

THE APPLICATION OF DIGITAL DIPLOMACY TO SUSTAIN THE PUBLIC DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS IN SRI LANKA DURING THE POST COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Modern diplomacy has a long history of serving as a practical and convenient method of managing official interactions between sovereign states. With the rapid development of the communication technology, the traditional diplomatic procedures have been digitalized as 'Digital Diplomacy' which is practiced by various governments throughout the world as a form of public diplomatic missions. This study looks into the applications and impacts of digital diplomacy on Sri Lanka's public diplomatic practices during the COVID-19 period. The data and information for this study were acquired through a qualitative and quantitative archival research using books, journals, e-publications and government websites with a particular focus on the Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry. This survey reveals that more than 75% of overall population who use social media in Sri Lanka consumes Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp for communication purposes while more than 50% of population uses Instagram to keep up with the world order. However, in Sri Lanka, the use of social media in government digital diplomatic practices has yet to be developed in order to maintain public diplomatic missions. Furthermore, this study discovered that the benefits of digital diplomacy include strengthening international relations, fostering two-way communication, and ensuring minimal contamination of people while threats to cyber security, spreading extremism, and losing the exclusive power of state are the disadvantages. The digital diplomatic practices of Sri Lanka are challenged by technological difficulties, linguistic constraints, lack of education, awareness and the knowledge. To promote digital diplomacy in Sri Lanka, this study recommends providing social media training to the government officials, establishing a consistent official website for all consular affairs and introducing social media profiles for embassies and high commissions. Finally, this study suggests that using digital diplomacy may help to sustain public diplomatic missions in Sri Lanka throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key words: Digital, Public, Diplomacy, Mission, COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

With the establishment of the first embassies in 13th century, the history of modern diplomacy can be traced back to the state of Northern Italy in the early Renaissance. Diplomacy is a formal means of maintaining international relations between states. It is a recognized and official method of influencing the actions and the decisions taken by the foreign governments and the people through dialogues. It can also be introduced as a convenient method of conducting formal contacts between sovereign states. These approaches could be bilateral or multi-lateral methods used by two or more states. The majority of diplomatic affairs are conducted through intelligence gatherings of delegates who are accountable for the foreign policy decision making of sending-state and the host state. However, since the end of 2019, diplomatic affairs have been affected by the unprecedented travel restrictions and the border closures due to global outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic

Therefore, in certain countries, the traditional diplomatic efforts have been transformed into virtual face-to-face meetings through “Digital Diplomacy”.

“Digital Diplomacy” is an

emerging phenomenon that has changed traditional diplomatic methods as a result of the revolutionary alterations in Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The current ICT and the COVID-19 concerns have altered the traditional diplomatic approach to state and non-state actors. Hence, the traditional diplomatic engagements have been transformed into virtual procedures and social media has created a dialogue between citizens and government. Digital diplomacy is the most contemporary technique of sustaining international relations based on social media platforms managed by the official representatives of state, diplomats, members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Heads of the States. Digital Diplomacy allows governments to directly engage with a larger audience of civil society and exert significant influence over other governments and individuals. It is operated with Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and other social media platforms in conducting international relations through diplomacy.

Most countries are currently pursuing diplomatic solutions to maintain the international relations in the face of COVID-19 pandemic’s hurdles and

restrictions. However, because digital diplomacy has enabled numerous participations in international policy making processes, international relations have become more complicated as a result of digital diplomacy. Furthermore, despite creating a global platform for public opinion, digital diplomacy reduces exclusive monopoly of the state over the decision making power. The earliest example of digital diplomacy was marked in 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro for the first time, where the negotiations were conducted by emails. Malta was operated in the same fashion at the same time, and Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic studies was found as the first unit for computer application in diplomacy. Arab Spring is known as the origin of digital diplomacy that was responsible for 80% of the young recruitments to Jihadi movement in 2008. Moreover, the WikiLeaks scandal of 2010, which exposed 250,000 cables passed between US missions, was a significant milestone of digital diplomacy (Rashica, 2018). In 2011, Russia as the largest internet market joined the club of “Twiplomacy Great Powers”. Sweden is implementing a digital diplomacy online communication strategy, whereas the United Kingdom has formed an office of Digital Diplomacy that involves a range of

diplomatic activities. Consequently, Sweden foreign minister Carl Bildt has been named the “Best Connected Twitter Leader” (Adesina, 2017). In terms of Asia, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in India posted its first Tweet in 2010 to digitalize their official diplomatic operations. During the civil war in Libya in 2011, India made the finest use of Twitter by assisting and facilitating more than 18,000 Indian citizens. India is actively experimenting their digital diplomatic affairs despite their resource constraints and poor computer literacy (Adesina, 2017).

