

## HASHTAG DIPLOMACY AND ITS USE IN AFRICA

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### Abstract

*Hashtag diplomacy or 'Twitter' diplomacy, sometimes referred to as twiplomacy, is an emerging tool used by international policy actors, such as heads of state and diplomats, to conduct public diplomacy and to reach out to worldwide audiences. In a 2018 study of government Twitter users around the world, 951 Twitter accounts were identified as belonging to state leaders and foreign ministries in 187 countries. Therefore, close to 100% of United Nations members states (193 members) consider Twitter to be a valid enough tool to employ on a frequent basis. These users have a combined audience of close to 490 million followers. But what of Twitter's value for individual diplomats, foreign ministries and heads of state and government in Africa? Can this tool be of use in the management and implementation of public diplomacy in a continent where internet penetration is 40% of the combined population and if so, what are these foreign policymakers using it for? This chapter intends to address these questions by exploring the use of hashtag diplomacy in Africa, and other regions, in reference to select examples. It will begin by situating this type of diplomacy under the umbrella of public diplomacy and it will then move on to consider feasibility and reach of this social media platform in Africa.*

**Keywords:** hashtag/Twitter diplomacy; Africa; social media

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## Introduction

‘A Swedish diplomat once asked me how one can reduce the complexities of international diplomacy to a 140 character tweet. I responded by saying that Twiplomacy must be regarded as an art form, one that uses the language of Twitter in order to condense foreign policy initiatives or official statements into short bursts of diplomacy’.<sup>1</sup>

Hashtag diplomacy or ‘Twitter’ diplomacy, sometimes referred to as twiplomacy, is an emerging tool used by international policy actors, such as heads of state and diplomats, to conduct public diplomacy and to reach out to worldwide audiences. Twitter is a social media tool that allows all registered users with access to the internet to send short messages, or ‘tweets’ of up to 280 characters in length (originally 140 characters and which is still the length for some languages). Users can also receive messages, attach web links or other resources and can ‘follow’ other Twitter users via this platform. Hashtags refer to identifiers, or labels, for specific content posted in tweets. This tool allows users to remain aware of the latest news and events worldwide, and to draw attention to specific statements or images or events quickly through retweeting and all thanks to the relative convenience of a smart-enabled cellular phone or similar device. In a 2018 study of government Twitter users around the world, 951 Twitter accounts were identified as belonging to state leaders and foreign ministries in 187 countries. Therefore, close to 100% of United Nations member states (193 members) consider Twitter to be a valid enough tool to employ on a frequent basis. These users have a combined audience of close to 490 million followers.<sup>2</sup>

But what of Twitter’s value for individual diplomats, foreign ministries and heads of state and government in Africa? Can this tool be of use in the management and implementation of public diplomacy in a continent where internet penetration is 40% of the combined population and if so, what are these foreign policymakers using it for? This chapter intends to address these questions by exploring the use of hashtag diplomacy in Africa, and other regions, in reference to select examples. It

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<sup>1</sup> Ilan Manor, “Exploring the Use of Hashtags”, *Exploring Digital diplomacy*, 2014, [<https://digdipblog.com/2014/09/30/hashtags/>], 20 February 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Burson, Cohn & Wolfe, *Twiplomacy study*, 2020, [<https://twiplomacy.com/blog/twiplomacy-study-2018/>], 20 February 2020.

will begin by situating this type of diplomacy under the umbrella of public diplomacy and it will then move on to consider feasibility and reach of this social media platform in Africa.

## Layers Of Public Diplomacy

Diplomacy involves the management of interstate relations and relations between states and other actors.<sup>3</sup> This can be a very intricate business, as Hocking and Melissen support, and any analysis of diplomacy would need to separate out the diplomatic domains (the often complicated context behind negotiations) from diplomatic sites (that is the nature of the process through diplomatic communication occurs via specific channels)<sup>4</sup>. Although questions around the risks of using social media as a communication tool of diplomacy abound, in an increasingly digital world, it cannot be discounted. And it is within this digital debate, that public diplomacy is most often emphasised.

Public diplomacy refers to that mechanism by which the Government of a state promotes its foreign policy goals by communicating its foreign policy to international audiences not only foreign governments but foreign publics too. Communicating foreign policy is key. South Africa, for example, experienced heavy backlash from domestic, and international, audiences in 2017 when it failed to communicate to them, effectively, its reasons for its voting decisions during its first year as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.<sup>5</sup> As an instrument of soft power, public diplomacy has encompassed the cultivating of public opinion in other countries; reporting on international events and their impact on foreign policy; and investing in intercultural communications. Public diplomacy, therefore, can be regarded as an overarching concept encompassing cultural diplomacy, public affairs and propaganda.<sup>6</sup> In a

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<sup>3</sup> Ronald P. Barston, *Modern Diplomacy* (4<sup>th</sup> Edition), London: Routledge, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Hocking, Jan Melissen, *Diplomacy in the Digital Age*, Clingendael: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Chris Landsberg, Suzanne Graham, "South African foreign-policy formulation, 2009-2016" in Chris Landsberg, Suzanne Graham (eds.), *Government and Politics in South Africa: Coming of Age*, Pretoria: Van Schaik, 2017, pp. 263-285.

