Critical Digital Diplomacy as a Global Challenge: The South Korean Experience

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Abstract

An important debate on the impact of digitization on diplomatic practice is currently taking place in most of the world's diplomatic services and beyond. Western perspectives do however dominate writings on the subject and there is scope for importing new theoretical notions into these discussions. This article on digital diplomacy aims to show that South Korea's practices harmonize well with insights from new media theory, and that both inform this debate. New media theory advocates the examination of the new digital environment in which diplomatic interactions are unfolding, and it articulates the politics behind digital technology. We argue that existing, "analogue" diplomacy is not merely superimposed onto technologies now shaping an environment that is facilitating digitally native practices. The debate on digital diplomacy can equally benefit from analysis of the experiences of South Korea. Technological development and innovation impact on the sphere of foreign policy, to the extent that "becoming technological" has turned into an important Korean export asset. We briefly review four ways in which South Korea applied technology to diplomacy. Our analysis concludes with general recommendations for diplomatic practitioners across the world, particularly those who still look at new technologies, including social media, as mere open and freely available "services".

Introduction

This article aims to throw new light on the current debate concerning diplomacy in the digital age — digital diplomacy for short — by combining reflections inspired by literature on new media with an analysis of South Korean practice. As a high-tech economy aiming to invest in its network power to compensate for its geopolitical predicament, the Republic of Korea (ROK; hereafter South Korea) is in a good position to maximize the diplomatic potential of digital technology. Following the Japanese example in various ways, South Korea largely rebuilt itself with the help of digital technology throughout the second half of the twentieth century (Mahlich and Pascha, 2012). It has promoted itself as a distinguished high-end, technologically advanced country among its partners in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Ok, 2011).

South Korea's practices as a digital middle power harmonize well with insights from new media theory. This article will show that, taken together, they add theoretical and non-Western ingredients to the current global debate on digital diplomacy.[i][1] Existing literature on digital diplomacy often overlooks past and recent research originating from new media studies. The purpose of this article is to show how this field can be beneficial to digital diplomacy. By giving preference to the contribution from this literature, we underline the importance of its research tradition when studying digital diplomacy. Following this introduction, we discuss how new media literature helps us look at the impact of digitization as an environment in which diplomacy is enacted. Digital diplomacy can be more than social media and other tools available for diplomats to use (Manor 2016). We aim to engage with some conceptions of digital diplomacy by examining the technical, yet no less political, properties of digital diplomacy today. In doing so, the analysis is a call for a critical examination of the political and diplomatic significance of digital technologies.

In general terms, this review of selected aspects of South Korean digital diplomatic practice aims to contribute to our understanding of how diplomacy is adapting to the processes of digitization. In English-speaking literature, such discussions are usually dominated by an American and European intellectual framework, their institutional experience and that of other international actors (Yi & Melissen 2011; Melissen & Sohn 2015). Outside of this framework, the South Korean case can be of particular interest. Technology is at the heart of governmental efforts to brand this middle power.South Korean governments had already made indirect use of digital tools in the context of foreign policy by the mid-1980s (Oh & Larson 2011). As inferred during online research for this article, literature consultation and a range of interviews in Seoul, it does not make sense to conceive of American and European cases as examples.[ii][2] South Korea has undergone comprehensive digitization in a peculiar historical context, and so have multiple aspects of its foreign policy (Mahlich & Pascha 2012).

The article starts by discussing key notions on the impact of digitization from outside the field of diplomatic studies, followed by a discussion of what the "softwarization" of diplomacy means for its mediation capacity (for more on the notion of softwerization, see Berry, 2014; Bratton, 2016; Manovich, 2013a; Tufekci, 2014; Galloway and Thacker, 2004; Barreneche, 2012; Siegert and Winthrop-Young, 2015; and Kitchin and Dodge, 2011). We argue that it is important to articulate the politics behind digital diplomacy rather than just applying digital tools to existing practices, and to think of future practices by confronting the

emerging reality of forms of diplomatic engagement in a digitized world (Bjola & Holmes 2015).[iii][3] Turning to South Korea, the article analyses conditions facilitating its transformation into one of the world's leading technological powers, plus the areas of digital diplomacy where we can identify its main strengths. We conclude by suggesting how debates on diplomacy today can learn from combining analyses of (new) media theory and practices of a political actor like South Korea.