In the instance of Sri Lanka, border restrictions enacted in response to the rapid outbreak of COVID-19 have hampered and limited public diplomatic affairs for the past two years. As a result, Digital Diplomacy procedures and practices should be adopted in Sri Lanka at present. In this scenario, there are various hurdles to exercising digital diplomacy in Sri Lanka while maintaining its public diplomatic missions and foreign policy objectives. However, embracing digital diplomacy could be important as well as critical to achieving the goals of Sri Lanka foreign policy while pursuing the challenges of COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this study examines the suggested theme while answering the research

questions listed below.

RQ1: How is the social media being used to maintain public diplomatic relations in Sri Lanka at present?

RQ2: What are the benefits, drawbacks and limitations of engaging in Digital Diplomacy for Sri Lanka?

RQ3: What are the recommendations for putting in place an effective Digital Diplomatic practice in Sri Lanka to boost public diplomatic missions during COVID-19 pandemic?

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study relies on secondary qualitative and quantitative data and information gathered through an archival research. This archival research was carried out using the Governmental e-documentations on public diplomacy and the government's websites with special focus on Sri Lanka Foreign Ministry. The related websites provided up-to-date information for investigating and evaluating Sri Lanka's current practices of public diplomacy and digital diplomacy efforts. Further, the related books, journals and e-publications were used to examine the theoretical framework of digital diplomacy

and relationship between the two concepts of public diplomacy and digital diplomacy.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Diplomacy is a term that has been transformed into several phases from time to time according to the nature of its functions. Throughout this transmission, digital diplomacy (also known as e-diplomacy) could play a significant role in modern diplomacy. Digital diplomacy can occur with the use of internet, communication and information technologies; however, it could be beneficial and occasionally be challenging for the states. At the meeting of ambassadors and permanent representatives, the president of Russia Vladimir Putin introduced the digital diplomacy as the most effective tool of foreign policy making. Therefore, this section examines the theoretical framework of digital diplomacy through the perspective of using 'soft power' (Adesina, 2017: 6). Joseph Nye (2009) defines it as "the ability to set the agenda in world politics through persuasion, enticing and attracting others through the force of one's beliefs, values and ideas, and not through military or economic coercion" (Nye, 2009: 88 as cited in Reshetnikova, 2018: 1)

According to Dr. Luis Ritto

(2014), telegraph and telephone improved the communication between countries and diplomatic affairs in the latter part of 19th century. Gradually, the technology of facsimile system has been allowed by the ambassadors and share important matters and issues promptly. Further, the consular systems are also conveyed via facsimile system with regard to receiving important documents such as birth and marriage certificates, passports and visa after 1980s. Friedman (2005) claims that “the evolution of internet makes the world increasingly flat”, since it played a crucial role in connecting the globe with each other while making comparative advantages of different markets. Further, Abbasove (2007) cited that, “it was a gradual shift from telegrams to mobile phones and more recently to Skype, postal letters to e-mails, short messages (SMS) to twitter posts, hard-copy invitations to Facebook events, TV announcements to YouTube channels, costly meetings to web-conferences and even from physical embassies to net-based virtual missions”. This evolution emphasizes that the diplomacy has always been adopted with the global changes of ICT. As a result, many countries have seized their physical diplomatic affairs and are actively following websites, blogs, Facebooks, Instagram, Twitter and other social media platforms to

pursue the objectives of their foreign policy through digital diplomacy.

According to Holmes (2015: 15), Digital Diplomacy is defined as a “strategy of managing change through digital tools and virtual collaborations” emphasizing its collaborative nature of both online and offline. Further, digital diplomacy refers “mainly to the growing use of social media platforms by a country in order to achieve its foreign policy goals and proactively manage its image and reputation” (Manor & Segev, 2015). Lewis (2014) defines digital diplomacy as “the use of digital tools of communication (social media) by diplomats to communicate with each other and with the general public” while Potter (2002) introduces the concept as “the diplomatic practices through digital and networked technologies, including the Internet, mobile devices, and social media channels”.

Ben Scott, the Innovation Adviser to former US secretary Hillary Clinton has outlined three components of digital diplomacy as follows (Funnel, 2014 as cited in Adesina, 2017: 5).

