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Fieldnotes From Brussels: When Diplomacy Meets (Big)Tech ^[1]

Diplomacy, the academic literature tells us, is fundamentally about the mediation of estrangement. We live in a world of differences, and diplomacy creates points of contact to negotiate antagonisms and agreements. While we often think about diplomatic spaces as hidden away behind the thick walls of international organizations, embassies or ministries, the mediation of estrangement has undergone important changes in recent years. One change is the softening of diplomacy's boundaries as nonstate actors enter the scene. As scholars of public diplomacy observe, diplomacy reaches far beyond interstate relations and involves a range of nonstate actors including individuals, cultural institutions or corporations. Another key change, noted by practitioners and observers, concerns the opportunities and challenges associated with diplomacy in a digitalizing world. Breaking down the term "mediation" is a good starting point for thinking about these changes.

Below, I consider these two developments based on my observations during multiple research

visits to one of Europe's prime diplomatic locations — Brussels. Like New York, Geneva, Jakarta or Nairobi, Brussels is a global diplomatic hub. The Belgian capital currently hosts more than 180 diplomatic missions, as well as the headquarters of multiple multilateral organizations, including NATO and the European Union.

The diplomatic scene in Brussels has changed in recent years. For one, the work environment is increasingly *mediated*, as diplomacy has come to rely on digital technologies. While Brussels is a place with both local and historical significance, it is also a place influenced by digital technologies, which challenge existing diplomatic formats and create new ways to work. Especially after COVID-19, screens and VTC technology have become ever-present in diplomatic meetings; and when asked about their daily work routines, diplomats often report that the one tool they could not do their job without is their smartphone. During the pandemic lockdown, the availability of virtual interaction formats led some observers to speculate about the “death” of diplomacy and the likelihood that face-to-face interaction would become entirely replaced by digitally mediated formats. Today, we see that this has not happened, but that the diplomatic world instead has absorbed digital technologies into its myriad practices, norms and rhythms.

The second change to Brussels' diplomatic landscape in recent years is that there is a new group of *mediators* on the block. As scholars of public diplomacy have argued for years, in places like Brussels (or Washington, Jakarta or Doha), there are many other kinds of actors not formally associated with a state that mingle on the scene, including journalists, academics, lawyers and lobbyists. In thinking about diplomacy as the mediation of estrangements, all of them — by reporting, observing or legitimating diplomatic work — are important to the field. In the past two years alone, big technology firms have increased their Brussels lobbying budgets by more than 15% from EUR97 million to EUR113 million, and four of the top ten spenders are U.S. tech companies. In order of annual budget for the 2023 fiscal year, they include META (EUR 8,000,000), Microsoft (EUR 7,000,000), Apple (EUR 7,000,000) and Google (EUR 5,500,000). In Brussels — but also globally — these companies have in recent years become seen as almost “state like” entities as they shape the values and norms of international society, collect and distribute vital information about citizens and provide public spaces for local, national and global exchange. This increasingly evident role of technology companies as *mediators* of estrangement is, thus far, little explored in the study of diplomacy.

Digitalization and technological change should make observers of diplomacy pay attention to two key questions: how does diplomatic work become digitally mediated? Which digital actors and stakeholders will enter the diplomatic scene as technology takes over more aspects of life?

To begin to fill this gap, I can report this: In early 2024 in Brussels, newspaper headlines are filled with announcements about the emergence of the European Commission's new digital regulatory packages (the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act), and the negotiation of a so-called historic deal on the regulation of artificial intelligence. At the same time, my

LinkedIn timeline (incidentally, a website owned since 2016 by Microsoft) overflows with posts by the Brussels offices of American tech companies holding events on themes that diplomacy has long concerned itself with. These themes include questions of global order, the future of the planet and basic organizing principles of international coexistence, such as sovereignty.

In November 2023, for example, the Microsoft Government Affairs office in Brussels, located a stone's throw away from both the European Commission and the European Parliament in the heart of the "Brussels bubble," hosted a book talk on the theme of "Digital Empires." Following the title of the new book by the legal scholar Anu Bradford (who famously coined the term "The Brussels Effect" to describe the EU's global regulatory power), the discussion circled around questions just as relevant in diplomatic and ministerial meetings a few hundred meters away at the European Council. The conversation explored how the struggle over the organizations and future of the world has now become linked to the struggle over digital infrastructure, influence and visions. The mediation of estrangement, in other words, is no longer an analog affair, neither in its practical, everyday enactment, nor in the question of who gets a seat at the negotiation table.

Digitalization and technological change should make observers of diplomacy pay attention to two key questions: how does diplomatic work become digitally mediated? Which digital actors and stakeholders will enter the diplomatic scene as technology takes over more aspects of life? Both questions are best approached through a humanistic and practical lens that foregrounds the complex ways in which digitalization overlaps with international and social dynamics, rather than an overly optimistic or pessimistic view that considers such technology as our salvation or a threat.
