The Development and Game of US Digital Diplomacy Under Geopolitics

WU Fei
Jinan University, Guangzhou, China
The Chinese Association for History of Journalism and Mass Communication, Guangzhou, China

JI Yao
Jinan University, Guangzhou, China

As the evolution of public diplomacy, digital diplomacy uses Internet and new communication technologies to help achieve diplomatic goals. As early as 2006, the United States began to actively develop cyber diplomacy in order to maintain and develop the broad interests of the United States in cyberspace. However, in recent years, the US digital diplomacy has encountered internal and external communication barriers, especially after the 2008 financial crisis, the US government no longer has the strength to support its diplomatic actions. At the same time, a small number of large technology companies are beginning to compete for geopolitical influence using their own financial and technological advantages as well, including Tesla President Musk, whose expansion in Starlink technology in the Ukraine crisis is an act of bringing his own funds technology to participate in U.S. digital diplomacy.

Keywords: digital diplomacy, geopolitics, big tech

Introduction

Digital diplomacy is the evolution of public diplomacy that uses Internet and new communication technologies to help achieve diplomatic goals, focusing on Internet-driven changes in the diplomatic environment, diplomatic agendas such as cybersecurity, privacy, and the use of Internet tools. Digital diplomacy is also known as or is part of public diplomacy 2.0, E-Diplomacy, and cyber diplomacy. As explained by Jan Melissen (2007), a Senior Fellow at Leiden University’s Institute of Security and Global Affairs, in The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations, cyber-diplomacy “links the impact of innovations in communication and information technology to diplomacy” (p. 30). Digital diplomacy has its foundations that, “new communication technologies offer new opportunities to interact with a wider public by adopting a networked approach and making the most of an increasingly multicaentric global, interdependent system” (Melissen, 2007, p. 57). The rise of social media as a tool in diplomacy has given way for states to strike up two-way or “dialogic” communication with other diplomatic actors and their foreign publics, compared to the one-way nature of traditional public diplomacy.

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WU Fei, Ph.D., professor of Journalism & Communication, Jinan University, Guangzhou; Vice Chairman of the Global Communication and Public Diplomacy Research Committee, The Chinese Association for History of Journalism and Mass Communication, Guangzhou, China.

JI Yao, master of arts, School of Journalism & Communication, Jinan University, Guangzhou, China.
Constance Duncombe (2019), a lecturer in international relations at Monash University, believed that while traditional diplomacy occurs offline in relative privacy, online diplomacy has allowed many a multitude of participants to discuss foreign policy-making, increasing the influence of public opinion on the foreign policy agenda.

Even though the United States had engaged in digital diplomacy under President George W. Bush as early as 2006, the United States officially launched digital diplomacy in 2009. From 2010 to 2011, the White House released several official documents outlining digital diplomacy priorities, including one titled Public Diplomacy: Strengthening U.S. Engagement with the World. It outlined what the U.S. government wanted digital diplomacy to achieve: (1) to discredit America’s ideological enemies; (2) to counter Chinese propaganda on the Internet; (3) to limit the presence of Russian media in the former Soviet republics; and (4) to use social networks confronting Iran’s foreign cultural policy.¹

The U.S. develops digital diplomacy as a response to the growing loss of U.S. voice, extending the scope of U.S. diplomacy beyond intergovernmental communication. Digital diplomacy, as identified by the U.S. State Department, covers a broad range of U.S. interests in cyberspace, including cybersecurity, Internet censorship, Internet governance, military uses of the Internet, innovation, and economic growth. Cyberspace has also become a vehicle for joint U.S. industry and civil society engagement in foreign policy.²

**There Are Communication Barriers in U.S. Digital Diplomacy Under the Geopolitical Game**

Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken delivers remarks on Modernizing American Diplomacy at the Foreign Service Institute in Arlington: on cyberspace and emerging technologies, the State Department must make sure that it serves and protects U.S. interests, boosts U.S. competitiveness, upholds American values, and reduces the misuse of surveillance technology. Although Office of the Coordinator for Cyber Issues was created under former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2011, it was demoted during the Trump administration. On April 4, 2022, the U.S. State Department established the Bureau of Cyberspace and Digital Policy (CDP) to address one of the most significant challenges in digital diplomacy. U.S. Ambassador at Large for Cyberspace and Digital Policy Nathaniel C. Fick described the bureau’s mission on the front page of the official website as leading and coordinating the Department’s work on cyberspace and digital diplomacy to encourage responsible state behavior in cyberspace and advance policies that protect the integrity and security of the infrastructure of the Internet, serve U.S. interests, promote competitiveness, and uphold democratic values, ensure the U.S. remains the world’s innovation leader and standard-maker.