- ✓ Public diplomacy, including the use of online platforms.
- ✓ Building expertise in

technology, policy and understanding the way the internet influences international developments such as political movements.

- ✓ Impact on development policy and how ICT can be used more effectively to promote economic growth around the world.

“Digital Diplomacy is a form of new public diplomacy which uses the internet, new information and communication technologies (ICT) and social media as means for strengthening diplomatic relations. The main differences with the classical public diplomacy lie in a greater access to information, greater interaction among individuals and organizations, and greater transparency” (Chakraborty, 2013 as cited in Rashica, 2018: 77). Hanson (2012) outlines the main policy goals of digital diplomacy as follows.

- ✓ **Knowledge management:** To harness departmental and whole of government knowledge, so that it is retained, shared and its use optimized in pursuit of national interests abroad.
- ✓ **Public diplomacy:** To maintain contact with audiences as they migrate online and to harness new communication tools to listen to and target important audiences with key messages and to influence major online influencers.
- ✓ **Information management:** To help aggregate the overwhelming flow of information and to use this to better inform policy-making and to help anticipate and respond to emerging social and political movements.
- ✓ **Consular communications and response:** To create direct personal communications channels with citizens travelling overseas, with manageable communications in crises.
- ✓ **Disaster response:** To harness the power of connective technologies in disaster response situations.
- ✓ **Internet freedom:** Creation of technologies to keep the internet free and open. This has the related objectives of promoting freedom of speech and democracy as well as undermining authoritarian regimes.
- ✓ **External resources:** Creating digital mechanisms to draw on and harness external expertise to advance national goals.
- ✓ **Policy planning:** To allow for effective oversight,

coordination and planning of international policy across government, in response to the internationalization of the bureaucracy.

(Hanson, 2012 as cited in Adesina, 2017:3)

According to Prof. Aktaş, the Digital Diplomacy could change and transform the diplomatic norms and customs. On the other hand, the world leaders and diplomats are increasingly using social media platforms and are supported by the internet tools especially Twitter and Instagram in diplomacy. The digitalization of diplomacy might deeply affect the traditional diplomacy in four different dimensions: institutional structure of diplomacy, diplomacy executives, those affected by diplomacy and the method of execution of diplomacy. Further, digital diplomacy can make some risks and dangers towards states. In certain cases, digital diplomacy can become an important weapon for terrorists, radical organizations and foreign ideologies. As a result, cyber-attacks can be constituted through digital diplomacy. Moreover, Russian International Affairs Council argues that the digital diplomacy which is supported by new technologies does not replace the conventional form of traditional diplomacy. Therefore, council further

emphasizes that,

“...digital diplomacy is mainly applicative in nature and is particularly useful in working with foreign audiences in matters of relaying the official position and building up the image of the state. It is important to understand that it is unlikely to ever replace diplomacy in its conventional sense. Closed talks will remain closed. However, digital diplomacy is capable of explaining why a certain decision was made, what results it will give, how it will influence the foreign policy process, i.e. of opening public access to the results of conventional diplomacy” (Permyakova, 2012 as cited in Hocking and Melissen, 2015: 24)

According to above review, Digital Diplomacy can be simply defined as the process of using the internet and ICT to achieve the goals/objectives of foreign policy in a certain country. The discussion of this study will expose the implementation and influence of digital diplomacy on Sri Lanka's public diplomatic missions in the post-COVID-19 period, based on above theoretical and practical world context.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section examines the role of digital diplomacy in shaping public diplomatic affairs in Sri Lanka during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study discusses the use of social media in Sri Lanka to maintain digital diplomacy as a form of public diplomacy, as well as the challenges, risks, and benefits of digital diplomacy in current public diplomatic mission in Sri Lanka.

Figure 1 depicts the global social media usage and it reveals that consumers prioritized Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram. More than 1,000 million individuals use the aforementioned social media sites around the world, with Twitter being the least popular. In a worldwide context, Twitter, which is used by just 353 million people, ranks last in the list of social media platforms utilized by the ordinary public.

