



The Role of Social Media in Contemporary International Politics

Rola mediów społecznościowych we współczesnej polityce międzynarodowej

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The paper presents an analysis of the influence that the social media have on the modern politics phenomenon. Author shows the growing role of the social media and digitalisation throughout the recent years. She also presents the modern examples of the crucial part of the social media in conducting contemporary politics. The analysis also explains the term of “twiplomacy”, highlighting the moments of today’s diplomatic reality when this term would be adequate. Author also touches the topic of the inclusiveness of the modern politics, created by the social media influence and the possible threats of using this tool for the international security and different disadvantages connected with it. She also shows the influence of the COVID-19 pandemics on this topic. The paper is concluded by the brief considerations about the future of the social media application in politics and diplomacy.

Key words: social media, politics, diplomacy, twiplomacy

Introduction

If someone had told us twenty-five years ago that digitalisation would one day dominate our lives, that we would base our knowledge on online sources, that future leaders would communicate with each other and publicly disseminate important information to the point where almost everyone would have access to it, we would have thought him or her insane. However, as time has gone, our world has shifted dramatically, and this is how it now seems.

The advent of social media has had an impact on everything from individual lives to industry operations. It hasn't left anything unaffected by its might. Digitalisation and social media have altered the way information is disseminated to the general audience. Since the invention of the internet, the costs of recording and distributing information dropped considerably and the number of citizen journalists, bloggers and online activists has steadily increased, making the role of non-traditional media more vital than ever.

In the last ten years, social media has evolved into one of the most essential sources of information as well as a tool for establishing worldwide connections. Despite the fact that many people would not believe it, social media has played a significant role in international relations. The Arab Spring, the refugee crisis, and Donald Trump's whole presidency in the United States are just a few examples of how Twitter and other social media played a key role in the creation of international policymaking.

In this article I will demonstrate the importance of the social media in conducting the modern politics, basing on the examples from the last five years. I'll discuss the realities of using social media in contemporary politics, the inclusivity of modern politics created by this instrument, how the COVID-19 pandemics transformed people's attitudes toward social media, the threats it poses, and the future of this tool.

Reality

Social media are increasingly used as means of communication between states. Diplomats and political leaders are relying more than ever on Twitter or Facebook to interact with their counterparts, rather than the traditional methods of contact used earlier. These discussions take place in front of a global audience, adding a layer of potential criticism that is unique to this mode of communication. Traditional political customs, according to which politics is performed through formal channels of com-

munication and informal face-to-face social contact, are undoubtedly challenged by Twitter. We have moved on from a time when political leaders and diplomats could only share information and opinions through official statements and by the spokespersons.

Recently, we've been dealing with a phenomenon defined by the new terms: Twitter diplomacy, also "*Twiplomacy*" or "hashtag diplomacy", which are defined as "the use of social media website, Twitter, by heads of state, leaders of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and their diplomats to conduct diplomatic outreach and public diplomacy." (Kelemen, 2012) For the purpose of this paper I will use the most popular term which is the "*twiplomacy*".

This phenomenon can be observed for years now. Politicians and officials from all around the world are using social media to share their views and thoughts. It also applies to the international organisations and its leaders. The informations about the official meetings and the public statements of, for example, European Parliament are being published online through official accounts of the institutions, President of the European Parliament but also through accounts of the politicians and other individuals involved.

The biggest illustration of twiplomacy, however, may have been seen during Donald Trump's presidency in the United States of America. Trump has changed the way government personnel deal with social media. His use of social media has gotten him a lot of press throughout the world. He routinely made comments about other politicians, celebrities, ordinary citizens, and current events on Twitter and other social media sites. He tweeted almost 17,000 times between his official statement of candidacy in June 2015 and the first two-and-a-half years of his presidency. He became considerably more engaged by the end of his mandate. On June 5, 2020, he had his most productive day, tweeting 200 times. According to the New York Times, President Trump's most conspicuous presence in the three weeks after the 2020 election has been on Twitter. Since Nov. 3, he has sent nearly 550 tweets, with around three-quarters of them attempting to smear the 2020 election results (Yourish, Buchanan, 2020). His tweets have been deemed official declarations by the president of the United States since early in his presidency. As emotional encounters between US and foreign officials have played out publicly throughout Trump's administration, we've seen a lot of Twitter diplomacy examples.