Dr. Jovan Kurbalija, executive director of the DiploFoundation, believes that digital diplomacy has gone beyond the State Department and involves many more participants, including: U.S. Department of Commerce and the Federal Communications Commission, which are responsible for e-commerce and Internet infrastructure, and the US technology company Microsoft has also launched a “diplomatic service”.

**U.S. Technology Companies Become Actors and Stakeholders in Digital Foreign Policy**

In brief, digital diplomacy is the use of digital media to communicate, and the current form of expression is

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digital technology which includes, for example, Tesla President Musk’s behavior in expanding Starlink technology to participate in digital diplomacy in the United States with his own funds and technology.

U.S. digital diplomacy aims to involve a wide range of segments of U.S. society, excluding diplomats from Western societies outside the U.S. and developing countries. According to the Russian researcher Natalia Tsvetkova, American Web 2.0 public diplomacy includes making radio and TV programs available on the Internet, facilitating access to American literature, which also includes a large number of literatures promoting American values in the core of SSCI, monitoring discussions in the blogosphere, creating personal pages of U.S. government members in social networks, and distributing information via mobile phones. (Tsvetkova, 2008, p. 110)

The United States is implementing its digital diplomacy programs with the help of large IT companies, including such heavyweights as Google, Twitter, Tesla, and more.

Digital diplomacy was embraced by the United States Department of State in the commencement of 21st century statecraft, utilizing YouTube, multimedia, and social media to inform policy to publics. The U.S. Department of State’s official explanation of it is, “The complementing of traditional foreign policy tools with newly innovated and adapted instruments of statecraft that fully leverages the networks, technologies, and demographics of our interconnected world.” The First Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review of 2010 published by the U.S. State Department, explained 21st century diplomacy as the U.S. moderately influencing the process of national debate and attracting more actors, the U.S. can act according to its own diplomatic agenda, and an increasing amount of states, such as corporations, transnational networks, foundations, NGOs, religious groups, and citizens themselves are capable of acting on their own diplomatic agendas.

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton explained the concept as The U.S. is working to leverage the power and potential embracing new tools, like using cell phones for mobile banking or to monitor elections. But the department is also reaching to the people behind these tools, the innovators and entrepreneurs themselves. (Clinton, 2012)

The rise of digital diplomacy has enabled the U.S. government to directly engage with foreign publics through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, spreading the U.S. government’s voice.

In his book Digital Diplomacy: Theory and Practice, Corneliu Bjola (2015), associate professor of diplomatic studies at Oxford University, argues that for Digital Diplomacy 3.0 to function properly, collaboration with big tech companies is needed.

The U.S. Department of State currently has 230 Facebook pages, 80 Twitter accounts, 55 channels on YouTube, and 40 accounts on Flickr. The State Department has also founded many digital diplomacy programs and initiatives including Dipnote, Digital Outreach Team, Opinion Space, Democracy Dialogues, and Civil Society 2.0.

Guy Golan (2021), a public diplomacy expert at Syracuse University, believes that a big misconception about social media by organizations, including governments, is that they have direct access to the public, rather
than relying on traditional media outlets, such as elite news organizations like the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal. But the results of the new study suggest that the flow of information in Twitter is highly mediated.

The 2018 Twiplomacy report revealed that 97% of UN member states had Twitter handles, reaffirming Twitter as by far the most popular digital diplomacy platform. Constance Duncombe (2018) believes that one reason for the increasing use of Twitter as a diplomatic tool is that it not only can help political leaders and practitioners easily reach domestic and foreign publics through traditional one-way messaging, but also through participation in the form of two-way dialogue.