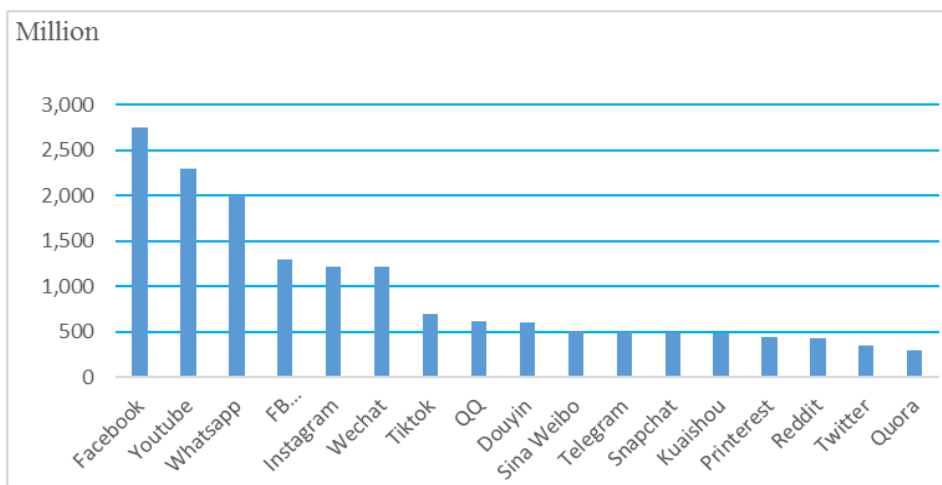


Figure 1. The World's Most-used Social Platforms 2021 (Million)

Figure 2 shows the local consumption of social media in Sri Lanka. By 2021, the most popular social media platforms in Sri Lanka, such as Facebook and YouTube have surpassed 75% of users across all age groups. Instagram and Twitter are also

gaining in popularity among persons aged 13 to 34. According to the social media statistics, Colombo and Gampaha districts have the greatest social media consumption in Sri Lanka. According to Facebook data, nearly all of 6 million users of

social media platforms are entertained by Facebook (Hattotuwa, November 2018: 5). In the light of this, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter, as well as other social media platforms could be used to directly address the community through digital diplomacy, providing a common platform for local people

to share political, social and cultural issues and ideologies with an international audience. This could be a good approach for Sri Lanka to enhance public diplomacy through digital diplomatic methods instead of traditional diplomatic procedures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

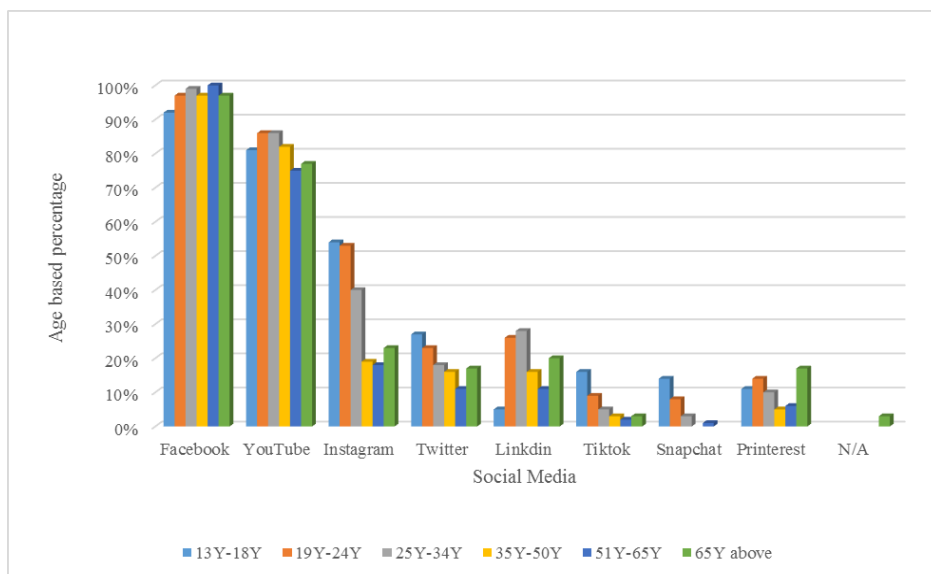


Figure 2: Local Consumption of Social Media Platforms in Sri Lanka, 2021
 Source: Asia Pacific Institute of Digital Marketing (APIDM), 2021:18

When comparing global and local statistics of social media usage, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram are the most popular social media platforms for reaching out to the public audience both locally and globally. As a result, it can be stated that digital diplomatic practices in Sri Lanka should be promoted

predominantly through Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp and Instagram, with Twitter being used on occasion. Promotion of Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram as the most popular social media platforms among the ordinary people may be necessary to reach a larger national and international audience through digital diplomacy. During the

COVID-19 period, it will be effective for the government to maintain direct public diplomatic missions while dealing with public opinion from a national and worldwide audience avoiding physical encounters. Furthermore, direct public access through digital diplomacy may reduce the use of human resources as well as other resources, resulting in cost-effectiveness for the government.