For example, we could have watched Trump and former Mexican President Vicente Fox feud about the wall, as they both tweeted about Trump's repeated campaign promise to build a border wall (and make Mexico pay for it). There was also a developing

example of Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's hostile language escalating, with North Korean officials threatening to treat Trump's remarks as a declaration of war.

The occurrence of twiplomacy is not limited to the United States. It can be seen all around the world. Users of social media may follow and react to the decisions and opinions of politicians and decision makers on a regular basis. This tendency may have been seen, for example, during the Brexit discussions, when EU and UK officials exchanged opinions via Twitter and Facebook, with active engagement from a global audience.

Inclusiveness

When discussing social media as a tool in contemporary diplomacy, it is critical to recognize the benefits of this phenomenon. The most important, in my opinion, is how diplomacy is becoming more inclusive as a result of the usage of this tool. Social media has created an environment that empowers citizens while also exposing politicians to public scrutiny in a way that the conventional media previously couldn't. We must pay attention to the role of non-governmental organizations and citizen initiatives, both of which have a significant impact on modern politics.

The expanding influence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) adds a new dimension to the political power connected with the rise of social media. Non-Governmental Organizations have influence on diplomatic and political actions on a variety of issues, including economic fairness, fair trade, climate change, and human rights promotion.

Through the blogosphere, tweets, and postings, social media networks allow members of the public to communicate their opinions to leaders and organizations. We are more involved in the debate than we have ever been. Due to this increased visibility, a broader range of actors have been urged to engage in more in-depth discussions in order to realize listening, citizen advocacy, and cultural practices. Furthermore, social media provides a continuous real-time newsfeed via Twitter, as well as alternate venues for the dissemination of foreign broadcasts, allowing fans to stay in the middle of the action at all times.

It can be seen in a variety of situations. I believe that one of the best examples of social involvement and acknowledging state actors and politicians about citizens' opinions and emerging problems can be seen around the world during #metoo actions, climate strikes, and nowadays in Poland during the Polish-wide Woman Strikes which are also taking place online and influencing policy makers.

Disadvantages of using the social media in modern politics and diplomacy

Unfortunately, as is often the case when there are benefits, there are also drawbacks to any occurrence. Previously, information was only accessible through state institutions, and the flow of information between governments and civilians was closely controlled; but, now that diplomacy has gone public and online, we are facing even more challenges than before.

Digitalisation and social media have the potential to create totally new types of crime, putting users at danger of cybercrime. Cracking¹ is the most prevalent type of cybercrime, in which a cybercriminal uses computer technology to steal a person's information, personal and corrupt, or illegitimately view data details for various purposes. For example, diplomatic adversaries can attack systems in order to obtain information that is thought to be useful to them and use it for specific goals.

One of the biggest examples was the Wikileaks narrative, since Wikileaks is known for being an internet whistle-blower who successfully revealed millions of critical emails and documents. There have also been instances where officials' accounts have been hacked. It can be demonstrated using an example from last year, when a hacker guessing the password got into President Trump's account.

Until the efficient digital security solutions in the social media zone will not be developed, using of the social media in contemporary politics and diplomacy will not be safe and has to be lead very carefully.

Another disadvantage of using a social networking platform is the impact it has on image creation. Before the Social Media spread each piece of information was double-checked by the advisor before being released to the public in an official statement. Currently, these information, which is frequently unchecked, is often passed directly from the official to the public, who can then respond. This has an impact on people's public image. It might be witnessed when Donald Trump published information that later turned out to be fake news. Politicians that broadcast false information lose credibility in the eyes of the public and, as a result, lose elections, affecting the international order.

