

Digital Diplomacy & Bangladesh

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Globalization has intriguingly connected the world over the last three decades. Concurrently, the changing trends in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have become pervasive across the continents. In the same vein, state-to-state and diplomatic communication has been transformed from ancient *Pigeon Diplomacy* to *Twitter Diplomacy* in modern days (Seib, 2012). In the diplomatic domain, the digital mode of communication ensures timely action and intervention on bilateral issues and other foreign relations. Additionally, a quick response in a crisis is likely to prevent the escalation of any discord in a positive manner. To take advantage of ICTs, most countries worldwide have consolidated the state-of-the-art in their statecraft. Thus, cutting-edge technology ensures prompt and top-notch outcomes with less workforce.

The global digital revolution and vibrant social media created a political fervor among ordinary people who are willing to be connected to the realm of statecraft. Therefore, people from respective countries and abroad follow political leaders, politicians, and diplomats on social media platforms to get updated about their domestic and international events and engagements, wherein, with digital participation, the commoners find themselves engaged with the state's policy-making in real-time. In accordance with the global digital transformation in socio-political aspects, most international political leaders have a vibrant presence in the virtual space with verified social

media accounts. Nowadays, Global leaders routinely practice *Selfie Diplomacy* with their counterparts, using social media platforms to project their national images and interests.

In contrast, we witnessed a deficient presence of top leadership and key ministers in the digital domain of the previous government led by Sheikh Hasina, which showcases a narrow understanding of the power of digital technologies in foreign affairs.

According to the global digital data observer (*Kemp, 2024b*), Bangladesh had 77.36 million internet users in January 2024, which is 44.5 percent of the country's total population. The social media users in Bangladesh stand at 52.9 million, which is 30.4 percent of the total population. Whereas the global internet users stand at 66 percent (5.35 billion of a total 8.08 billion population), active social media users have been reported as over five billion, 62.3 percent of the global population (*Kemp, 2024a*). Earlier in January 2023, internet usage observer Statista (2023) reported that Bangladesh ranked 16th in the list of top number of internet users' countries and is the second highest in South Asia after India, which stood second in the list after China.

Statistics show that Bangladesh is outpacing some of its neighbors in digitalizing society. With the help of extensive fiber optic networks, government functionaries connect major cities and rural areas. Correspondingly, to reach out to

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the global audience, Bangladesh looks to adopt digital diplomacy to solidify its public diplomacy efforts and accomplish its foreign policy goals (Khan, 2016).

However, Bangladesh needs to catch up regionally and globally in maintaining and projecting a sustained digital presence commensurate with its goal to achieve soft-power capability in the cyber domain. Though Bangladesh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has a social media presence with 370K followers on Facebook and 54.9K on their 'X' (formerly known as Twitter) handles (as of November 2, 2024), the missions abroad are yet to make their vibrant presence digitally. Bangladesh has to widen the social media presence of diplomatic missions abroad to connect with more than 15 million migrant workers and a considerable number of Bangladeshi diasporas worldwide (Ovee, 2023).

Digital access to information fosters the freedom of speech and ensures people's participation in the common virtual public sphere. Information publicized by a competent authority or from a central focal point can counter the spreading of disinformation and rumors. Maintaining social media accounts for the top leaders, i.e., the Prime Minister, President, or Head of the State, might be constrained by some socio-political causes like-unwanted comments, misinterpretation and/or misuse of messages, harsh criticism by netizens of political issues, and so on. However, these should not be the obstacles to being connected to the global audiences if competent/trained staff can be employed for the job. The concerned people may have to keep an eye on the global trends to understand the approach worldwide.

The existing digital infrastructure in Bangladesh should also be upgraded to considerably pursue digital diplomacy. The lack of harmonization between infrastructural development and skilled manpower in digital diplomacy efforts has been identified as a major setback for the country. Moreover, information management, cybersecurity, and political hesitancy in the social media presence of the country's top leadership and key ministers of the previous government can be considered as existing obstacles to Bangladesh's lack of vibrant engagement in the digital diplomatic domain.

The country should not be trapped in the political rhetoric and hyperboles of 'Digital' and 'Smart' Bangladesh. It is high time we made concrete

changes to move faster and keep pace with the changing globe.

However, the emergence of digital publics in Bangladesh, South Asia, and other parts of the globe has been considered an opportunity for a participatory democratic culture. Whereas the unrelenting diatribe, political/diplomatic faux pas, trolls, negative backlash, misinformation/disinformation, and management of dialogic communication with the digital public remain significant challenges for Bangladesh to pursue digital diplomacy. Additionally, the prolonged quiescence of social media postings, updates, and engagement with digital audiences have been observed on the government websites, social media pages, accounts of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, overseas missions, and key personnel who are in the front-line to carry out the digital diplomacy for Bangladesh.

To overcome all these constraints, Bangladesh should focus on data protection management and unassailable cybersecurity. Additionally, proper training for young, tech-savvy officials, diplomats, and other staff of the foreign ministry and in missions abroad can upskill their competencies in social media management. It will facilitate dialogic/interactive communication with the audience. Hence, knowledge development on overall cyberspace can assure cutting-edge digital diplomacy.

It is time to think of the globe as a virtually interconnected common domain where all have the equal opportunity to claim a share, depending on scrupulous presence and promptness. Bangladesh should come up with a significant overhaul to strategize digital diplomacy. Global actors are moving toward this new mode of diplomacy by leveraging social media platforms to boost their dominance and soft power expansion. Therefore, Bangladesh has to maintain plenteous foreign relations to discern multiple avenues as an aspiring nation.

On a positive note, the head of the interim government has a vibrant presence on social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter), where the Facebook Page tagged "Chief Advisor GOB" already has more than half a million followers (526K as of the first week of November 2024), and the X account as "Chief Adviser of the Government of Bangladesh" (@ChiefAdviserGoB) is having 39.5K followers. Along with that, the personal X account of Dr. Muhammad Yunus is also available

with @Yunus_Centre where 243.7K people follow him around the globe.

The Chief Advisor, Dr. Muhammad Yunus, has stardom and foreign exposure to the global audience, whereas the Foreign Adviser, Md. Touhid Hossain is a veteran diplomat and well-versed in international affairs and public diplomacy. Bangladesh should utilize their fame and experiences to take the nation's public diplomacy to a greater height by harnessing social media and other digital platforms. Bolstering Bangladesh's digital diplomacy efforts can make public diplomacy congruous with modern-day statecraft and will pave the way to advance soft power projection to the globe in the coming days.

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