Unfortunately, in Sri Lanka, social media platforms are primarily used for informal rather than official communication among the officials, politicians and ordinary communities. As a result, now is the moment to execute formal debates among people through digital diplomacy using social media to contribute to Sri Lanka's public diplomatic missions.

4.1. THE APPLICATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN DIGITAL DIPLOMACY PRACTICES OF SRI LANKAN GOVERNMENT AS A FORM OF ITS PUBLIC DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS

This sub-section looks at how the government of Sri Lanka uses social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Zoom Technology, etc.) in the procedures of public diplomatic missions. According to the findings of this study, there are a few successful stories of using Digital Diplomacy being sustained through public diplomatic

missions performed by the Sri Lanka Foreign Ministry.

As part of Sri Lanka's public diplomatic strategy, the former Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardana announced on 01 July 2020 that the country has launched a "Contact Sri Lanka Portal" in collaboration with Information and Communication Technology Agency (ICTA) to find digital solutions for traditional practices of diplomacy during the COVID-19 period. Sri Lanka also adopted the "Global Declaration on the Digital Response to COVID-19" at the virtual ministerial conference hosted by Estonia and Singapore with over 60 countries in attendance (Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the United Nations, 03 July 2020). Moreover, the Twitter Pages of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the minister of Foreign Affairs Dinesh Gunawardana which engage in digital diplomacy can be found at @MFA_SriLanka and @DCRGunawardana respectively (Gunawardana, 2016).

Sri Lanka's digital diplomacy potential is still in its infancy. However, at the individual and organizational levels, the Sri Lankan government engages in limited digital diplomatic practices. Unfortunately, Sri Lanka has yet to commit to define a

digital diplomatic strategy, plan or program for the improvement of the country's digital diplomacy in the future (Jayatilaka, 2020).

Further, the social media usage in Sri Lankan politics has given the priorities for;

- ✓ Online conspiracies and campaigns
- ✓ Maintaining popularity during election periods (i.e. In comparison to 26 official Facebook pages of politicians, 4 official Facebook pages are anchored by Rajapaksas generating around 33% total engagement in Social Media through Facebook)
- ✓ Making political echo chamber
- ✓ In the elections as a media campaign anchored by political parties as well as civil societies
- ✓ conducting social movement protests (i.e. the massive social movement protest led by Mr. Namal Rajapaksa called 'Jana Balaya Colombata' is totally promoted by social media through Facebook, Twitter and Instagram in Sri Lanka) and,
- ✓ Leveraging constitution and its design

(Source: Hattotuwa, November 2018:6-9)

According to above facts, social media use in Sri Lankan politics is ineffective in terms of sustaining public opinion in a diplomatic manner. In Sri Lanka, the political authorities have failed to fully exploit the potential of social media to sustain foreign relations through diplomacy. The majority of the diplomatic missions listed above do not address the general public opinion in Sri Lanka. The existing practice of the government in public diplomacy does not adequately convey the public opinion of the Sri Lankan people. Furthermore, the transfer of information from the government to the public and public to the government may not be sustained by the government's public diplomatic missions, as these missions are still entertained by a small and specific audience who participate in traditional diplomacy. As a result, public diplomatic mission in Sri Lanka has been challenged during the COVID-19 pandemic with travel restrictions at present. Hence, it would be important and crucial to introduce an alternative diplomatic practice instead of traditional diplomatic procedures to avoid problems. Therefore, digital diplomacy could be suggested to be promoted as a form of public diplomacy in Sri Lanka in the future.

In this background, this paper

examines the impact and applicability of digital diplomacy to maintain and achieve public diplomacy and its goals throughout COVID-19 era. In Sri Lanka, digital diplomacy could bring communities together directly through social media platforms, bypassing traditional diplomatic methods. This could provide a wide range of opportunities for the citizens to voice their views and opinions to the government through active and direct participation in public diplomatic missions both within and outside of Sri Lanka. As a result, digital diplomacy will be a sustainable tool for public diplomatic missions to maintain public opinion through direct community participation in diplomacy in the future. In this perspective, the next section of this paper will examine the benefits, drawbacks, and challenges of digital diplomacy in delivering Sri Lanka's public diplomatic missions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.2. BENEFITS OF DIGITAL DIPLOMACY TO SRI LANKA