Diplomacy in a transformative digital environment

The impact of digital technologies on diplomatic practice is codependent on our understanding of their nature when applied to social and political contexts. New media studies look at other aspects of such technologies than how social media can be successfully employed by national governments and other diplomatic actors.[iv][4] They resist regarding new technologies as open and freely available "services" for governments to use, but as a complex set of instruments designed by actors (e.g. Google or Facebook) to interact with others and systematise their interests in social, political and economic spheres.

Neither practitioners nor pundits debating "digital diplomacy" can afford to ignore the underlying infrastructures of such technologies, such as algorithms and other encoded mechanisms. In a matter of years, new media have become ubiquitous access points to culture, politics and economic activities, having an exceptional mediatory capacity. Actors behind popular platforms have a powerful political impact in how they organize our access to information and capital today. How do digital technologies redesign people's access and engagement with these processes? Just as Facebook may have redesigned much of social life, online infrastructures may also have a role in redesigning international relations, political dialogue, cultural exchange and the conditions for the creation of new ideas in ways that are directly relevant to the very nature of diplomacy.

Reminiscent of references about "soft power" in the past 25 years, basic terminology in the digital diplomacy debate is used rather loosely. Participants in this debate often have little common understanding of what "digital" means, which is of course an important prerequisite for an informed discussion about its influence on diplomatic practice. This is where new media theory may come in to help students of diplomacy. In debates on the impact of digitization on diplomacy, there is generally little reflection on the nature of new mediums in which diplomacy will increasingly be operating. The impact of numerical

language in restructuring international relations and communication is, however, not an esoteric question. Digital platforms are progressively influential in the fields of culture and social relations, meaning that they are also of greater relevance to an increasingly "societized" diplomatic institution (Hayden 2012; Pamment 2013). The study of diplomacy needs to reflect on the depth and extent of digital technology as a new *environment* in which states and other international actors communicate and conduct relations. New media theorists could, in turn, benefit from a better sociopolitical understanding of digital media: everything "digital" changes the game of diplomacy in the international sphere and of relations between a government and society at home.

Digital technologies should also be recognized as a source of creativity for diplomats. They can be more than simply using devices and services such as email, Twitter or Facebook. Their relevance comes above all from their transformative capacities, rather than from their convenience (Lister, 2009, p.87). In a sense, these new technologies "digitize" workplaces, to the extent that they render objects manageable, collectible and reusable data (Kitchin, 2014; Berry, 2014). Big powers, small non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and, indeed, diplomatic actors of any kind can employ programming languages as tools to operationalize ideas, interests and objectives into usable software (Kunasegaran et al. 2016). Many international challenges of our time have acquired some kind of digital dimension, and their corresponding technologies provide a platform for social, political and economic activities that should be understood as acquiring technical significance (Rieder and Schäfer, 2008; Rieder, 2016). Ultimately, this also demands that we examine the political significance of technicity per se (Simondon 1989; Simondon 2013).

What are the consequences of platforms that organize and systematize human relations, information and culture? It is one thing to assess Facebook as a vector of diplomatic messages, with embassies creating their pages and engaging with audiences as if Facebook is a virtual, simulated facility. Another aspect would be to assess the selfsame politics proper to the way in which the platform functions and that can be relevant to foreign policy. How does Facebook aggregate its users and the information they share? What is the role of algorithms behind the Newsfeed in picking and retrieving posts that belong most to a certain political viewpoint? Does Facebook seek to aggregate ideas that are diverse enough for users to be exposed to different worldviews, and hence to promote dialogue (Sandvig *et al*., 2014; Bessi *et al.*, 2016)? Why, for example, does Google show European authors who are Google Searching for the "Dokdo islands" (that is, the islands contested by South Korea,

which calls them Dokdo, and Japan, which refers to the Takeshima Islands) more pages originating in Japan (finishing in ".jp") than in South Korea (Rieder and Sire, 2014; Rieder, 2009)? These and other issues about the reach into society of digital platforms surface naturally in South Korea, with its own internet and digital life, and the export of its applications, especially to Southeast Asia.