<sup>6</sup> Nina Gorenc, "Public Diplomacy as an Instrument of US Foreign and Security Policy" in *Teorija in Praksa*, no. 3-56, 2019, pp. 911-929.

recent study, Sanchez found that Mexico and Russia are using “soft power as part of their diplomatic strategies in Twitter to respond to current challenges of the International Relations dynamic in Foreign Policy issues.”<sup>7</sup>

Traditionally states have made use of four correspondence tools in their dealings with each other and other international actors.<sup>8</sup> These are notes; letters; memoranda and aides-memoires. However, Rana contends that “public diplomacy as it takes place now could not be conducted without the ICT revolution” and that due to evolving technologies, “communication with publics is transformed.”<sup>9</sup> Although Ciolek asserts that only the mode of delivery is changing and that the purpose of public diplomacy remains unchanged.<sup>10</sup> It is true that “Twitter has taken on diverse and occasional roles in diplomatic communications, from cordial announcements of bi-lateral cooperation to terse exchanges and diplomatic jabs, as well as more casual posts”.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Manor argues that “understanding hashtags, or hashtag literacy, is now a requisite from all those following diplomatic institutions be it scholars, journalists, citizens or even other diplomats.”<sup>12</sup> He goes on to state that on occasion hashtags can indicate countries’ entire foreign policy initiatives and they offer global followers the chance to understand how countries’ promote themselves around the world.<sup>13</sup>

Twitter is appealing because it is quick and by nature enforces succinct short text messages. Public figures, like heads of state, enjoy this advantage as it also accommodates dynamic political situations requiring Twitter storms of information, advice, opinion and responses. Users can

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<sup>7</sup> Ramses Sanchez, *Digital Diplomacy of Mexico and Russia: Cross-National Comparative Analysis*, (MA Dissertation) 2018, [[https://dspace.spbu.ru/bitstream/11701/12938/1/MA\\_Dissertation\\_RamsesSanchez\\_2018.pdf](https://dspace.spbu.ru/bitstream/11701/12938/1/MA_Dissertation_RamsesSanchez_2018.pdf)], 26 February 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Ronald P. Barston, *op.cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Kishan S. Rana, *21st Century Diplomacy: A Practitioner's Guide*, London: Continuum, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Muhammad Ittefaq, “Digital Diplomacy via Social Networks: A Cross-National Analysis of Governmental Usage of Facebook and Twitter for Digital Engagement” in *Journal of Contemporary Eastern Asia*, no. 1-18, 2019, pp. 49-69.

<sup>11</sup> Datta Dinkar Chavan, “Twitter Diplomacy”, 2019 [<https://abhikipedia.abhimanu.com/Article/IAS/MTE4OTU0/Twitter-Diplomacy-India-and-the-world-IAS>], 15 February 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Ilan Manor, “Exploring the Use of Hashtags”.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem.*

also search for specific hashtags and subjects can trend which draws global attention to them. Moreover, it offers an easy browsing experience on cellular phones. However, Dee argues that:

“Whilst Twitter has become a major component of diplomatic life, with diplomats themselves frequently tweeting position updates and news from negotiations, it does also present a major challenge for diplomacy. If diplomacy is best achieved where trust is developed quietly and away from the public eye, Twitter can provide the medium for removing that trust between diplomats as any statement, off-hand comment, or ‘red-line’ presented can be tweeted and showcased to the world. Worse still, it raises serious concerns where diplomats’ own politicians can broadcast statements which either contradict or undermine the position they are presenting or even attack the other party with whom the diplomats are seeking to build rapport and trust.”<sup>14</sup>

The public reads the tweets of leaders and diplomatic actors and by retweeting or responding to these tweets has the power to legitimise these actors and the foreign policy principles they are communicating.<sup>15</sup> Dissenting from this view are Uysal and Schroeder who contend that, in the case of Turkey, the public has very little power via this social media platform and that ‘Twitter’ public diplomacy is a decidedly government-driven strategy. In essence it is about propaganda and not about engagement. Moreover, a consequence of this type of diplomatic communication is the birth of a ‘new’ cult of personality in public diplomacy.<sup>16</sup> Simunjak and Caliandro, argue that US President Donald Trump’s interactions with political leaders around the world through Twitter have often failed to employ conventional diplomatic language. President Trump has frequently used Twitter to insult those he opposes, to inform about policy changes or to announce his frustrations. And often it is

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<sup>14</sup> \*\*\*, “Trump, Twitter and diplomacy”, (Commentary for the University of Warwick Knowledge Centre by Guido Van Meersbergen and Megan Dee), *Knowledge Centre*, 2017 [<https://warwick.ac.uk/newsandevents/knowledgecentre/society/politics/Twitter-diplomacy/>], 20 February 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Constance Duncombe, “Twitter and the Challenges of Digital Diplomacy” in *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, no. 2-38, 2018, pp. 91-100.