Digital diplomacy creates additional benefits for maintaining public diplomacy, particularly in the event of a pandemic, as we are currently witnessing. This could allow the public and delegates to deal with foreign governments without leaving their host

countries under minimum contamination with outside people. This section will look at how to use social media platforms to benefit from digital diplomacy through public diplomatic missions in Sri Lanka during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Strengthening international relations

Digital diplomacy has the potential to make states' foreign affairs more successful and efficient than traditional diplomacy. It also helps the advancement of foreign policy goals, international alignment, direct public engagements and the interactions of state and non-state actors through social media. Digital diplomacy may assist in maintenance of legitimacy and the development of partnerships among the states in order to strengthen international relations especially during the COVID-19 global pandemic in Sri Lanka.

Fostering two-way communication

According to Rudolf Bekink, the Netherlands Ambassador to the United States "the digital arena opens new possibilities from one-on-one conversations to dialogues with communities" (Hocking and Melissen, 2015: 25). Traditional diplomacy is based on the interactions between the

government representatives and the officials, however, the adoption of digital diplomatic practices may allow government officials to interact and communicate directly with public audiences and individuals via Twitter and Facebook, resulting in open conversation spaces for various debates. Individuals may be able to influence government policies through two-way communication (Ross, 2011: 451-455). Finally, governments and their foreign policies may benefit from these discussions through digital diplomacy since they will be able to argue public opinion on specific issues (Bjola and Holmes, 2015: 1-9).

Accelerating the dissemination of information

People would be unable to move and would have to be locked-down during a pandemic period, thus the flow of information about public affairs would be suspended. Therefore, traditional diplomatic missions would be ineffective and inefficient in such instances. In case of such a pandemic, social media will be significant for communicating with the public and circulating information around the world by employing digital diplomacy tactics. During the COVID-19 outbreak, various countries have used social media to interact with their citizens who are

under quarantine as a part of their public diplomatic missions (De La Garza, 2020).

Delivering fast, efficient and cost effective diplomatic services

Digital diplomacy is fast, efficient and cost effective because it uses social media platforms for communication, service delivery, documentation, conducting consular affairs and interviews. Furthermore, it will allow embassies to work with fewer officers while serving comparatively a broader range of clients than traditional diplomacy allows. In addition, digital diplomacy may lower the cost of maintaining traditional diplomacy by reducing the requirement for human resources. As a result, digitalization of diplomacy will be cost effective.

Ensuring minimal contamination of people

It will be important to conduct consular and diplomatic affairs via social media since it ensures that people are not contaminated while working during the pandemic. Digital diplomacy may limit the physical meetings of people, as it facilitates online meetings using Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, etc. These online forums have the potential to bring people from all over the world together, and those

forums could be valuable in promoting public diplomacy during COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, digital diplomacy would reduce the risk of spreading the virus through diplomatic channels.

Create a mass availability and accessibility for public services through digitalization

Digital diplomacy can help to digitalize public services that serve a greater variety of clients simultaneously by establishing consular services such as investment supports, travel services, passports, and visa applications on an internet basis. It will make more availability and accessibility than traditional practices and methods. These procedures might be important in the event of travel restrictions due to COVID-19. Moreover, these virtual procedures would be cost effective and less time consuming for the people.

4.3. DRAWBACKS OF DIGITAL DIPLOMACY IN SRI LANKA

Diplomats can lose the monopoly of their role in reporting information

Digital diplomacy has the potential to alter the role of the diplomat's job. It will not take into account the responsibilities of a diplomat

who represents his/her government, nation and the citizen while he/she is overseas, and reports information back to the government. Therefore, the diplomat will lose his/her monopoly in reporting information as a part of his/her role and this monopoly could be shifted to the citizens who can easily share the information with the general public via social media.

Spreading extremism

According to Kalathil (2013), the use of social media networks in digitalization of diplomacy may lead terrorism and imposition of foreign ideologies. Various extremist organizations can use social media to disseminate their threats to the norms, values and objectives of the international arena (Kalathil, 2013 as cited in Rashica, 2018: 82). Therefore, the small states like Sri Lanka could be vulnerable to external threats such as terrorism, which poses a threat against its sovereignty, demographic integrity, and socio-cultural identity. As well, the extremists' ideologies could be amplified over the foreign policy and decision making of minor states like Sri Lanka through digital diplomacy.

