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# YouTube as a Tool of Soft Power in the Digital Age <sup>[1]</sup>

*"The world outside and the pictures in our heads."* Walter Lippmann, Public Opinion (1922)

A century ago, the American journalist and media critic, Walter Lippmann argued that the public doesn't live in direct contact with reality but through mediated images that construct public opinion. Today, those pictures move faster than ever, and the gap between the world outside and the pictures in our heads has blurred the boundaries of reality itself. In the digital age, every event, whether national or international, unfolds on two stages: one on the ground, and one online, where algorithms, thumbnails, influencers, clicks, and reels translate lived experience into narrative for millions of followers.

The pictures in our heads are no longer shaped solely by traditional media or official narratives, as in Lippmann's time, but are now driven by algorithms and short reels flashing endlessly across our screens. Within this double layer of constructed rhetoric and reality, YouTube travel vloggers have become the modern 'Pied Piper'—guiding their audiences not with magical flutes but with drone shots and GoPro footage via digital platforms. In this new media order, followers, likes, comments, and reshares have replaced credentials as the measures of credibility. Their cameras cross borders faster than diplomats or journalists, crafting emotional geographies that often prove more persuasive and more enduring than official narratives.

When digital imagery becomes the new rhetoric of persuasion, what remains of truth on the ground and who controls the lens through which we see it?

In post-conflict Afghanistan, where the Taliban's consolidation of power has systematically erased women's voices from public life, two travel vloggers: Abrar Hassan, a Pakistani motorcyclist with over 2.13 million subscribers, and Jake Youngblood, an American YouTuber with 19.6K subscribers, known for immersive expeditions in volatile regions, offer sharply divergent portrayals of the nation that diverge sharply not only from each other but also from traditional media narratives.

A viral 55-minute travel vlog by Youngblood, viewed more than 33,000 times and commented on by thousands, follows him wandering through Kabul, meeting Taliban guards, swimming in lakes, and sharing meals with locals. Smiling into the camera, he assures viewers, "It's safe. It's beautiful. It's not what you think." In his digital rhetoric, a country long synonymous with war is reframed as a haven of hospitality and calm.

Hassan, by contrast, commands a far larger digital audience and centers his lens on scenery, hospitality, and the rhythms of everyday life along long overland routes. His encounters with the Taliban appear mainly as travel inconveniences--"*Talibans almost caught me...*"--rather than political engagements. The tone remains adventure-driven and apolitical.

Yet in both cases, the visual narratives are grounded more in personal experience than in informed analysis or investigation. Their portrayals, while engaging, often lack context about the country's geopolitical realities, security challenges, and human rights conditions especially the ongoing erasure of women from public life. Such absences reveal how easily digital storytelling can aestheticize complexity, turning conflict into content and reality into spectacle.

Still, these YouTube travelers practice a quiet kind of people-to-people diplomacy, drawing thousands of viewers with each video uploaded reshaping perceptions more effectively than any official campaign. What's more, though, they also construct new illusions: realities filtered through framing and imagery where the line between representation and reality begins to blur as without a single policy statement, YouTubers have reframed the post-conflict country as a destination of beauty and normalcy.

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## **"YouTube has become the world's most visited embassy, open 24 hours a day, governed not by protocol, but by the power of the frame."**

This is digital diplomacy, or more precisely, YouTube soft power: diplomacy through pixels, distributed by algorithms, emotionally charged and globally consumable. Joseph Nye's concept of soft power—the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce has always depended on perception. What has changed is who now shapes those perceptions. Governments no longer monopolize narrative control; influencers, filmmakers, and travelers occupy that space through digital storytelling.

As Nicholas J. Cull notes in his early work on public diplomacy 2.0, the rise of platforms like YouTube and WikiLeaks transformed not just how information travels but how transparency, narrative control, and authenticity are contested in real time. The architecture of influence has shifted from government press rooms to the logic of digital platforms, where engagement metrics often define credibility. A single travel vlog can reach a greater a global audience than a foreign ministry's press release. The cost is negligible, the reach exponential, and the tone far more persuasive.

However, the rise of YouTube diplomacy is not without risk. Visual narratives can humanize, but they can also sanitize. A carefully composed frame may omit structural inequality or repression, presenting selective truths under the guise of neutrality. As the line between citizen and diplomat dissolves, the global information order becomes less hierarchical and more performative. Nations compete not just for territory or alliances, but for attention. The algorithm, reels, and flashing visuals have become more powerful and driven by engagement rather than ethics.

In this environment, the concept of "narrative sovereignty" takes on a new urgency. Who owns the stories that define a nation? Who decides which images dominate the feed? And can traditional diplomacy keep pace with influencers who reshape national reputations in a single upload?

The future of international relations will depend not only on military or economic strength, but

on narrative agility: the ability to frame, to curate, and to appear in the algorithmic field of vision. In that sense, YouTube has become the world's most visited embassy, open 24 hours a day, governed not by protocol, but by the power of the frame.

Like all diplomacy, digital diplomacy is double-edged. It can humanize, but it can also sanitize. A carefully edited portrayal of tranquility, for instance, may obscure deeper political realities. Yet, as Lippmann suggested, public opinion is not formed by facts alone, but by the images through which facts are perceived. The power of Youngblood's videos lies not in its accuracy, but in its effect, its ability to make viewers feel that Afghanistan is safe, familiar, and worth visiting. This digital emotional shift is the new terrain of foreign relations.

In an age of digital mediation, content creators have emerged as new symbols of "organic public diplomacy"—non-state, grassroots actors who shape the pictures in our heads through visual framing and everyday storytelling. When a vlogger's lens reframes Afghanistan as a safe and welcoming place, the act moves beyond tourism and enters the realm of soft power—reshaping how nations are imagined and how empathy is distributed. In keeping with Walter Lippmann's idea that public opinion is constructed through mediated realities rather than direct experience, digital platforms like YouTube now operate as the new arenas of soft power shaping the pictures in our heads. In such a world, it falls upon educators, researchers, and global citizens to keep questioning these digital media frames—to ask not only what we see, but why we see it, and who wants us to see it.

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