<sup>16</sup> Nur Uysal, Jared Schroeder, “Turkey’s Twitter public diplomacy: Towards a ‘new’ cult of personality” in *Public Relations Review*, no. 5-45, 2019.

world leaders who take to Twitter to respond to President Trump's declarations.<sup>17</sup> When President Trump allegedly referred to some African countries as in 'very bad shape' and used offensive language to describe them, @NAkufoAddo, President Nana Akufo-Addo of Ghana, responded on Twitter: "...we will not accept such insults, even from a leader of a friendly country, no matter how powerful".

In a study conducted in the six Persian Gulf states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, by Straub, Kruikemier, van der Meulen and van Noort found that Western embassies rarely engage in direct, interactive personal communication with their foreign audiences. Moreover, Western embassies' networks are limited, and social media is used only to post information.<sup>18</sup> O'Boyle suggests that mainstream news houses are relying more and more on social media as a news source.<sup>19</sup> This is an important factor for foreign policy practitioners to consider as social media can, through dialogue and engagement, assist states in building a positive image globally.<sup>20</sup>

Kampf, Manor, and Segev reviewed dialogic communication adopted via social networking sites of 11 Ministries of Foreign Affairs around the globe (including Somalia) and found that these Ministries have "quarantined their engagement with followers".<sup>21</sup> In other words, the potential use of these social platforms has been unfulfilled mainly because Ministries remain committed to conventional broadcast models of communicating diplomatic content.

Cowan and Arsenault refer to three layers of public diplomacy. The first is one-way communication to a foreign audience (monologic), for example through a speech. The second is two-way or multidirectional

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<sup>17</sup> Muhammad Ittefaq, *op.cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Nadine Straub, Sanne Kruikemeier, Heleen van der Meulen, Guda van Noort, "Digital diplomacy in GCC countries: Strategic communication of Western embassies on Twitter" in *Government Information Quarterly* no. 4-32, 2015, pp. 369-379.

<sup>19</sup> Jane O-Boyle, "Twitter diplomacy between India and the United States: Agenda-building analysis of tweets during presidential state visits" in *Global Media and Communication*, no. 1-15, 2019, pp. 121-134.

<sup>20</sup> Muhammad Ittefaq, *op.cit.*

<sup>21</sup> Ronit Kampf, Ilan Manor, Elad Segev, "Digital Diplomacy 2.0? A Cross-national Comparison of Public Engagement in Facebook and Twitter" in *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, no. 10, 2015, pp. 331-362.

communication (dialogue), for example discussions between two heads of state. The third refers to initiatives where people 'work together on a joint venture or project' (collaboration).<sup>22</sup> It is important to consider in what ways hashtag diplomacy may be a useful tool for foreign policy practitioners. It may be that all three layers of public diplomacy, as referred to above, can be facilitated through Twitter. In December 2019 and January 2020 @Paul Kagame, Rwanda's President Paul Kagame, tweeted a confirmation of the positive bilateral relations shared between Rwanda and the United Arab Emirates whilst referencing its political leader @MohamedBinZayed; and congratulated his "brother & friend" @hagegeingob, President Hage Geingobon, on his re-election in Namibia and on the growing relationship between Rwanda and Namibia respectively. In another example, in June 2017, United States (US) President Donald Trump announced his intentions to withdraw the US from the Paris Climate Agreement. In response to this, the Prime Ministers of Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Finland and Denmark coordinated a Twitter reply that the US should not leave the Agreement and @realDonaldTrump should "show global leadership."<sup>23</sup>

Zahran offers another view on the above. She contends that the age of social media has created a new phase of public diplomacy - one that concerns the public. Twitter is a relatively accessible tool for interested publics, and civil society organisations, globally and via this platform they can become content producers of foreign policy agendas not helpless consumers of it. Public choice has also expanded. Publics can choose 'to follow' state leaders they are interested in on Twitter, for example. Governments have become increasingly aware of this and as a result public diplomacy literature has become peppered more and more with phrases such as 'partnerships'; 'mutuality'; 'social networks' and 'relationship building'.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Geoffrey Cowan, Amelia Arsenault, "Moving from Monologue to Dialogue to Collaboration: The Three Layers of Public Diplomacy" in *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, no. 10-616, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Burson, Cohn & Wolfe, *op.cit.*

<sup>24</sup> R.S. Zaharna, "From Pinstripes to Tweets", *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, Winter 2015, [<https://www.thecaireview.com/issues/winter-2015/>], 15 March 2020.

