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Assessing the Long-Term Impact of Ukraine's Digital Innovations ^[1]

Since the onset of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine War, Ukrainian diplomats have relied heavily on social media to narrate war-related events, shape media coverage, rally online support for Ukraine's war effort and delegitimize Russia. In a recent [journal article](#), Moran Yarchi and I sought to examine Ukraine's innovative social media tactics, while asking which of these innovations will other ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) adopt thereby reshaping the practice of digital diplomacy.

We began by reviewing 90 digital diplomacy studies and identifying which factors contribute to the spread of innovative social media practices among MFAs, and which limit the spread of practices. Our 14-factor matrix, that includes elements like digital experience, peer emulation, ethical concerns, and resource requirements, was used to assess each Ukrainian innovation, and determine its diffusion potential. Notably, Ukraine's innovation lies not in the adoption of new technologies, but in using existing technologies in novel ways. We first identified three Ukrainian innovations that are likely to diffuse among MFAs.

1. Open Letters to Tech CEOs

From the onset of the War, Ukraine's Minister of Digital Transformation publicly tweeted open letters to tech leaders including Tim Cook of Apple, Mark Zuckerberg of Meta, and others asking they exit the Russian market in response to the Russian invasion. These weren't private diplomatic demarches but public appeals shared on Twitter/X and designed to generate public pressure on tech companies. This Ukrainian tactic proved highly effective as more than 200 tech companies suspended their operations in Russia owing to both public pressure and additional pressure from the U.S. government.

This innovative tactic will likely spread among MFAs as Ukraine's example serves as a "digital success story" showing that public pressure can shape Big Tech policies. Yet, the implications of this new digital are profound. Silicon Valley has effectively chosen sides in a war. This means that future wars may be determined by states' ability to instigate tech boycotts of other states, boycotts which can be disastrous. Presently, Russian citizens can't use the gig economy, sell products globally, or access cloud services. As such, diplomacy will increasingly involve currying favor with tech CEOs, while Silicon Valley Embassies will be called upon to foster friendly relations with Big Tec to avoid possible boycotts. This will not only increase the power of Silicon Valley, but may also stifle national attempts to regulate Big Tech.

2. Radicalized Humor

Ukraine has used humor, pop culture references, and memes to retain the attention of social media users. By comparing the War to Marvel movies, Ukrainian diplomats created a coherent narrative of a heroic Ukraine battling a villainous Russia in an epic struggle of good

versus evil. But our analysis found that as the war progressed, Ukraine employed "radicalized humor" as Ukrainian accounts posted increasingly graphic content including videos of Russian death set to rock music, romantic sentiments towards weapons, celebrations of death and destruction and techno music dance routines performed in front of cannon fodder. Through these tweets, the tragedy of war was obscured by one-line zingers.

"The beautification of war through humor, the reduction of complex geopolitics to memes, the commodification of conflict through celebrity culture, and the empowerment of Big Tech all represent fundamental shifts in how nations conduct diplomacy."

This tactic will likely spread among MFAs as humor has already become central to digital diplomacy with France, Russia and others using humor to create distinct online brands. The danger is that through "radicalized humor," war becomes normalized to the point where social media users view armed warfare as a natural solution to tensions between states. Additionally, the depiction of war as an epic battle between good and evil may lead to diplomatic negotiations being portrayed as obstacles that prevent the triumph of good over evil, while eroding public trust in diplomacy.

Crucially, we found that memes in particular reduce complex geopolitical conflicts to simplistic good versus evil stories which can generate unrealistic expectations among social media users. When wars inevitably end in diplomatic settlements, publics may feel betrayed and lose faith in diplomacy.

3. Celebrity Digital Ambassadors

Ukraine has appointed several American celebrities as Twitter/X ambassadors, including *Star Wars* actor Mark Hamill, singer Barbra Streisand, and historian Timothy Snyder. Each of these have a large online following, allowing Ukraine to reach diverse social media publics. This tactic is likely to spread among MFAs as celebrities have long been recruited by organizations like UNICEF, and some countries already use celebrity envoys.

However, this tactic is also problematic, as Mark Hamill has become the face of Ukraine's "Army of Drones," helping raise \$1.5 million for reconnaissance drones used in targeting Russian forces. The U24 crowdfunding website features Luke Skywalker imagery and quotes. This fusion of pop culture and warfare is troubling, as *Star Wars* fans buying signed posters in exchange for donations to Ukraine become complicit in acts of war without deliberating moral implications. This tactic fosters "complicity without accountability" as individuals fund weapons but aren't held responsible for how they're used. Moreover, the commodification of war through celebrity culture promotes a blasé attitude toward armed conflicts which undermines diplomacy.

The Innovation That Won't Spread

From the war's beginning, Ukraine posted bank account details on Twitter to crowdfund the

procurement of weapons. The U24 platform raised over \$300 million for aid and advanced weapons. Despite its success, our analysis suggests that this tactic is unlikely to spread among MFAs for several reasons. First, crowdfunding weapons procurement creates ethical concerns as diplomats become arms dealers, while their relationship with the public becomes one of transactional donor relations. Second, crowdfunding weapons creates a world where any state, rebel group or terrorist organization can rely on social media users for aid in purchasing weapons, potentially leading to the global proliferation of conflicts.

The Long Road Ahead

Our research reveals that Ukraine's digital innovations will have a lasting impact on the practice of digital diplomacy. The beautification of war through humor, the reduction of complex geopolitics to memes, the commodification of conflict through celebrity culture, and the empowerment of Big Tech all represent fundamental shifts in how nations conduct diplomacy. Ukraine's innovations have opened a Pandora's box that may be impossible to close, fundamentally altering the relationship between war, diplomacy and technology.
