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Jan 21, 2022 by [Luigi Di Martino](#), [Lisa Tam](#), [Eriks Varpahovskis](#)

As Trust in Social Media Crumbles, Are These Platforms Still Adequate for Public Diplomacy? ^[1]

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *This post is based on a December 7, 2021 debate co-organized by the International Studies Association (ISA)'s International Communication Section and the International Communications Association (ICA)'s Public Diplomacy Interest Group, which can be viewed [here](#).*

The tension of social media as both a liberating and constraining force has important implications for the study of digital communication in public diplomacy. The challenges and opportunities brought about by social media have been discussed in the third of a series of debates co-organized by the ISA's International Communication Section and the ICA's Public Diplomacy Interest Group. [Lisa Tam](#) of Queensland University of Technology and [Eriks Varpahovskis](#) of HSE University (National Research University Higher School of

Economics, Russia) debated the question: “As trust in social media crumbles, are these platforms still adequate for public diplomacy?”

Diplomacy, along with several other governmental activities, has been altered by social media in two key ways. First, the internet has changed what diplomats do to engage with publics; second, it has changed the actors who influence or are engaged with diplomacy.

With the introduction of the internet in public diplomacy—and in particular of social media—governments have considered digital technology as a factor that empowers new actors on the international stage, resulting in calls for a dialogic model of public diplomacy.

However, new questions about the quality, accuracy and accessibility of news in social media have emerged. Author Eli Pariser has warned about the so-called “filter bubble.” The widespread use of the term “fake news”—often mentioned by both commentators and politicians to discredit an opponent or another political actor—signals a decline in trust toward news platforms. Social bots—created to produce automatically generated messages on social media—have spread misinformation and spam. Recent revelations from a Facebook whistleblower confirmed what media and communications scholars have been warning for a long time: the design of social media platforms reflects a focus on profits rather than on users’ well-being or on democratic and informed debate.

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Tam argued that even though trust in social media platforms has plummeted, research has shown that people continue to use social media, especially for accessing news and information. Both opinion leaders and opinion seekers are still active on social media platforms. She also noted that trust in social media platforms is not equivalent to trust in the organizations or entities that have a presence on social media platforms. One may not trust Facebook but could trust the social media page of Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade as an official source of credible information. Even if it is difficult to define and measure social media’s “adequacy,” it still remains a key component of public diplomacy activities as demonstrated in one of Tam’s publications on the interpersonal approaches to public diplomacy exhibited on the Facebook page of the U.S. Consulate in Hong Kong.

Varpahovskis, on the other hand, started his opening statement by pointing out that despite the hype about freedom of speech in the first years in which social media platforms were emerging, governments around the world are now limiting access to social media content, gaining access to users' personal data and conducting surveillance of their citizens. When it comes to security, states have never been so obsessed. Therefore, Varpahovskis argued that states and their leaders are mostly interested in social media platforms as a tool for propaganda or strategic public diplomacy and control of the population. However, he recognized that some of the global challenges that we are facing, such as climate change, require that states give up some of their sovereignty.

In response to these contrasting views, noted scholar Nancy Snow warned that we often associate public diplomacy with engagement, but we fail to recognize that engagement can be chaotic. This is an aspect of digital culture that is rarely accepted by governments. According to Snow, it seems that both perspectives have in common the will to “create a better society,” working with collaborative partners because so many contemporary issues and problems are shared. Therefore, it is crucial to think about the possible contributions of public diplomacy starting from both perspectives.

Useful contributions came from the audience. Zhao Alexandre Huang, associate professor of communication at Université Paris Nanterre, warned against the risks of using digital technologies for mere propaganda and governmental surveillance. Phillip Arceneaux, assistant professor of strategic communication at Miami University, invited us to put into the equation the role played by active publics that can also shape the use and content of social media platforms. Arceneaux concluded by saying that as much as we all agree that social media communication has its limitations, we should not forget that public communication takes place where publics are, so it is obvious that diplomats should be on social media.

Despite the different views in the debate, there was an agreement on the need for diplomats to be active on social media platforms despite their limitations. All the speakers and the participants recognized the fact that public diplomacy needs to use all channels in order to be successful, including traditional forms of public diplomacy and face-to-face diplomacy.

The recording of the debate can be viewed [here](#).