## Twitter Diplomacy In Africa

It is interesting to note that the South African Government (@GovernmentZA) is among the top five most active Twitter accounts in the world, according to the 2018 Twitter study, with more than 30 tweets a day on average.<sup>25</sup> The hashtags #Rwanda and #Kagame are among the most frequently used most especially because the President of Rwanda, Paul Kagame, consistently refers to these labels in his own tweets. President Kagame appears to value Twitter. He takes the time to respond to his followers and conversations in his Twitter feed, which would require a great deal of time as he has close to 1,8 million. Nearly all of his tweets are responses to other Twitter users. President Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya has around 3.3 million followers on Twitter, the most in Africa, followed by Ghana's President Nana Akufo-Addo, Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari and Rwanda's President Paul Kagame.<sup>26</sup> Table 1 offers a possible explanation as to why Kenya's President has the most followers in Africa; Kenya has the largest percentage of population with access to the internet. Manor contends that the value of Twitter, and other social media platforms, as diplomatic channels for African countries lies in three parts: diaspora diplomacy, networked diplomacy, and nation branding. Africa countries can bolster trade and cultural links with global diasporas by investing in tweets about embassy activities, events, historical connections and common thoughts on economic and political issues.<sup>27</sup> For example, in the UK, the Ethiopian embassy has 7000 followers on Twitter and the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry has an active Twitter presence to important expatriate locations including Canada, Israel, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the US and UK. Examples such as these reflect the value of using Twitter for diaspora diplomacy. In relation to networked diplomacy, Manor found that when Amina Mohamed was the Cabinet Secretary for Foreign Affairs for Kenya, she was able to serve as a hub of information linking Ministers that did not follow

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<sup>25</sup> Burson, Cohn & Wolfe, *op.cit.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>27</sup> Ilan Manor, "Digital Diplomacy in Africa: A Research Agenda", *University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy Blog*, January 20, 2016 [<https://www.uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/digital-diplomacy-africa-research-agenda>], 10 March 2020.



each other directly on Twitter. At the time, she performed the role of “an information junction..., attracting attention from her peers around the globe.”<sup>28</sup> This reflects a type of social media mobility which small countries may also make use of to elevate their global diplomatic positions.

Table 1. Percentages of Top 10 African Countries in Terms of Internet Penetration (as of June 2019, rounded off)

Country	% population with access to the internet	% internet growth over two decades (2000-2019)
1. Kenya	90%	23%
2. Liberia	81%	805%
3. Seychelles	70%	1%
4. Tunisia	67%	8%
5. Morocco	65%	24%
6. Mali	63.4%	66%
7. Mauritius	63.2%	824%
8. Cabo Verde	62.8%	4%
9. Gabon	62%	9%
10. Nigeria	61%	62%
11. South Africa	56%	1%

In terms of nation branding governments can make use of Twitter to flex any soft power they may have; manage their international reputation and attract investors. In July 2015 US President Barack Obama visited Kenya as part of the Global Entrepreneurial Summit. This visit drew a lot of media attention and Kenyan authorities made use of this attention to boost its brand internationally via Twitter, and other media. It marketed itself as

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem.*

a rising economic power with growth opportunities for international investors to close on two million people. This was done through the use of the Obama hashtag alongside #chooseKenya as well as Kenya's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta's personal Twitter handle and the President's official channel. When the American news network CNN made a serious error in labelling Kenya a 'hotbed of terror', prior to Obama's visit, Kenya's active Twitter community criticised the network, setting it right, using the hashtag #someonetellcnn, which trended for several days.<sup>29</sup>

### Turning Off Twitter

In 2016 the governments of Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Gabon, the Gambia, Togo and Uganda shut down social media platforms during elections and in some cases instituted full internet blackouts.<sup>30</sup> In March 2019 Chadian citizens had experienced a full year of Government restrictions on social media platforms such as Twitter.<sup>31</sup> These shutdowns had been imposed since March 2018 when constitutional changes were permitted allowing Chad's President Idriss Deby, in power since 1990, to continue in his role until 2033. Chadian public protests had been on the increase in recent years due to "austerity measures, increased economic hardship following a drop in oil prices, and violence between ethnic groups."<sup>32</sup>

The Police Chief in Ghana, a noted democratic state, also threatened to shut down the internet during the run up to Ghana's general elections that in 2016. However, a backlash from Ghanaian civil society resulted in Ghana's President declaring that the government had no intention of

<sup>29</sup> Murithi Mutiga, "CNN executive flies to Kenya to apologise for 'hotbed of terror' claim", *The Guardian*, 14 August 2015, [<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/14/cnn-kenya-apologise-obama>], 25 March 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Abdi Latif Dahir, "More African Governments Are Trying to Control What's Being Said on Social Media and Blogs", *Quartz Africa*, July 17, 2018, [<https://qz.com/africa/1329145/african-governments-silence-social-media-bloggers-on-twitter-whatsapp-facebook/>], 21 February 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Abdi Latif Dahir, "Chad Has Now Spent A Full Year Without Access to Social Media", *Quartz Africa*, March 28, 2019, [<https://qz.com/africa/1582696/chad-has-blocked-whatsapp-facebook-twitter-for-a-year/>], 21 February 2020.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.