Mohammad Minshawi (2021), a Washington-based Egyptian news writer and expert on U.S. affairs, sees tech giants as having a powerful and independent geopolitical role. At the same time, national security has begun to intervene in the operation of Silicon Valley’s technology platforms. The distance between politics and technology is disappearing over time. Henry Kissinger’s or Samuel Huntington’s old ideas about world order are no longer applied to this new world. The old world order is completely out of tune in front of the new world order, which is governed only by technological innovation and the speed of communication, even control, and enslavement.

**Digital Companies Take Advantage of Capital to Reshape the Global Order**

In modern times, national governments have been major players in global affairs. Nien-hê Hsieh (2009), a professor of business ethics at Harvard University, said that in the 1990s, American technology companies were unwilling or not involved in American political operations, and new technology companies believed that their commitments could go beyond politics and be more neutral. That has started to change in recent years as a handful of big tech companies have begun to compete for geopolitical influence. Non-state actors are increasingly shaping geopolitics, with tech companies appearing more active.

According to President of Eurasia Group Ian Bremmer, today’s biggest technology firms have two critical advantages that have allowed them to carve out independent geopolitical influence. First, they have created a new dimension in geopolitics—digital space—over which they exercise primary influence. People are increasingly living out their lives in this vast territory, which governments do not and cannot fully control. Second, tech companies provide the full range of digital products needed to run a modern society, which affects all aspects of civic, economic, and private life.

Klon Kitchen (2022), a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), believes that technology has always been a key variable in geostrategic change. Sailboats, gunpowder, steam engines, nuclear power, modern communications, and information technology, these innovations have changed their respective eras and changed the destiny of nations. Today’s “Fourth Industrial Revolution” is shaping and reshaping the contours of the emerging global order. What’s more, the multinational corporations at the heart of this revolution are rapidly becoming powerful geopolitical stakeholders that often challenge the authority, sovereignty, and capabilities of governments.

In a 2008 survey of United States Information Agency (USIA) alumni study, American public diplomacy scholar Kathy Fitzpatrick (2008) argued that despite increased funding for public diplomacy in the Middle East after 9/11, dozens of reports called for a dramatic increase in public diplomacy capabilities.

Retired Admiral Mike Mullen and Marine Corps Commander James Jones (2017) advocated for adequate funding of the international affairs budget, in an op-ed Why Foreign Aid Is Critical to U.S. National Security on Washington’s Politico website: In the 21st century, weapons and warriors alone are insufficient to keep America secure, the U.S. still needs digital security.
The Trump administration slashed funding for U.S. diplomacy and development programs, cutting funding for nonmilitary initiatives by a third. As a result of these cuts, U.S. diplomacy has retreated globally, with USAID and unofficial diplomatic missions closing in succession.

In March 2021, Senators Chris Murphy, Chris Van Hollen together with Representatives David Cicilline and Ami Bera offered proposals such as the Investing in 21st Century Diplomacy budget plan in the 117th Congress that called for a 20% spending increase in the diplomatic affairs budget, and $68.7 billion for the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development, or America’s diplomatic and humanitarian efforts will fail to meet the challenges of the 21st century. According to a budget report provided by the Congressional Research Service, Department of State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs: FY 2023 Budget and Appropriations, the Biden Administration’s FY2023 applications for the foreign program account total $9.64 billion, just about 1% more than the $9.54 billion Congress appropriated in 2022, including all base and supplemental funding. At the same time, the House Armed Services Committee flippantly tacked on an additional $37 billion onto the defense budget during a recent National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) markup hearing with little debate or discussion.

Meanwhile, the interest and influence of US technology companies in geopolitics is also rapidly rising. According to the State of the Global Technological Economy report released by former Nolan Norton researcher Howard A. Rubin (2017), global spending on technology exceeded $6.3 trillion in 2016, making it the third-largest economic force in terms of gross domestic product (GDP), second only to the US and China. In 2018 alone, Apple brought in $265.6 billion in net income; Amazon made $232.9 billion; Google parent Alphabet, $136.8 billion; Microsoft, $110.4 billion, and Facebook, $55.8 billion. These five companies alone make up more than $801.5 billion in annual revenue (not even counting net assets), roughly the size of Saudi Arabia’s nominal GDP in 2018. The report also predicts that by 2023, more than 50% of global GDP will be driven by services and products from digitally transformed industries. But it’s not just about money, it’s about the impact of these resources.