Digital literacy and awareness in diplomacy

Consumers' familiarity with, and dependence on, digital and increasingly mobile technologies — symbolized by the smartphone — often seems to go hand in hand with a lack of critical awareness of how such technologies have started to shape our political life. The so-called "digital divide" is not just one between populations that have or lack the means to access these technologies, but also a divide between more or less "digitally literate" citizens.[v][5] In this perspective,meta-literacy does not appear to be so much of a matter of "catching up". It would be about the individual ability to make an informed assessment of the role and impact of digital technologies upon people's personal lives and on politics, and in being able to act with instruments that are attuned to contemporary forms of power, such as with software (Rushkoff, 2010). And it would be a small step from the self-awareness of digital citizens and the administrative reality of digital governance to the digital manifestations of diplomacy.

One of the problems may be that diplomats still view "digital" as synonymous with Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Google, and the economic and social disruption caused by platforms such as Uber and Airbnb. "Digital diplomacy" would then correspond to the use of popular software for diplomatic purposes and — at most — relations with the actors producing them, with the consequence being that diplomacy "as we know it" is superimposed onto digital technologies "as we know them" — that is, as mere tools for statecraft that is essentially the same as yesterday. One old-school voice in the debate about the impact of digitization on international relations maintains that the nature of the "revolution" should not be exaggerated: ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) have dealt with earlier technological shifts such as the introduction of the electric telegraph in the nineteenth century, that present developments are not qualitatively different from such earlier developments..[vi][6]

It is inevitable for MFAs to examine the effects of digitization on their structures and work processes. The digitization of foreign operations goes back to the use of code-breaking machines during the Second World War and, later, to the introduction of personal computers in the late 1970s, depending on the definition of digital technologies (Maximoff and Andréani, 2004). What is going on today may, however, have far-reaching implications for governments, as diplomacy is no longer a trade that is taking place in closed spaces. MFAs have started thinking about the fundamental implications of digital transformation for the physical structures of their headquarters and embassies (Bratton, 2015; Siegert and Winthrop-Young, 2015; Parisi, 2013). A real challenge for foreign policy bureaucracies that are steeped in centuries of diplomatic tradition is that they lack the intuitive, post-disciplinary, "native" character of some emerging non-state actors — whether NGOs or companies — that are thriving with the investment and management of data (Dann, 2015).

Rather than thinking about "digital" in terms of communication, MFAs may need to invest more in how digital technologies can enhance their policymaking capacity. In South Korea, this was for instance put into practice in overseas development assistance. Many of the policies of South Korea's International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) have a science, technology and innovation component. In the words of one senior South Korean diplomat, their tradition in science, technology and innovation — is "KOICA's default mode". This governmental agency under the South Korean foreign ministry has emulated the model of the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JAICA), and, like Japan, it sets an example for the "digital for development" (D4D) approach in other parts of the world, such as the European Union (EU). Development as a concept offers the tools and knowledge that countries in the Global South may invest in their own policies. This makes KOICA a notable and innovative competitor to Western partners in the process of changing their donor-recipient relationships. The South Korean view is that technologies of any kind are tools to strengthen populations, which makes its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) information and communication technology for development (ICT4D) approach distinctive. The South Korean International Cooperation Agency exports connectivity infrastructures and other machines to the Global South, where it also offers its services as an adviser on e-governance (KOICA, 2014). It is also a strong card for the South Korean government to play in their competition with other aid-giving countries.