One of the most serious challenges to decision-makers' use of social media was witnessed on January 6, 2021 in the United States, when rioters supporting President Donald Trump stormed the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C. They've banded

¹ The term "cracking" means trying to get into computer systems in order to steal, corrupt, or illegitimately view data. The popular press refers to such activities as hacking, but hackers see themselves as expert, elite programmers and maintain that such illegitimate activity should be called "cracking."; por. Cybercrime.org, "Cracking" <https://cybercrime.org.za/cracking/>.

together on social media with the goal of overturning Trump's loss in the 2020 presidential election by disrupting the joint session of Congress assembled to count electoral votes that would officially certify President-elect Joe Biden's victory. During this period, rioters assaulted law enforcement personnel, destroyed property, and overtook the Capitol Complex for many hours, forcing lawmakers and staff to flee. Five people died in the hours leading up to, during, and after the incident. A large number of individuals were hurt, including 138 police officers. Four officers who responded to the attack died by suicide within seven months. Those events marked a turning point in the public's perception of social media.

The "March for America" had received a lot of press in preparation. The planned event was praised on social media, including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, in addition to the president's and his allies' frequent comments. There was rhetoric that flirted with hostility, even violence, weaved into many of the pleas to stand up for President Trump — and, if possible, block congressional certification of the election he claimed he had won. According to Zignal Labs, a media analysis firm, the term "Storm the Capitol" was used 100,000 times in the 30 days leading up to Jan. 6. Many of these mentions came in viral tweet threads about a hypothetical Capitol storming, which offered instructions on how to get into the building (Barry, McIntire, Rosenberg, 2021).

The events of January 6th demonstrated the power of social media as a political instrument and what can happen when this power is misused. This situation has sparked a debate about alternative remedies to prevent similar events from occurring in the future. A few days after the attack on the Capitol, Donald Trump's social media accounts were disabled. Many people disagree over whether the social media companies' decision was correct. In my perspective, although hate speech is unacceptable, the situation in which companies interfere with people's freedom of speech without any oversight from institutions poses a threat to the global order. We necessitate global solutions, including international law, to provide us with remedies that do not jeopardize freedom of speech and democracy while also shielding us from the dangers posed by the social media.

Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemics

The coronavirus has accelerated the digitalization of international politics even more than it had already done. Leaders who were only half-hearted in their use of digital platforms are now actively conversing using tools like Google Meet, Skype, and Zoom and engaging their followers on Social Media.

Even Pope Francis took part in a Skype interview and is tweeting. As the virus spread over the world, politicians jumped on social media to update their status and change their profile pictures to emphasize the need of combating the global pandemic. While governments strive to reach out to their citizens via social media, particularly Facebook, to warn them about the fatal virus and how to halt its spread, leaders mostly use Twitter to notify people about “wear the mask challenge”, vaccination and other events, as well as maintain in touch with society.

We can also witness a new trend in which we are directly informed about the leaders’ health by them. Diplomacy and international politics have a long history of concealing national leaders’ health in order to maintain the country’s integrity and demonstrate the country’s power on a global scale. We are now directly updated on the leaders’ health, if they are quarantined, vaccinated, or how they spent the lockdown via Twitter or other social media channels. The leaders went more public than ever during the coronavirus pandemics. It was demonstrated in the case of UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who was infected with the coronavirus, resulting in hospitalization and intensive care therapy. We were also notified by Justin Trudeau, Canada’s prime minister, that he had tested positive for Covid-19 and had been quarantined.

Future

What will it look like in the future? What function might social media play in contemporary politics and diplomacy? I believe that in the future, social media and digitization will increasingly rule diplomacy. It’s impossible to return to a time when we didn’t have it. Particularly in the post-Covid-19 era. We are currently witnessing a change in communication from the physical to the virtual realm. The only scenario in which I can imagine social media being phased out as a tool in modern diplomacy is a dystopian image of the internet collapsing or widespread hacking making it unusable.

For the time being, the globe must adapt to a new style of conducting international politics. The task of ensuring security and modernizing diplomatic standards in order to be prepared for future problems lies ahead of us.

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