The world’s largest tech companies are amassing wealth, influence, international reach, and transnational interests previously reserved for only nations. Tech companies are not just players in global politics; they are often rule-makers as well. The “California model”6 of Internet governance that the United States believes in is the model with the least government intervention in the affairs of Silicon Valley companies.

Big tech companies have begun taking risks by acquiring businesses outside the tech industry to take on activities typically carried out by governments, including diplomacy, public infrastructure, civil service benefits, and defense purchases. In her book The Information Trade: How Big Tech Conquers Countries, Challenges Our Rights, and Disrupts Our World, Alexis Wichowski (2020) of the New York Office of Technology and Innovation went so far as to refer big tech companies as “Cyber States”, which have begun to engage in empire-building behavior.

Americans (and American tech companies) are used to having it all. But with tech supremacy at the heart of geopolitics, tech policy will no longer be made on a purely technological scale, and from the U.S. government’s perspective, it is not permissible if the global ambitions of the U.S. tech companies conflict with their values and interests. According to Scott Bade (2022), special series editor for TechCrunch’s Global Affairs Project, what

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6 Tech oligarchs produce enormous profits and generate wealth, California remains fiscally flush, and its evolving economy, long on digitization, and constant entertainment.
the U.S. needs is a new geopolitical technology doctrine and for the past two decades, the U.S. tech companies have dominated the industry with one simple strategy: growth at all costs. The U.S. government equates tech success with U.S. success, and while the government abandons regulation, technology is now beginning to take center stage in foreign affairs and national security agendas.

According to the *Financial Times*, Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple have increased funding for think tanks with overwhelming influence in Washington, including: Center for Strategic and International Studies, Center for a New American Security, Brookings Institution, and Hudson Institute. Contributions to the four think tanks by large tech companies have grown from at least $625,000 in 2017-2018 to at least $1.2 million in 2019-2020, and to more than $2.7 million in 2019-2020 directly.

![Total donations from big tech companies to U.S. foreign policy think tanks.](image)

The think tank itself denies being influenced by corporate donations in the tech industry. Andrew Schwartz, chief communications officer at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), said:

7 https://www.ft.com/content/4e4ca1d2-2d80-4662-86d0-067a10aad50b.
Due to the growing strategic competition between Washington and Beijing, big tech companies are increasingly interested in the national security issues involved in think tanks, and donations indicate that the companies want to know more about where the policy is headed. (Schwartz, 2022)

Paul Scharre, the Vice President and Director of Studies at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), believes: “CNAS maintains strict independence and autonomy, and donations do not exceed legal limits” (Scharre, 2022, p. 2).

From 2016 to 2021, internet companies’ lobbying spending in the U.S. increased from a total of $60 million to $92 million, according to publicly available data compiled by the nonprofit OpenSecrets. Online businesses have also increased spending on technology-related think tanks.

Brookings Institution received at least $620,000 from four tech organizations in 2019 and 2020, and at least $1 million from 2020 to 2021. For CNAS, the figure rose from at least $250,000 to at least $350,000 over the same period.

Bruce Freed, president of the Washington-based Center for Political Accountability, which advocates for tougher tech regulation, said: “Funding think tanks is a great way to influence experts and help shape the political conversation to help companies, not traditional lobbying, that are looking to shape the conversation and the political climate”. (Freed, 2022).

As early as 2014, the Washington Post reported on Google: Once Disdainful of Lobbying, Now a Master of Washington Influence. Google, once a weak lobbyist, has now become the main force in influencing Washington, and it is different from traditional lobby. Google funds research at universities and think tanks, invests in nonprofit advocacy groups in the political sphere, and funds pro-business coalitions seen as projects of public interest. Google, which donates to nearly 140 business trade groups, spent $16.7 million on lobbying in 2015, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, and has spent at or near the top of public companies in lobbying spending since 2012.