The softwarization of diplomatic practice

Many practitioners appear to see "digital diplomacy" almost uniquely as an extension of public diplomacy. As studies in new media suggest, there is an urgent need to analyse digital technologies as mediating political processes, and thus of digital diplomacy as having its own "digitally native" forms (Rogers, 2013; Rieder, 2016). The concept of diplomacy as a practice with its own "digitally native" forms departs from millennia of pre-digital practice. Diplomatic engagement with digital technologies and the utilization of software for diplomatic purposes is thus to be based on an understanding of the political significance of "digital". Against the backdrop of breakneck technological developments, and with generations entering the diplomatic profession that have a different relationship with data than their predecessors, "digitally native" diplomacy is no longer farfetched. Most diplomats will not yet see themselves as digital actors, but there are those who already do, and the data scientists who are currently entering the ranks of foreign ministries in growing numbers are signs of change. New questions abound: how do diplomatic actors regulate technologies for their use? How may software and its technical components be utilized for diplomatic purposes? How necessary is it for individual diplomats to become familiar with the world of technology by being more than simply consumers? What should the diplomat know about digital technologies in order to use them effectively?

The relationship between individual diplomats and digital technology can suggest a slightly different history than the way in which predecessors have adopted the use of the telephone (to call), the typewriter (to write), the telegraph (to send encrypted messages) and the personal computer (to write, and store, organize and send information) (Lister, 2009). To be sure, the advent of social media has shown entirely new dynamics in the relationship between diplomacy and technology. Such services seem to have surfaced almost out of the blue and, typically, their rise is seen as being a development outside the world of diplomacy. Over the past five years, many MFAs have invested a great deal in catching up with the social media phenomenon and have started making use of its potential in more and more areas of foreign policy. Following the Arab Spring, a variety of international crises between 2011 and 2015 were major learning opportunities for governments (Rieder *et al*.,

2015). In a relatively short time span, social media have become indispensable in the delivery of key MFA functions such as public diplomacy and assistance to nationals abroad.

Fundamentally new for governments, and unlike previous technological change affecting diplomacy, is the fact that society is setting a technological standard to which foreign ministries need to adapt (Hocking and Melissen, 2015; Melissen and Caesar-Gordon, 2016). Facebook and Twitter are now commonly used in the corridors of diplomacy to gather information, communicate ideas, strategize and communicate policies, build relationships, manage networks and to crowd-source knowledge (Pamment 2016; Pamment 2013; Hayden 2012). The way in which digital technologies are presently used is often fundamentally similar to the incorporation of various types of "machines" in nineteenth- and twentieth-century diplomatic practice: diplomats use what technology offers and was designed to do. Yet, as mentioned before, part of understanding the digital dimensions of diplomacy today is to understand what digital technologies comprise (Bjola and Holmes, 2015, pp. 13–32). Besides platforms, there are different operating systems, websites, apps and smaller components such as links, widgets and trackers (for a more detailed description of such elements, see Rogers, 2013; Rogers, 2004; and Helmond, 2015). Moreover, behind all of these interfaces there is a universe of code, programming languages and the algorithms that mechanize them (Manovich, 2001; Manovich, 2013b; Hartley *et al*., 2013). These various layers of digital technologies give us an idea of how much there is to explore in the practice of digital diplomacy — and is already being explored by governments, although often quietly.

In a world of uneven digital development, we see how, at one end of the spectrum, governments are still struggling to get their MFA website updated. At the other end of the spectrum, political actors are exploring the benefits of geospatial mapping in international crises, or algorithmic diplomacy to penetrate the overseas networks of those holding opinions that run against their national interests (see Silva, 2016; and Phil Howard's project on political bots: politicalbots.org). One of the most distinguishing characteristics of digital technologies is that they are meta-machines: machines that can be used actively and creatively to create yet other machines — software (Manovich, 2013b, pp. 107–158). They offer ready-to-use products such as computers and other hands-on devices, but they also provide the means to create software that is tailored to internal or proactive diplomatic needs. Such seems to be the case with what Uber does for transportation, Airbnb for the hospitality industry, Google for documentation, YouTube for filmmaking, Spotify for music,

