [1983] 2012:43).

*Digital disinformation and emotional restraint*

The Russian annexation of Crimea resulted in growing awareness of the threat of digital disinformation in diplomatic organisations (Hedling, 2021). It soon became widely known that Russia had weaponized digital diplomacy by using social media to spread disinformation to reach foreign policy goals. The understanding of digital diplomacy has since been shaped by efforts to balance the opportunities of digitalisation with its vulnerabilities. Awareness that digital tools are not just available for 'positive' and promotional purposes has increased levels of competition for online attention in digital diplomacy. The initial goal of enhancing engagement in digital diplomacy has gradually been complemented with a growing repertoire of strategies to interact with online transnational publics. Most importantly, the strategies for advocacy and promotion discussed above, were complemented with containment strategies (Bjola and Pamment, 2018).

The management of emotions is codified according to different roles and emotive performances. Hochschild compares how flight attendants managed their emotions by personalizing and identifying with the traveller, while bill collectors instead suppressed empathy by depersonalizing and distancing themselves in their professional interactions. Encounters with digital space in diplomacy, increasingly also entail balancing different roles. While the general guidelines for social media use still emphasise a 'personal tone', 'positive energy' or emotional tropes, dealing with disinformation instead calls for diplomats to depersonalize and 'distancing oneself' from social media platforms. This entails a careful balancing in the performance of a digital persona where diplomats on the one hand are instructed to display 'being curious and innovative' (Document 3, p. 3) but on the other hand to deal with disinformation by displaying 'caution, formality and distance' (Interview with British Diplomat). In this other context, diplomats are instructed to cultivate online self-restraint by 'not getting upset' by false claims or personal attacks and by refraining from responding in ways that could be seen as 'emotional'.

German diplomat: 'It's about making sure that you don't fall in to the same category as the one you are trying to work against. It's a very thin line and credibility is everything. You have to weigh every word'.

Estonian diplomat: 'You have to practice restraint. Sometimes it would be so easy to just discard something as nonsense or clearly fake news but that would play the

wrong way. On social media a response is not like a face-to-face interaction that stays in that room and is read in a social context, it can gain a life of its own and you have to try to stay in control'.

On the subject of dealing with disinformation, the diplomats expressed very different demands of managed emotions that instead served to separate themselves from the (deceptive) promotional use of social media by others. In this capacity, diplomats were no longer expected to embrace informality and the personal tone but instead fall back on their professional habitus of 'reason and composure' (Documents 5,6 and 7). Dealing with the digital in this context also warranted more institutional control. For instance, if in need of removing a comment on social media that contains false information, there is a strict protocol in the Swedish MFA with steps of archiving screenshots and filing motivation and contextual information (Document 2, p. 18). In stark contrast to the instructions to use discourse and visuals in ways that will seem spontaneous, diplomats were instructed to answer all comments containing criticism in a 'factual way'. Digital disinformation is thus a part of digital diplomacy that instead demands the display of absent emotions and online performance of a less 'engaging' and more traditional representation of the diplomatic self.

### *Tensions in the online-offline divide*

A closer interrogation of the ways in which social media has challenged the diplomatic profession reveals tensions in the complementarity of offline and online performance. As I have demonstrated, expectations of activities of digital diplomacy leads to demands of appropriate display on digital platforms. Moreover, digital disinformation has introduced new requirements of carefully navigating the display rules online. These tensions are further amplified by seemingly impossible combinations of good diplomatic conduct online and offline at the same time. A French diplomat shared an anecdote which he felt illustrated how emotions were at play in the online-offline divide of diplomatic practice:

A colleague in the service was about to get a big promotion. I mean it's never certain until its official, things can happen but everybody knew it would be him. It was about to be announced that afternoon and I wanted to be the first to congratulate him on Twitter – or at least be among the first. The only problem was

that I was hosting an event at the embassy that day and I can't check my phone while I am entertaining. That would be rude and unprofessional and make my guests feel uncomfortable. So, like I always do in these situations, I prepared the tweet and instructed an assistant to look for the announcement and publish the tweet the minute it was public. As I was instructing the assistant, I accidentally published the tweet – right then before the announcement was out. I absolutely panicked; I mean imagine the embarrassment. I managed to erase it pretty quickly and I do not think anyone saw it but I can never know and just thinking about it now brings back the horror.