closing social media platforms during the elections.<sup>33</sup> When the Ugandan government blocked Twitter and other social media sites on election day, citizens took measures to circumvent these blocks by using virtual private networks (VPNs). Governments tend to suggest that they are shutting down these sites to avoid electoral fraud or the spreading of misinformation or 'fake' news or because of security concerns.<sup>34</sup> The public sees it as clamping down on freedoms. In other examples of state control in Africa, Tanzanian bloggers have to pay government authorities more than \$900 for web licenses; and officials in Egypt banned calls using social media platforms; "blocked hundreds of local and international websites, and called for the launch of a state-owned, Facebook-like platform."<sup>35</sup>

### Reasons For Using Twitter

In a 2016 study conducted by Portland Communications, entitled, 'How Africa Tweets', political hashtags made up close to 9% of all hashtags in Africa. This was an interesting finding especially since this percentage was comparatively higher than those in the UK, US, France or Canada, where data and social media platforms are largely more accessible. This study suggests two reasons for this. Either African populations are more politically engaged, or conventional channels for freedom of expression are limited encouraging users to go online to express their voice. A main finding of this study revealed that "Twitter is a valuable tool for engaging a population around an issue or an election."<sup>36</sup>

This is an important point for policymakers and advisors in cabinets to reflect upon as social media can become an important Government communication tool - amongst other things. In 2015, for example, Egypt had the most tweets in Africa with 456 million, followed by Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya and Ghana with 347; 323; 76 and 65 million tweets

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<sup>33</sup> Kate Hairsine, "Using Social Media for Good During Ghana's Elections", *DW*, 5.12.2016 [<https://www.dw.com/en/using-social-media-for-good-during-ghanas-elections/a-36646065>].

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>35</sup> Ilan Manor, "Exploring the Use of Hashtags".

<sup>36</sup> Portland Communications, "How Africa Tweets: Politics and the Twitter Revolution", 2016 [<https://portland-communications.com/publications/politics-and-the-twitter-revolution/>], 25 February 2020.

respectively.<sup>37</sup> It is also important to note that although Twitter may not always be effective as a protest or campaign tool, the #Kony2012 movement ended in failure as the leader of the Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army, Joseph Kony, eluded capture despite the world's focus; in some instances if enough people 'speak' through platforms such as these, governments start to pay attention.

In April 2014 over 200 girls were abducted from their schools in Nigeria by Boko Haram, a radical Islamic group. The Vice President of the World Bank for Africa, Oby Ezekwesili openly called on the Nigerian government to 'bring back our girls'. Thereafter, Twitter users across Nigeria began using the hashtag #BringBackOur Girls and very soon over a million tweets included this hashtag worldwide.<sup>38</sup> The hashtag #BringBackOurGirls movement became a global campaign that drew attention from around the world, endorsed by Michelle Obama, US First Lady at the time, and highlighted the plight of ordinary citizens in Nigeria's north-east at the mercy of Boko Haram's activities. However, the initial global attention began to fade and two years later some girls were released. One hundred and twelve girls remain missing.

Examples from Africa indicate that Ministries of Foreign Affairs are using tweets to advertise important milestones in bilateral relations; to express messages of condemnation, condolence or congratulations; to declare solidarity and support by retweeting, and to relay information. For example, in August 2019, Chad's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, @ChadianMFA, retweeted Moussa Faki Mahamat's, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, call for a new multilateral world order post-G7 Summit. This tweet declared that Africa knows what it wants – all its partners to adapt by responding to #Agenda2063 for #TheAfricaWeWant. In October 2019 @ChadianMFA reported a meeting between Chad's Foreign Minister, Cherif Mahamat Zene and United Kingdom Ambassador to Chad, Rowan Laxton. They met to talk over strengthening bilateral and

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>38</sup> Matt Collins, "#BringBackOurGirls: the power of a social media campaign", *The Guardian*, 9 May 2014, [<https://www.theguardian.com/voluntary-sector-network/2014/may/09/bringbackourgirls-power-of-social-media>], 20 February 2020.

business relations between the two countries.<sup>39</sup> The Ministry also congratulated Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali on his Nobel Peace Prize win in 2019. @ChadianMFA tweeted: “You have inspired Africa and the whole world for signing a peace deal with Eritrea and ending two decades of hostilities. Well deserved award”. In November 2019, @ChadianMFA tweeted Chad’s condemnation of ‘terrorist’ attacks in Mali and Burkina Faso respectively and reached out to the people and governments of both countries to offer Chad’s support. For public diplomacy purposes it is important for Twitter followers to be given some insight into what is being tweeted.

South Africa’s Department of International Relations and cooperation (@DIRCO\_ZA) tweeting simply that the Central African Republic (CAR) President, Faustin-Archange Touadera, was received by the Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Dr Naledi Pandor at a South Africa Airport in March 2020 is a missed opportunity. What is it about South African – CAR relations that the public should be made aware of or should care about? What is the purpose of the tweet? If the tweet offers bare essentials, then it remains an information relaying tool only. In an effort to broadcast the South African government’s intent to serve the people of Africa, the Deputy Minister of International Affairs and Cooperation Candith Mashego-Dlamini was quoted in a March 2020, DIRCO tweet as saying: “African continent is less about its political leadership and more about its people---Africa’s greatest asset”. South Africa took on the Chairship of the African Union for 2020. @DIRCO\_ZA, which has about 51 000 followers has also retweeted tweets that mention DIRCO in a positive light. In early March 2020, @DIRCO\_ZA retweeted Georgian Ambassador, Beka Dvali (@BekaDvali1) who expressed his “utmost pleasure & honour, in my capacity of Dean of European Group of Ambassadors to South Africa, meeting Ambassador Maud Dlomo, Deputy Director General (DDG) for #Europe & #Americas at DIRCO.