and Facebook and Twitter for personal relations, political careers and political activism (for more on this, see Yeung, 2016; Bucher, 2013; and Henten and Windekilde, 2016). The influence of these platforms resides partly in their organizing and systematizing of digitized data and the transnational mediation of content, whether it is in the form of culture, ideas, knowledge, relations or capital. Such is the power of the daily bread-and-butter in the "walled gardens" of Google (using its PageRank algorithm), Twitter (selling algorithms to private-sector clients doing business in personal data with governments), YouTube (the second largest engine on the web) and Facebook (claiming digital recognition of contested states like Kosovo) (see Morozov, 2015). The *mediation capacity* of these platforms as controlled informational environments is as relevant to the world of diplomacy as it is to the commercial sector.

The making of South Korea as a digital diplomacy actor

Decades of industrialization have turned technology, now digital, into an object that is closely associated with South Korea's national identity. Following in the footsteps of policies put into place under the authoritarian rule of President Park Chung-hee (1961–1979), successive South Korean governments have made continuous efforts to "modernize" the country (Kim, 2014b). Technology soon turned into a totem of nationalization and a good that was traded to the rest of the world (Park and Shin, 2005). South Korea is often said to have become one of the most "wired" countries in the world. It is no exaggeration to state that South Koreans live in an intimate, yet mundane relationship with digital technology. As Hye Ryoung Ok observes: "Since its early days, online space in Korea has rarely been considered as a purely cyber or virtual space occupied by techno-geeks. Instead, the strong connectivity between online and offline reality defines the Internet as an inextricable part of techno-culture in Korea" (Ok, 2011, p. 325).

In order to obtain a better understanding of the meaning of "digital" in South Korea and how South Korea's experiences may inform the practices of other parts of the world, observers may have to look beyond stereotypes and assumptions that colour the way in which they look at Asian actors in international relations (Melissen & Sohn 2015; Yi & Melissen 2011). It may, for instance, seem paradoxical that "digital behaviour" can thrive in a typical risk-averse government bureaucracy. At the individual level, South Korean diplomats often appear to be reluctant about being visible in the global social media domain. From an American and European point of view, and by not taking cultural factors into

account, this could easily lead to the fallacy of labelling diplomats as "analogue" professionals. What may further look like a contradiction in Asian international relations is that digital culture coexists with a preference for traditional state-to-state relations and the Westphalian notion of noninterference in the internal affairs of neighbouring governments (Ibid).

South Korea's digital presence is often associated with the *Hallyu* wave of Korean entertainment and popular culture, and growing numbers of East Asians have become familiar with the digital platforms of Naver, Google's South Korean competitor, or the *Kakao Talk* messenger app.[vii][7] Popular culture and the popularity of mobile devices add to South Korea's soft power, and its technological strengths are visible in its public diplomacy instruments, ranging from digital outreach initiatives such as the Korea Foundation's Korea Clickers to its food app.[viii][8] Individuals who are curious about South Korea may have made direct contact with the country through civil society organizations — often supported by MOFA and/or other government agencies in one way or another. Interestingly, the South Korean government has managed to carve out a role for itself in mobilising civil society.

The success of the Voluntary Association Network Korea (VANK) is probably the best example of a South Korean NGO practising digital people-to-people diplomacy. In fact, this volunteer-based civil society initiative is functioning as a sui generis diplomatic organization, but VANK has also attracted criticism for hounding opponents online. VANK's cyber diplomats engage with information spread across all major platforms by individuals and they correct assumptions about South Korea that are propagated by influential media and other established sources of knowledge. An NGO like VANK seems a good fit for the South Korean public diplomacy approach that envisages a key role for civil-society actors who are broadly aligned with government policy on South Korea, and of course the use of digital media across a variety of Asian and Western platforms. But when it comes to engaging foreign audiences via digital media, the great majority of Korean social media pages, including the online pages of embassies in foreign countries, is in Korean and not in English.

