



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Government Information Quarterly

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/govinf

Factors influencing e-diplomacy implementation: Exploring causal relationships using interpretive structural modelling

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

e-Diplomacy
Digital diplomacy
Interpretive structural modelling (ISM)
ICT maturity
e-Government

ABSTRACT

Electronic diplomacy (E-diplomacy) is the use of technology by nations to define and establish diplomatic goals and objectives and to efficiently carry out the functions of diplomats. These functions include representation and promotion of the home nation, establishing both bilateral and multilateral relations, consular services and social engagement. It encapsulates the adoption of multiple ICT tools over the Internet to support a nation's interests in other countries while ensuring that foreign relations are improved between the countries. Given its embryonic nature, little scholarly research has been undertaken to study its influence on diplomatic functions and the various factors that influence its implementation. This paper applies the Interpretive Structural Modelling (ISM) methodological approach to identify factors that impact the implementation of e-diplomacy and to determine their causal relationship and rankings. This study applies the ISM methodology to the subject of e-diplomacy. The ISM-based model provides a framework for practitioners to aid decision-making and manage the implementation of e-diplomacy.

1. Introduction

Diplomacy plays an important role in implementing foreign policies through bilateral relations, consular services, communication and negotiations, i.e. making one country's policies understood and accepted by other states (Todhunter, 2013). While the policies offer direction and outline the outcomes to be achieved through diplomatic relationships, diplomacy itself involves the implementation of initiatives to realise the outcome and associated communications that take place around these initiatives and outcomes (Murray, Sharp, Wiseman, Crikemans, & Melissen, 2011). Ministers in MFA (ministry of foreign affairs) are responsible for a plethora of diplomatic duties, for example hosting foreign leaders from different parts of the world and attending state meetings in other countries (Baxter & Stewart, 2008). In recent times, MFAs have undergone significant changes in the way they handle foreign affairs as governments have adopted different approaches to interact with foreign countries (Hanson, 2010). It has been observed that foreign ministries are increasingly making exemplary use of the potential of technology (Ehiane et al., 2013; Hockings & Mellisen, 2015). Heeks and Bailur (2007) posit that ICT has penetrated all societal aspects and become an indispensable tool for delivering government

services in an open, transparent and auditable way. Ministries of Foreign Affairs have also used ICT frameworks to reduce the complexity of overall operations (Batora, 2008; Hanson, 2010) and technical infrastructures have been continuously updated over the years to improve the efficiency levels of foreign ministries' computing networks (Ehiane et al., 2013). However, the use of ICT in foreign ministries has been largely focused on internal operations, until recently, and in the last few years the concept of e-diplomacy has started to challenge and replace traditional methods of diplomacy to support the multiple function of diplomats.

E-diplomacy (also popularly known as digital diplomacy) is the use of communication and information technology for the purpose of attaining foreign policy goals (Hanson, 2010; Holmes, 2013; Ipu, 2013). Currently, there is no single definition of the term (Hanson, 2010). Some experts have defined e-diplomacy as the electronic component of public diplomacy (Hanson, 2010) while others have focused on the use of the Internet to help achieve policy goals and objectives (Permyakova, 2014), or the use of the Web and associated ICTs including social media tools to solve foreign policy problems (Huxley, 2014; Jones, Irani, Sivarajah, & Love, 2017; Sivarajah, Irani, & Weerakkody, 2015). Digital diplomacy is therefore an emerging field and its online application has

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2018.03.002>

Received 9 October 2017; Received in revised form 13 December 2017; Accepted 9 March 2018

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promoted its vast scope and uses (Hanson, 2010). However, each country follows a different approach to e-diplomacy due to differences in foreign policies and perspectives on technology (Al-Muftah & Sivarajah, 2016; Al-Muftah, Weerakkody, & Sivarajah, 2016).

The unique field of digital diplomacy has been largely neglected in academic research and most scholars focus on the diplomatist literature, which emphasise the diplomatic function, negotiation, mediation and others. In practice, this area has been evolving slowly compared to other areas of public services, such as e-government, e-commerce and e-health. Therefore, it is important and timely to investigate the variables that impact this important field of e-diplomacy. More specifically, very few studies explore factors affecting the implementation and diffusion of digital diplomacy. In this study, the authors seek to evaluate the use of inter-organisational and intra-organisational uses of digital diplomacy within foreign ministries and embassies. The study will focus on formulating a model of digital diplomacy that encapsulates ICT use across inter- and intra-organisational contexts.

The model aims to illustrate factors that impact digital diplomacy. To achieve this research aim, two research questions are posed:

RQ1. What factors influence implementation of e-diplomacy within a foreign ministry?

RQ2. What is the relationship between the defined factors?

To define the factors that can influence e-diplomacy implementation, interviews were conducted with key government officials responsible for e-diplomacy. The interviews were conducted with participants from three different countries: the USA, the UK and Qatar.

To explore this domain, the researchers applied ISM method (Interpretive Structural Modelling) to determine which factors impact e-diplomacy implementation.