Losing the exclusive power of State

The traditional diplomacy is carried out by the delegates who are appointed by the sovereign states on behalf of the state and its public. Consequently, the traditional diplomacy may not be able to challenge the sole power of the state. However, in case of digitalization of public diplomacy, the influence of external audience over the sovereign state may expand. In this situation, the small states such as Sri Lanka may lose its sole power of decision making due to the involvements of world super powers and other powerful states. This might jeopardize the sovereignty of small countries like Sri Lanka.

The culture of Anonymity

In the anonymous culture, one individual might impersonate another and cause harm to the person who has nominated and performed as the actual person. As a result of disseminating false information, this could lead to complicated issues. Cases exercising anonymity have the potential to cause mistrust between nations.

4.4. CHALLENGES OF PRACTICING DIGITAL DIPLOMACY IN SRI LANKA

During COVID-19 pandemic, digital diplomacy will be a significant tool for enduring public

diplomatic missions in Sri Lanka. However, due to the social and technical constraints such as lack of awareness, poor education and technical knowledge, poverty and political corruptions, digital diplomatic methods are difficult to implement in the Island. This section will discuss the challenges of establishing effective public diplomatic missions using digital diplomacy as a technological approach towards traditional diplomacy during the post COVID-19 era in Sri Lanka.

Threatening the cyber security

The rapid flow of information can be beneficial, but it can also be a challenge for a country if sensitive information is leaked, data and accounts are stolen. The most famous example in this regard is that the US confidential foreign policy files that had been shared between US embassies were publicly released by the United States scandal WikiLeaks allowing the entire world access into it (Manor, 2015). According to Adesina (2017), cyber security can be challenged by online anonymity exposing users to inaccurate and misleading information, particularly in public announcements on social media accounts. As a technologically poor country, Sri Lanka would be increasingly concerned about cyber security issues and threats in the

future in the engagements of digital diplomacy.

Technological difficulties experienced by ordinary people

Throughout the rapid technological evolution of the world, Sri Lanka has remained as a relatively impoverished country. The primary goal of public diplomacy is to communicate directly with international/foreign audiences. Unfortunately, the technological difficulties in Sri Lanka, particularly in remote areas, prevent people from connecting with foreign audience engaging in public diplomacy through digitalization. As a result, the public opinion and the interpersonal relationships in Sri Lanka are constrained to a small political group at present scenario of pandemic. Under these current circumstances, the public opinion is not conveyed properly through public diplomacy in the island. Therefore, the public opinion of a majority of rural people could be neglected and discriminated through digital diplomatic procedures.

Lack of education, awareness and the knowledge regarding the technology as well as the concept of Diplomacy

In Sri Lanka, especially rural people face with challenges to

obtain secondary education, and majority are deprived of tertiary education at university level. As a result, majority of the people lack technological and conceptual awareness when it comes to diplomacy, political and social matters. In this background, the voices of these people are not represented in the international political debates. Due to the absence of formal and accessible digital diplomatic procedures in Sri Lanka, the public opinion of majority is not properly conveyed through public diplomatic missions at present. Because of lack of awareness, education and knowledge regarding the diplomatic missions and technology, the public opinion could be spoiled and misled by the parties who use digital technologies. Therefore, public awareness of the technology and diplomacy will be important to entertain gains of digital diplomacy in Sri Lanka for public audience.

Linguistic constraints

Sinhala is the official language in Sri Lanka and the majority of the ordinary people speak in Sinhala. Most of the social media platforms use English Language and therefore, when the host people engage with foreign audiences via social media, they should be fluent in English as a universal language.

As a result, the language hurdles may prevent the majority of Sri Lankans' direct involvements in public diplomacy through social media. Therefore, the government has been forced to designate delegates on behalf of that majority through traditional diplomacy; however, the public opinion would not be realized through these traditional procedures at present.

Customizing digital diplomacy to fit with the individual needs

According to the Netherlands Ambassador to USA, Rudolf Bekink, "one challenge in this field is choosing the appropriate technological platform that allows you to reach your target audience. We should not be engaging in a one-size fits-all strategy, but customizing digital diplomacy to our specific needs" (Hocking and Melissen, 2015: 25). Customizing digital diplomacy platform in a country like Sri Lanka would be difficult, because the general public may have limited access to social media platforms. Therefore, the customization of social media for ground-level citizens in Sri Lanka to participate in public diplomatic missions via diaspora would be a challenge even at present. As well, digital diplomacy will be a challenge for the people who do not use and are not familiar with appropriate and recommended social media