South Korea's emergence as a digital diplomacy actor can be properly understood against the backdrop of the country's metamorphosis in the second half of the twentieth century (Oberdorfer, 2001). South Korea's transformation was propelled by a deep-seated belief in the merits of a close technology–governance nexus (Keller and Samuels, 2003). Successive governments took the initiative by giving technology a central place in the social contract

between government and people, thus creating a unique social and political relationship with newly emerging technologies (Lie and Park, 2006). It is important to understand the outline of this legacy and how it has left its mark on the practice of South Korean external relations. The use of digital technologies in South Korea has already been the subject of research by economists, political scientists and anthropologists, and there are good reasons for students of diplomacy to take a closer look at South Korea (Kim and Han, 2005; Khan *et al.*, 2014; Hjorth, 2013; Hsu and Park, 2012).

South Korean governments have invested in new technologies as a go for collective purposes and societal benefit. After almost 50 years of hardship caused by Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), the Second World War (1937–1945) and the Korean War (1950–1953), South Korea has almost entirely recreated itself. Technological development was much more for the "Korean makeover" than a means to rebuild South Korea's infrastructure. It was a modernizing and innovating force for the South Korean nation (Heo and Roehrig, 2010). In this perspective, Korea's chaebols — the sui generis South Korean giant production houses and business conglomerates — can in a way be seen as a means to renew national identity (Chung, 2011). As early as the 1970s, the production of technologies had become an industry in itself. Successive South Korean governments pushed for the economic and civil sectors not only to be aided by technological development, but to become "technological" themselves (Yi, 2013). The readjustment of public administration and the private sector in South Korea has imitated the horizontal structure of private tech companies, and the "creative economy", an idea promoted by Park Geun Hye's administration, seeks to stimulate the free-flowing problem-solving capacities that turned tech companies into new economic powerhouses (OECD, 2015). It does so despite a few important drawbacks, as South Korea's e-governance system remains stuck in software updating problems, over-relying on Microsoft PCs and poorly secured browsers such as Internet Explorer (Seltzer, 2013; Kim, 2014).

As discussed in the following section, South Korean diplomatic practice did not remain unaffected by this transformation. MOFA went through reforms that were aimed at integrating technologies as a means of governance, and the whole experience informed South Korean foreign policy and diplomacy, to the extent that *becoming technological* became a global South Korean export product (Kim *et al.*, 2011; Lee, 2013; Park and Kluver, 2009; Khan *et al.*, 2014). Digital technology — going beyond the export of South Korean hardware, software and the kinds of infrastructure that are facilitating their use —

has been at the heart of South Korea's efforts to maximize its global leverage (OECD, 2015; Ministry of the Interior, 2014).

Digital culture as South Korea's diplomatic asset

How does South Korea apply digital technology to diplomacy? First, MOFA takes an interest in extending South Korean influence by exporting *communicational infrastructures*. Such infrastructures may come in the form of broadband landlines and other materials, which are meant to allow relatively isolated populations in Central Asia to be more regionally and internationally connected. This kind of investment is part of South Korean foreign policy strategy. South Korea's technological credentials, together with its non-threatening middle power status, Asian identity, the absence of a history as a colonizing nation and its own relatively recent experience as a recipient of foreign aid all make South Korea a potentially valuable partner. Governments in the wider Asian region are also looking for South Korean support, as was recently demonstrated by Thailand's request for Seoul's help in developing its "4.0 economic roadmap" (YuGee, 2016). As has been mentioned before, South Korean digital strengths extend to the field of official development aid (ODA).