The paper is organised and presented in the following structure: First, a brief literature review is presented. Then, the research methodology used to collect the variables of e-diplomacy implementation are outlined. Next, the empirical findings are presented. A section detailing the ISM method employed to determine the significance of each factor in driving implementation of e-diplomacy is then discussed. This is followed by further sections presenting the results and examining their implications. Finally, the paper concludes by outlining the limitations and discussing the contribution of the research.

2. Literature review

With the evolution of ICTs in the Internet-era, public institutions have continued to exploit the potential of technology in their policy-making efforts in both the domestic and international (or diplomatic) service landscape (Jones et al., 2017; Omar, Weerakkody, & Sivarajah, 2017). The establishment of e-government in mainstream public administration has allowed governments to maintain improved levels of efficiency, transparency and relationships with their citizens in a number of areas including in education, health, transport, commerce and diplomacy (Asgarkhani, 2005; Heeks & Bailur, 2007). Scholars defined e-government as the integration and use of information technologies such as the internet, World Wide Web networks and mobile computing in different areas of the governmental activities, which is primarily undertaken by government agencies to facilitate the interactions with the citizens (Fountain, 2001; Kettani & Moulin, 2014). According to Bekkers and Homburg (2007), the concept of e-government has emerged with the increased use of ICT tools. This technology-based platform has supported a wide range of administrative tasks and even facilitated the integration of governmental operations. Public services are also positively affected by the increased use of social media, smart phones, Web 2.0 technologies etc., since they influence citizens' levels of engagement with government operations. However, Janssen and Cresswell (2005) posit that advanced and integrated government services require more comprehensive and integrated architectures.

Janssen, Konopnicki, et al. (2017) suggested that public sector innovation is linked with ICT where it is not only developing new products but also facilitating value creation. These authors go on to explain that innovation in government is about finding new ways to develop the relationship between the government and the public. According to Asgarkhani (2005), ICT policies in the public sector have been able to shape e-government projects effectively as these were adopted at the same time as a technological shift took place in the public sector. Institutional changes that are also closely associated with the adoption of ICT during the mid 2000s focused on: public service delivery; government operations; reform of governance; citizen participation and policy making. For instance, new technologies such as Shared Service Centres (SSCs) have gained the interest of decision makers and public administrations as an approach to improve efficiency and reduce costs (Janssen & Joha, 2006). According to Janssen, Loukis, Dawes, and Zheng (2016) ICT plays a major role to help both private and public-sector organisations to access knowledge, skills and resources present in other organisations; a key requirement in diplomatic operations. Janssen, Klievink, and Tan (2012) mentioned that sharing information can cause resistance in businesses, as information is seen as key to competitive advantage, whereas governments need information to conduct their tasks under a low cost model to preserve the public purse. At a societal level, intercultural dialogue has become more common and the interaction between citizens of different nationalities is a routine (Ramzan, 2013). Also, the exchange of information between countries has become more and more important (Janssen, Bharosa, Winne, Wijk, & Hulstijn, 2011). A reflection of literature suggests that many digital diplomacy studies have focused on one tool of digital diplomacy i.e. the use of social media (Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Cassidy & Manor, 2016; Costa, 2017; Kampf, Manor, & Segev, 2015; Manor, 2016). Research by Kampf et al. (2015) is based on data collected from eleven Ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs). The countries were chosen for their extensive use of Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as Facebook and Twitter. Bjola and Holmes (2015) conducted research based on extensive secondary data, which affirms the value of Social Networking Sites and the use of social media to transform public diplomacy. Manor (2016) suggested that Foreign Ministries are more inclined toward using social media to attract elite population instead of bridging the communication gap with foreign populations. Costa (2017) highlights the issues that are associated with social media use in public diplomacy. Cassidy and Manor (2016) expose the myths related to digital diplomacy in terms of its effectiveness, reach and impacts.

e-Diplomacy is about how countries contact and communicate with each other, share information, and also influence each other through using ICTs. It also promotes the idea of transparency, transfer of information and increased interaction between countries (Hanson, 2010). In the recent past, ICT has significantly been integrated with the affairs of diplomacy (Ehiane et al., 2013; Zaharna, 2007). This situation has long escalated a paradigm shift in the manner in which the political scientists view this as process transformation in diplomacy. For example, due to the advancements made in the ICT sector, e-diplomacy has evolved its functions whereby it allows digital delivery of information and enables the governments to link with other states across the world (Heeks & Bailur, 2007). Further, e-diplomacy has instigated a shift in the roles of diplomats by bolstering storage of office documents in the cloud and guarantees access from anywhere. Therefore, ministries need to rip the benefits of IT. The situation can have an achievement in the realm of competing with other states, parts of their governments, and the way they deliver their analogues in respective situations (Eldon, 1994). According to the digital strategy of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the UK (2012), digital diplomacy has been found to be a crucial tool in the management of issues that surround foreign policies. However, e-diplomacy has had limited definitions, with current definitions failing to cover its apparent scope. For instance, the current definitions miss out on the internal electronic processes, major mobile applications, and the various novel

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