![Figure 2. Google’s political campaign contributions.](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-google-is-transforming-power-and-politics/google-once-disdainful-of-lobbying-now-a-master-of-washington-influence/2014/04/12/51648b92-b4d3-11e3-8cb6-284052554d74_story.html)
During the Obama administration, Google representatives attended an average of more than one White House meeting a week during the Obama presidency, according to an analysis of White House data by The Intercept. During Obama’s eight years in office, nearly 250 people became mediators between the administration and Google, and Johanna Shelton, the Google lobbyist with the most visits to the White House, made 128 visits in eight years, far more than any other top lobbying firm.

Before Biden took office, employees of Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Microsoft, and Oracle had donated $4.78 million to the Biden campaign as of October 2020, according to a Wired survey. Google parent company Alphabet’s employees and political action committees spent more than any other company. A Vox analysis of 15 Silicon Valley millionaire political donations found that in the second two years of 2020, 15 Silicon Valley donors collectively donated $120 million to destroy Trump’s cause, and in return, big tech’s international views were well represented in the White House.

Cynthia Hogan, a senior adviser to the Biden campaign, led Apple’s lobbying business, and Biden’s chief of staff Hertz served as deputy counsel when Biden was vice president. Nicole Wong, Obama’s former deputy chief technology officer and Google vice president and deputy general counsel, was named to Biden’s National Security Council and Office of Science and Technology Policy review panels.

Jay Wang (2019), director of the Center for Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California, believed that as technology advances and globalization continues to intensify, the interaction between digital technology and public diplomacy will continue to strengthen. For global businesses, the principles and tools of public diplomacy provide a valuable framework for their international interactions, as they undertake aspects of the traditional role of diplomats in navigating the complex international public policy arena. New capabilities and new partnerships must be developed to address growing concerns about digital technologies and their social and geopolitical consequences.

The growing data and capability gap between the private sector and government has made national security leaders increasingly dependent on technology companies to carry out core national security missions. Gen. Joe Dunford (2018), former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, observed,

> The ability of the United States to leverage its industry and maintain a technological advantage over any potential adversary will depend largely on the partnership between industry, the technology community and the Department of Defense. U.S. tech companies have had a mixed reaction to this.

Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla and SpaceX, is the most well-known example of a private infrastructure participant who played an unexpected role in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Western countries are now short of money for diplomacy, so they need digital companies to participate, but most of the digital companies in the United States are concentrated in California, so they don’t quite understand Washington’s instructions, before, they were the main force of donations, and now Musk’s technology is also applied in battlefield of Udon.

SpaceX CEO Elon Musk heeded the call to quickly provide Ukraine with Starlink satellite Internet access terminals to Ukraine, and a companion app for accessing the internet has become the most downloaded app in the country in March 2022.

Speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Ukraine’s Minister of Digital Transformation Mykhailo Fedorov (2022) said: “The SpaceX founders have so far provided Ukraine with more than 12,000 Starlink terminals, which guarantee the information war Ukraine against Russia on social media.”
Conclusion

U.S. digital diplomacy is basically a variation on the practice of using technology companies after the 2008 financial crisis, when the government no longer had the strength to support its diplomatic efforts, and many U.S. think tanks or government officials have proposed regulation of U.S. technology companies, even for social media. However, in the international development system, the digital giants that have grown up in the United States have formed a symbiotic relationship with the U.S. government, which is difficult to break away from. In many international conflicts, the force that decides to stop the conflict is changing from the government to technology companies and arms companies. The interaction and influence between the two determine the development process of American politics. In many international conflicts, the force that decides to stop the conflict is changing from the government to technology companies and arms companies, and the interaction and influence between the two determine the development process of American politics.

The competition for discourse power in the Internet is very fierce, and it has become a diplomatic space that keeps pace with traditional diplomacy, and it is one of the main battlefields of current globalization. Under the current general situation, China can learn from the digital foreign policy of the United States, vigorously expand the space and channels of digital diplomacy, strengthen the vertical integration and coordination capabilities of diplomacy, industry, and international communication, and build a horizontal platform for the public, enterprises, and government departments. The strategic synergy capability at the same level can enhance the national strategic scientific and technological strength. Through extensive participation in global digital governance activities, we can open up the soft power of China's cyberspace, carry out diplomatic activities more effectively, and enhance China's international image and international discourse power.

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