Second, MOFA represents South Korea as an important *digital knowledge resource* and vector of new issues in digital technologies and international relations. This asset makes it easier for South Korean diplomats to strengthen bilateral relationships among clubs like the G20, OECD, or MIKTA (the informal partnership of Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey and Australia). One area where South Korea's expertise is appreciated concerns the discussions about internet regulation that have moved higher on the international agenda. N*egative* cyber relations are a given on the Korean peninsula, often in the form of cyber-attacks or attempts to nullify each other online (Harlan, 2010). Issues such as hate speech and respect for each other's digital boundaries, which are on the agenda of multilateral talks on cyberspace, also have their place in South Korea's relations with its neighbours North Korea and China respectively (Hongbo, 2013). But there are also domestic issues. The curbing of the freedom of expression and democratic achievements as a result of official use of the Public Security Law has attracted criticism in South Korean society and from foreign observers.

In recent years, MOFA has gained its share of influence in multilateral talks on cyber norms and cyber security, by aiming to give states and international organizations greater agency

in a prospective digital world. This has granted South Korea positions of authority in the United Nations as a participant in the Governmental Group of Experts, just like in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum and its informal dialogues within MIKTA (Secretary-General of the United Nations, 2015), although there are abundant challenges threatening to erode South Korea's efforts to influence global regulatory debates about cyber (Fidler, 2015).

Third, South Korean society and the economy are pushing the digital standards of government upwards, resulting in more and more intuitive use of cultural elements that are particular to online spaces by government officials. Another way in which South Korean diplomacy is showing awareness of digital culture is by communicating with foreign audiences via local platforms, notably with Weibo in China, and observing the way in which relevant groups in foreign societies communicate online. This practice is quite common in other diplomatic services. The more digitally literate diplomat's intuition for digital culture does, however, resonate in an understanding of what moves and makes culture online (Hjorth, 2013; Yoon, 2006). MOFA has made deliberate use of online participatory culture as a way of engaging users with South Korea-related web pages. This goes as far as nudging people towards South Korean views on policy issues, including controversial topics in international politics such as the contested sovereignty of the Dokdo/Senkaku islands between South Korea and Japan.

Fourth, and in a very practical sense, MOFA benefits directly from state-of-the-art technology in the use of software for domestic diplomatic purposes. Besides using US, Chinese and its own South Korean platforms to reach different audiences around the globe, MOFA's consular section has secured fruitful partnerships with South Korean corporate communication giants SK Telecom, Korea Telecom Freetel and LG Telecom, which cover almost 100 percent of the local telecommunications market. For example, South Koreans landing at a foreign airport receive a text message giving regularly updated travel advice that is tailored to local conditions. Like other foreign ministries, MOFA is constantly updating its apps and it is gradually heading for a future where a digitally native population will be a condition for greater effectiveness in government services.

Arguably, the South Korean government is better at communicating in Korean and with South Koreans at home and abroad than with foreign publics. The domestic dimension of

South Korea's public diplomacy is underpinned by the view that people-to-people diplomacy is more effective than government-initiated communication, and that citizens travelling overseas are to be educated about the duties of being unofficial diplomats. South Korean people-to-people diplomacy is thus society-based, but, significantly, it is indirectly government-driven and its participating citizens are organized in age groups (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2014). The premise that people agree with the overall approach of government can however not be taken for granted in citizen diplomacy. Occasionally devoted Korean citizen diplomats have caused embarrassment at home, as when a statue reminding of sexual slavery by Japan during the Second World War was put in front of that country's Consulate-General in Busan in 2017.

Conclusions

In the past five years many foreign ministries have made considerable progress in learning the ropes of social media, and there is an understandable interest of governments in measuring the effects of their activities in the digital realm. We argue, however, that for many diplomats the most important learning, and indeed catching up with the world outside, is still to come: it concerns a critical knowledge and use of software and other technical, but no less political, elements constituting digital technologies. Research in new media studies helps to advance our understanding of diplomatic practice in the digital age while, as we have argued, South Korean digital diplomacy is pushing some, not all, of the frontiers of practice. The breadth and complexity of digital technologies, the new meanings that they bring to the game of international relations, and the uses that countries such as South Korea have made of them are all motives for an exploration of the new digital boundaries of diplomatic practice.