Cowan and Arsenault’s position that regardless of the public diplomacy initiative or tool, the most effective outcome is the intent behind the initiative and that intent is designed “with an eye for the best means of engaging with and building credibility among foreign publics.”<sup>40</sup> This

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<sup>39</sup> Twitter.com, 2019 [https://Twitter.com/chadianmfa?lang=en], 27 February 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Geoffrey Cowan, Amelia Arsenault, *op.cit.*

credibility may be based on manipulation. In some cases, as Donaldson notes, “regimes may even use social media to allow people opportunities to air grievances and create an illusion of free expression, whilst themselves diverting or subverting debate.”<sup>41</sup>

## When Do Tweets Become Influential?

Twitter diplomacy has implications for international relations. An emerging trend has been the ‘politicisation’ of Twitter. More and more state actors, and citizens too, are using Twitter to launch political attacks. US President Trump’s particular Twitter style has provoked reactions across the globe. In May 2019 @realDonaldTrump, President Trump tweeted the following: “The United States has been losing, for many years, 600 to 800 Billion Dollars a year on Trade. With China we lose 500 Billion Dollars. Sorry, we’re not going to be doing that anymore!”<sup>42</sup> Trump threatened to raise tariffs on certain imports from China resulting in serious political setbacks for global stock markets. Using Twitter as a platform for diplomacy, President Trump signalled to the world how US-China trade relations were deteriorating.<sup>43</sup>

Although some would suggest that social media platforms like Twitter should be thought of as “the world’s largest cocktail parties, where everyone is invited and guests kindle conversations and relationships, just as in real life”,<sup>44</sup> others would suggest that Twitter diplomacy has

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<sup>41</sup> Alasdair Donaldson, “The Soft Power of Twitter”, *British Council*, January 2016 [<https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/insight-articles/soft-power-Twitter>], 19 February 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Matthew Yglesias, “The Trump trade tweets that sent the stock market tumbling, explained: Trade war clouds return”, *Vox*, May 6, 2019, [<https://www.vox.com/2019/5/6/18531101/trump-china-tariff-tweet-schumer-stock>], 28 February 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Chu Wang, “Twitter Diplomacy: Preventing Twitter Wars from Escalating into Real Wars”, *Future of Diplomacy Project*, May 20, 2019 [<https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/Twitter-diplomacy-preventing-Twitter-wars-escalating-real-wars>], 28 February 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Wren Elhai, “Twitter Is a Cocktail Party, Not a Press Conference (or, Social Media for Reporting Officers)”, *The Foreign Service Journal*, December 2019 [<https://www.afsa.org/Twitter-cocktail-party-not-press-conference-or-social-media-reporting-officers>], 27 February 2020.

potentially disastrous consequences for diplomatic relations. In 2018, for example, Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs Chrystia Freeland tweeted the following: "Very alarmed to learn that Samar Badawi, Raif Badawi's sister, has been imprisoned in Saudi Arabia. Canada stands together with the Badawi family in this difficult time, and we continue to strongly call for the release of both Raif and Samar Badawi".<sup>45</sup> Samar Badawi is a writer-activist who created the website 'Free Saudi Liberals'. A second round of Canadian tweets followed from @CanadaFP: "Canada is gravely concerned about additional arrests of civil society and women's rights activists in #SaudiArabia, including Samar Badawi. We urge the Saudi authorities to immediately release them and all other peaceful #humanrights activists". The Saudi government responded swiftly with a series of tweets, @KSAmofaEN, denouncing Canadian interference in the internal affairs of Saudi Arabia, and declaring that Canada's Ambassador was no longer welcome in Saudi Arabia. In addition, the Government would freeze all new trade and investment transactions with Canada and end student exchange programs amongst other actions. This diplomatic incident attracted support from other actors. The Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Anwar Gargash the United Arab Emirates, tweeted that his country stood in support of Saudi Arabi's sovereignty. Bahrain's foreign minister, Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, also offered a similar note of support for Saudi Arabia. This case demonstrates how a series of tweets can escalate diplomatic tensions quickly and create deep longer lasting fissures in diplomatic relations.