This recollection stresses how 'being first' to publicly comment on an announcement on Twitter mattered to this diplomat to the extent that he needed to find a way of performing his digital self even when otherwise occupied. He acknowledges that doing both at the same time would be 'unprofessional'. The competent performance of digital diplomacy is here at odds with diplomatic decorum but the diplomat still wanted his online persona to follow the 'always on' script and 'pride himself' in being first. The sense of shame and fear that the diplomat expressed that he felt when the tweet was published also suggest that he had indeed internalised the display rules of digital diplomacy, not only was he not first, he made the mistake of calling something too soon, stepping on a clearly red line in diplomatic conduct. He managed to delete the tweet which offered some relief, but the risk that it may reappear (someone might have taken a screenshot) resulted in emotions of shame as opposed to the desired pride in competently performing on both stages at the same time (cf. Hochschild, [1983] 2012:237; Scheff, 2000).

Diplomats also perceived tension in the way that positive promotion and dealing with disinformation was seen as 'two sides of a coin' (Interview with Estonian diplomat) that were at odds with each other. Some diplomats were clearly sensing the increasing antagonism online where following the script had become a political practice of 'emotionally ignoring the other':

Italian diplomat: It's almost like we are pretending that it's not there you know. We keeping doing the positive stuff or engaging seriously with our peers but then

without acknowledging that there is this whole other side where the rules are entirely different – in fact where there are no rules and everybody knows this.

This diplomat expressed mild frustration over the different rules of engagement on social media when engaging with diplomats outside of the European community. The fact that social media had become weaponized by some, had made digital diplomacy interactions evident repertoires of performance without 'true' meaning. Being constrained by being personal only when the personal was promotional on social media, she feared was damaging the credibility of the diplomatic profession offline.

## Conclusions

Being a diplomat depends on being able to embody the state that you serve and manage emotions of the self and others in often politically sensitive situations. Diplomacy therefore requires managed emotions. Demands of social media activities known in the field as 'digital diplomacy' have however introduced new dynamics of managed emotions. Diplomats are expected to be active on social media in ways that will engage publics, serve to democratise foreign policy and increase public support for diplomacy. This seized opportunity for increasing transparency has however been conditioned by the emotional affordances of social media platforms. In order to compete for attention online, content must be appealing in ways that differ from display rules in the traditional diplomatic arena. In addition to cultivating credibility through high-level sociability and face-to-face interactions, diplomats are encouraged to adopt commercial communication practices to appear 'fun' and 'relaxed' using emotions as 'hooks' in ways that will put online followers at ease.

On first glance, digital diplomacy has introduced new display rules that are transferred to diplomats in the shape of strategic communications skills. In these performances, diplomats produce social media content that is engaging and achieves the intended outreach goals through measurements of reach (such as shares and likes). These display rules however have deeper implications in activating new scripts of always thinking about content, being connected and online which diplomats have begun to internalise as new norms. Growing acceptance of digital diplomacy inevitably led diplomats to increasingly value their online persona. Moreover, the appropriate display rules are entirely different when diplomats are expected to deal with the

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dangerous and deceptive activation of emotions online that instead requires practices of 'digital restraint' on and in relation to social media. This in turn produces tensions both between the modes of digital diplomacy (promotional or countering communication practices) and between the online and offline management of emotions. Digital diplomacy is therefore challenging enactments of 'the good diplomat' by demanding at times impossible combinations of online and offline competent performance.

All of this reveals that professional encounters with digitalisation result in more than the continuation of social interactions by other means. Demands of online performance include adopting new norms and practices at the margins that may not appear to challenge core activities until they have been internalised and tensions arise. The analysis I have offered therefore points to the role of digital change in professional agency in ways that cross the online/offline boundary. Attention to managed emotions therefore enables us to interrogate this change beyond what is seen on social media.

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