platforms in digital diplomatic practices. In that case, Sri Lankan government is not economically and technologically strong enough to tailor the digital diplomacy with the target group and their needs.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The origin and development of digital diplomacy may be traced back to the end of the twentieth century with the launch of Public Diplomacy 2.0 in 2008, WikiLeaks scandal in 2010 and especially the Arab Spring in 2011. As a form of using 'soft power', social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, You Tube, Instagram, and Snap chat have become an important communicative tool in shaping public diplomacy for politicians, diplomats and the general public at present. In the post COVID-19 period, the application of digital diplomacy in Sri Lanka will be a significant strategic approach for realizing public diplomatic missions. The significant changes in social media as a result of technological advancements will lead to a new era of public diplomacy that will be digitalized through digital diplomacy. Digital diplomacy is developed with the ICT, internet and social media to achieve its main goals towards knowledge management, public diplomacy, information

management, consular communication and response, internet freedom, external resources and policy planning.

This study examined the application of digital diplomacy in Sri Lanka using social media to sustain public diplomatic missions during the COVID-19 pandemic period. The study evaluated the social media usage of the people at national and international levels. It revealed that more than 75% of overall people are using Facebook, You Tube, Twitter and WhatsApp while more than 50% of overall people use Instagram for the purposes of informal communication around the world as well as in Sri Lanka. However, despite this high potential scenario of using social media among public, the digital diplomatic practices in Sri Lanka are still weak and yet to be developed in order to sustain public diplomacy even during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study further examined the advantages, disadvantages and challenges of Digital Diplomacy in Sri Lanka as an approach for promoting public diplomatic missions. Strengthening international relations, fostering two-way communication, accelerating the dissemination of information, ensuring minimal contamination of people, and providing fast, efficient and cost effective diplomatic services are

identified as advantages, while challenges for cyber security, spreading extremism, losing the exclusive power of state and the culture of anonymity are discovered as disadvantages of establishing digital diplomacy as a form of public diplomacy in Sri Lanka. Moreover, technological difficulties with ordinary people, lack of education, awareness and the knowledge about technology as well as the concept of diplomacy, linguistic constraints and tailoring digital diplomacy to meet individual needs are revealed as challenges in Sri Lanka towards digitalization of public diplomacy. Therefore, as a country which has been severely affected by COVID-19 pandemic, Sri Lanka should realize the applicability and effectiveness of digital diplomacy in directing public diplomatic missions to increase the participation of the foreign and local communities in order to minimize the negative impacts of traditional diplomacy in the future.

5.1. RECOMMENDATIONS

Providing a social media training to the government officials

As the front line of diplomatic procedures, outgoing government officials, delegates, diplomats and relevant departmental officers should be provided a social media

training to foster e-literacy. They should be given a training on the practical use of technology in public diplomatic missions including quarantine procedures, investments, and consular affairs during the COVID-19 period.

Diplomats should adopt their role with the new communication systems

Diplomats should abandon their traditional role in diplomacy and they should embrace the new communication tools to maintain public affairs through digital diplomatic procedures. Thus, they should be more familiarized with using social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram in handling public diplomatic missions from their host country offices to limit physical movements and contaminations during the pandemic. In this matter, above mentioned social media training will be important to increase e-literacy of diplomats in transforming their traditional role to the digitalization of public diplomacy.

Introducing a consistent official website for all consular affairs

Introducing consistent official website for consular matters will reduce the physical use of documents and it may help to limit the physical presence of

public service providers in the airports and visa offices. “Contact Sri Lanka Portal” launched on 26 March 2020 will be a progressive approach towards public service delivery via digital diplomacy. This was initiated by Sri Lanka’s Foreign Ministry and the Information & Communication Technology Agency of Sri Lanka (ICTA) for overseas Sri Lankans as a diplomatic and consular solution during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Introducing social media pages for embassies and high commissions

Following the footsteps of other countries who maintain social media pages like Facebook and Twitter, the Sri Lankan government might urge all the embassies and high commissions to create their own social media pages at a low cost to coordinate and manage their day-to-day diplomatic and consular affairs. During the COVID-19 period in Sri Lanka, people could have easy access to the information and solutions to their consular matters at digital presence.

Carrying out social media campaigns which cover ongoing public diplomatic missions

Sri Lanka is now carrying out a number of public diplomatic missions with several countries.

These ongoing public diplomatic missions could be operated through social media campaigns by using Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and You Tube to increase the participation of foreign and national public in diplomacy. This kind of missions may sustain international relations with particular countries through the digitalization of public diplomacy especially during COVID-19 pandemic.

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