The fast-paced, relatively uncensored nature of Twitter means that diplomats can tweet anything and even if the intent is well-meaning, the slightest misreading of it could have serious consequences for all actors involved. Traditional diplomatic controls or risk assessments via bureaucratic processes can be bypassed with the use of this social media platform. Heads of state can tweet foreign policy positions without consulting cabinets and often these become formal policy setting back government strategists. This relatively unfiltered expression of personal opinion or emotion of state leaders can also prove very telling for interested observers. The risk of different publics having access to a type of 'insider' knowledge of what drives a word leader could be useful for allies and

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<sup>45</sup> Chu Wang, *op.cit.*

adversaries alike. For example, Wang suggests that when Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, won the 2014 general elections he tweeted his thanks in response to country leaders for their messages of congratulations in order of personalised importance.<sup>46</sup> He kept the US waiting and thanked Canada first.

In Africa, Algeria is a good example of a country using Twitter for political ends. Domestic and foreign crises are highlighted in various tweets by Algerian citizens and officials. Supporters of the Algerian government's claim to be an "important actor" in the Western Sahara conflict favouring the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination have used hashtags referring to Sahara or desert or Algerian Sahara. In response Moroccan activists have created their own hashtag referencing Moroccan Sahara. Algerian 'foreign-oriented' tweets focused on Iran in 2017 after the announcement that Iranian President Hassan Rouhani would be visiting Algeria. Activists launched a Twitter campaign, for example #(No to Rouhani in Algeria) and #(Algerians against Iran) to condemn the visit for fear that Iran might try to interfere in the Algerian domestic situation. President Rouhani's visit was postponed as a result.<sup>47</sup>

Twitter accounts may be used by international organisations to draw media attention to smaller, more under-resourced states. The United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation, #FAO, has over 350 000 followers. This reach is quite important as the FAO highlights the plight of small island developing states (SIDS) through Twitter. In a September 2019 tweet, the FAO, posted a video identifying five ways in which it is helping SIDS to achieve food security. Alongside this video the hashtag #SamoaPathway was also posted. The latter is a decade-long framework that intends to help these states build stronger economies and resilience to climate change consequences. Three of the six African small island developing states (ASIDS) feature in the top 10 African countries in terms of internet penetration (see this chapter's Table 1): Seychelles; Mauritius and Cabo Verde.

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>47</sup> Future for Advanced Research and Studies, "Hashtag Diplomacy: Twitter as A Platform for Political Attacks", 2017 [<https://futureuae.com/en-US/Mainpage/Item/2708/hashtag-diplomacy-Twitter-as-a-platform-for-political-attacks>], 18 March 2020.



In an example of self-promotion on Twitter, @SeychellesDFA, the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Seychelles, drew attention to Seychellois Ambassador Barry Faure, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Blue Economy, who presented at two high level panels on human rights promotion and protection at Human Rights Council talks in Geneva Switzerland in February 2020. States and international actors can boost each other through social media platforms, as seen with the FAO example above. In another example, Seychelles and the United Nations Development Programme refer to each other's handles via Twitter. Amanda Serumaga (@ASerumaga), who is the new UNDP resident representative to Seychelles tweeted: "Thank you to Ambassador Barry Faure @BarryFaure @SeychellesDFA for an excellent discussion on all things #SIDS! @UNDPseychelles commits to continuing our support to #ClimateChange mitigation #BlueEconomy and the push to listen to SIDs voices!" (Twitter.com).

Mauritius has numerous Twitter channels: @GovMauritius; @MFA\_MU, which is the official account of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Mauritius; @MauritiusPM; @Diplomacy\_MU. In March 2019, Diplomacy\_MU retweeted Mauritius' national birthday congratulations from India and Israel's diplomacy Twitter channels. It also retweeted the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for Ukraine (@MFA\_Ukraine) which celebrated the anniversary of Mauritius' Independence Day. Ukraine's Ministry also stated that they consider Mauritius to be an important partner in Africa and that they continue to count on the Republic for further support of Ukraine's territorial integrity. The Prime Minister of the Republic of Mauritius, Pravind Jugnauth, used his Twitter handle @PKJugnauth to reach out to Mauritian diasporas wishing all his compatriots at home and abroad a happy Independence Day.

In February 2020, the President of Cabo Verde used his Twitter handle (@PresidenciaCV) to announce the visit of a Luxembourgish delegation to the African state. Luxembourg is paying for a solar photovoltaic production system for Cabo Verde's parliament, with an expectation of up to 30% reduced electricity usage. The president of the country's National Assembly, Jorge Santos; the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Communities of Cabo Verde, Luís Filipe Tavares, and the Luxembourgish Minister for Cooperation and Humanitarian Action, Frantz

Fayot participated in these talks. Luxemburg and Cabo Verde have a longstanding relationship of cooperation programmes, the next round of which starts 2021-2024 with an increased investment from 45 million Euro to around 60 million Euros.<sup>48</sup>

In line with the new phase in public diplomacy referred to earlier in this chapter where public voices can be augmented through Twitter, there are a growing number of climate change youth activists using Twitter to spread their messages condemning governments and industries around the world for not doing enough to combat global warming.<sup>49</sup> In October 2018 Zimbabwean-based #AfricanYouthInClimateAction (@AyiccZim) joined Twitter. Its goal, as an African youth initiative focussing on climate change issues, is to bolster intergenerational dialogue in as many forums as possible. It posts about events in Zimbabwe and regional activities too. A youth activist from Uganda, Vanessa Nakate (@vanessa\_vash) began a Rise Up Movement in Africa also focused on climate change issues. The 23-year old Nakate has over 140 000 followers on Twitter.<sup>50</sup> Another Ugandan youth Leah Namugerwa (@NamugerwaLeah) already has a Twitter following of 17 000 people despite only joining the social media site in February 2019. She uses the platform to mobilise the youth, and others, to plant trees and ban plastic and clean up litter. South African, 17-year old, Ayakha Melithafa represented the Republic at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2020 and is referred to often via climate change channels on Twitter.