What is it that foreign ministries across the world need to do in a field of activity that is fast-moving but still quite daunting for most practitioners? It would be in their interests to embrace conceptions of technology that no longer separate substance from technique, and instruments from language. The technical aspects of everything digital are profoundly political, as debates about foreign interference in the 2016 and 2017 US and European election campaigns have made clear. Diplomats should remain critical of real-life actors behind software, of their intentions and of how they pursue their aims, and with what effect. It is in their interests to realize that politics happens at the earliest stages of the design of software that is used in the context of international relationships. The rather more positive

flipside of this is that software can be increasingly created for diplomatic purposes. Not doing so would place many foreign ministries at a disadvantage in comparison with more astute counterparts and non-governmental actors. From user-friendly interfaces to codes and algorithms, it is this design that they need to examine, critique, and improve in the interests of enhancing policy capacity.

The new digital instruments that are, in principle, within everybody's reach are mediums that design our access to information, ideas and culture and one's possibilities to connect and relate to others. Critical digital diplomacy is then not so much an active and continuous search for attention online, as in a lot of public diplomacy. It constitutes diplomatic engagement with how culture, information and relations are systematised in software, such as with the counteracting of algorithms that do not work in one's favour. Mechanisms constituting digital technologies can be actively used as tools to operationalize political and diplomatic interests. The challenge for MFAs the world over is thus to explore all this and put it into practice. Individual diplomats are in need of the concepts to critique and comprehend the digital realm. Their governments would be well advised to make the most of their operations in this new environment, in which future diplomacy will increasingly be enacted.

MFAs and governments at large are currently pondering what it takes to be effective and stay relevant in the digital age. Some of these issues are surprisingly mundane. For South Korean government agencies there is for instance an important issue to address: their impact as digital diplomatic actors is significantly hampered by the fact that, in spite of all technical sophistication and lessons learned from decades of innovation, most online communication from Seoul and by overseas embassies, is not in English but in Korean, and would benefit from less reluctant engagement with foreign audiences. This is a clear argument for more direct engagement with online citizens from other countries, including the West. We also feel that South Korea could do a better in promoting Korean platforms of potential interest to overseas publics. Just as with the export of South Korean entertainment such as K-pop and K-drama, Southeast Asians are among the foreign populations that already benefit from Korean apps as non-Western and non-Chinese alternatives.

Policy Implications

➤ Foreign ministries (MFAs) across the world should embrace conceptions of technology that no longer separate substance from technique, and instruments from language.

➤ Diplomats should realize that digital diplomacy constitutes engagement with how culture, information and relations are systematised in software, such as with the counteracting of algorithms that do not work in one's favour.

➤ As diplomacy is increasingly enacted in a digital environment, diplomats should be critical of real-life actors behind software, of their intentions and how they pursue their aims, and with what effect.

➤ MFAs that have the capability to create software for diplomatic purposes but do not yet do so, are at a disadvantage in comparison with more astute counterparts and non-governmental actors.

➤ Mechanisms constituting digital technologies can be used as a medium to operationalize political and diplomatic interests. MFAs should explore all this and put it into practice to improve policy-making.

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[3] We looked at the direct use of social media and websites by the Korean diplomatic body, but also at back-ended phenomena such as link connections between these websites and social media accounts with other actors online and in the greater realm of the web.

[4] Key titles are: Kang, 2015; Robson, 2015; and Sam *et al.*, 2012.

[5] See *World Development Report 2016: Digital Dividends*.

[6] Christopher Meyer, "How Different is the Digital Diplomat?", *The Spectator*, 18 June 2016.

[7] For three titles covering the two dimensions of South Korean new media and culture, as well as digital culture as a subject matter for cultural diplomacy, see: Sam *et al*., 2012; Kang, 2015; and Robson, 2015.

[8] Link to Korea Clickers: https://www.facebook.com/KoreaClickers/?fref=ts; and the Korean food app: https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/korean-food-guide-800/id896936657?mt=8.