Sweden's Greta Thunberg (@GretaThunberg) is another example. Thunberg is 17 years old. Despite her young age she has stumped politicians with her speeches and inspired climate change activists globally. When Thunberg was named Time magazine's Person of the Year in December 2019, President Trump's responded via Twitter: "So ridiculous.

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<sup>48</sup> Macauhub, "Luxembourg finances solar energy project of the Cabo Verde parliament", 19 February 2020, [<https://macauhub.com.mo/2020/02/19/pt-luxemburgo-financia-projecto-de-energia-solar-do-parlamento-de-cabo-verde/>], 25 February 2020.

<sup>49</sup> Inma Galvez-Robles, "Climate Action: 19 Youth Climate Activists you should be Following on Social Media", 2019 [<https://www.earthday.org/19-youth-climate-activists-you-should-follow-on-social-media/>], 19 March 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Sheree Bega, "How Africa's Youngsters Are Saving the Planet", *IOL*, 2020 [<https://www.iol.co.za/saturday-star/news/how-africas-youngsters-are-saving-the-planet-42547371>], 25 February 2020.

Greta must work on her Anger Management problem, then go to a good old fashioned movie with a friend! Chill Greta, Chill!” Thunberg responded the following day by changing her Twitter biography to, ‘A teenager working on her anger management problem. Currently chilling and watching a good old-fashioned movie with a friend’ (Voytko, 2019).<sup>51</sup> Although President Trump probably meant to downplay Thunberg’s importance through his tweet, he inadvertently drew attention to her name, and indirectly what she stands for, by allowing his 74 million followers the opportunity to find out more about the activist.

## Conclusion

This article briefly explored the nature and value of hashtag diplomacy or Twitter diplomacy in Africa, and other regions, with reference to a few examples. The chapter began by outlining where hashtag diplomacy fits within the umbrella of diplomacy and especially public diplomacy. Although traditional tools of diplomacy remain intact, the evolving nature of technology demands that in order to stay relevant, state leaders and other foreign policymakers must acknowledge the potential impact of using social media networks as a diplomatic tool and decide how best to reduce its risks and exploit its advantages. Social media is fast and effective. However, it can also be home to Twitter wars and the possibility of misinterpretation or insults that traditional bureaucratic modes of diplomacy, by their very nature of being thought-through and methodical, strive to avoid. This chapter referred to the point that only 40% of Africa has internet penetration which means that for African leaders to reach out to foreign publics using Twitter, for example, in other African countries they will be reaching out to a relative few with access to the internet. Despite this, it is clear that African countries acknowledge the power of this medium as some governments have taken stringent measures, especially during elections, to prevent the public from accessing Twitter. Moreover, there are examples of African leaders, such as Rwanda’s Paul Kagame and

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<sup>51</sup> Lisette Voytko, “Trump Attacks Greta Thunberg On Twitter—And Greta Trolls Him Back”, *Forbes*, 12.12.2019, [<https://www.forbes.com/sites/lisettevoytko/2019/12/12/trump-attacks-greta-thunberg-on-Twitter-and-greta-trolls-him-back/#6773c0bc1792>], 19 March 2020.

Kenya's Uhuru Kenyatta and African Ministries of Foreign Affairs making frequent use of this platform and this would suggest some belief in its necessity.

It is evident that African Ministries of Foreign Affairs, and state leaders, are using tweets to advertise important milestones in bilateral relations; to express messages of condemnation, condolence or congratulations; to declare solidarity and support by retweeting, and to relay information. In addition, As Manor contends "digital diplomacy holds the potential to increase the effectiveness of African diplomacy in diverse areas."<sup>52</sup> This includes governments reaching out to diaspora communities; soft power boosts through nation branding and self-promotion; and becoming active hubs in growing networks connecting leaders and policymakers with common goals and challenges. The public, as agents in their own right and part of the public diplomacy process, can draw global attention to issues that affect them, for example, climate change. This platform also affords communities considered to be outside the realm of usual actors in the political world the opportunity to have a voice, such as the youth. Social media sites, like Twitter, can also be used by small island developing states to project onto a global platform their relevance and needs. Used properly, digital diplomacy can, in conjunction with traditional diplomacy, be an effective platform for policymakers and state leaders in 21st century diplomatic activities.

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<sup>52</sup> Ilan Manor, "Digital Diplomacy in Africa: A Research Agenda".

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