CPD Perspectives

Exploring the Semiotics of Public Diplomacy

By Ilan Manor

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Abstract

Few studies to date have investigated diplomats' use of visuals on social media. This study asserts that diplomats are now visual narrators as they use visuals to shape the worldviews of social media users. Moreover, this study asserts that ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) have institutionalized the process of visual narration as diplomats create and disseminate visuals on a daily basis. To examine diplomats' visual narration, this study analyzed three social media-based public diplomacy campaigns: one managed by the British Foreign Office and two managed by the Israeli and Lithuanian foreign ministries. Interviews with Israeli and Lithuanian diplomats were used to identify campaign goals and authorial intent. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and an inability to interview British diplomats, the analysis of the British Foreign Office campaign was based on secondary material that outlined campaign goals and authorial intent. Next, semiotic analysis was employed to unearth the meaning that might arise from diplomats' visuals. Notably, this study is among the first to employ Roland Barthes's semiotic approach to visuals shared online by diplomats who conduct public diplomacy. This study found that MFA visuals were used to obtain offline policy goals. Moreover, visuals enabled the delivery of elaborate messages despite Twitter's character limit. This study also found that visuals served as ideological devices as they were used to promote a certain worldview. Results thus validate the study's assertion that diplomats are visual narrators and highlight the need for more academic research into this form of visual narration.

Introduction

Over the past decade, public diplomacy has undergone a rapid process of digitalization as diplomats increasingly employ digital technologies to obtain foreign policy goals. Since 2008, diplomats have adopted myriad technologies including social media (Duncombe, 2019; Laeeq et al., 2021), virtual embassies (Metzgar, 2012) and big data analysis (Manor, 2019). Importantly, diplomats' initial adoption of digital technologies was closely associated with the practice of public diplomacy (Mazumdar, 2021), defined here narrowly as states' "direct communication with foreign peoples, with the aim of affecting their thinking and, ultimately, that of their governments" (Malone, 1985, p. 199). The U.S. State Department first migrated online to interact with Muslin internet users (Khatib, Dutton & Thelwall, 2012); the Swedish ministry of foreign affairs (MFA) created a virtual embassy to engage with global publics (Pamment, 2012); while other MFAs hoped to leverage digital technologies toward influencing old and new media actors (Manor, 2016). Though the definition of public diplomacy adopted in this study may seem dated, it is fitting given the study's assertion that diplomats use visuals on social media to shape the worldviews of digital publics.

This study argues that digitalization is a two-stage process that begins with *reactive* digitalization and advances to *proactive* digitalization. In the former, MFAs undergo a swift process of digitalization as they react to external shocks. In *proactive* digitalization, diplomats strategically use digital technologies to obtain offline foreign policy goals. This article further argues that digitalization has transformed diplomats into visual narrators given that diplomats now use visuals to shape public perceptions of world events. The article draws attention to the need to analyze diplomats' visual narration while offering a methodological approach to do so.

Literature Review

The term "digitalization" refers to the impact that digital technologies have on the norms, values and working routines of diplomats. From a normative perspective, digitalization has led diplomats to interact with digital publics rather than elites (i.e., policymakers). Blog sites and social media profiles are used to communicate with digital publics assembled in foreign countries (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). From a value-based perspective, diplomats increasingly 'listen' to the publics they interact with online while integrating public feedback into the policy formulation process (Cull, 2019). With regard to working routines, diplomatic institutions rely on digital feedback to create social media campaigns that resonate with specific foreign populations (Bjola & Manor, 2018).

Digitalization may be conceptualized as a two-stage process that begins with *reactive* digitalization and advances to *proactive* digitalization. *Reactive* digitalization is a forced process in which events necessitate that diplomats utilize new technologies. Conversely, *proactive* digitalization is a voluntary process in which diplomats employ digital technologies to obtain concrete policy goals. The Arab Spring, for instance, forced diplomats to embrace Facebook in order to monitor online conversations and anticipate future shocks to the international system (Seib, 2012; Causey & Howard, 2013). Similarly, the COVID pandemic demanded that diplomats embrace video conferencing platforms following social distancing (Bramsen & Hagemann, 2021).

Reactive digitalization brings dramatic change at once, while *proactive* digitalization is a prolonged process of trial and error. For example, in 2012 the U.S. State Department was already managing a social media empire of 1,200 accounts (Hayden, 2012). Yet it was between 2012 and 2015 that the

State Department *proactively* embraced social media or institutionalized its use by training U.S. diplomats in social media use and authoring guidebooks for the publication of information online (Israeli MFA, 2016). Moreover, since 2016 MFAs have used different social media platforms to interact with different publics. While Twitter is an elite-to-elite medium used to interact with opinion and policymakers, Facebook is an elite-to-public medium used to interact with foreign populations (Bjola, 2018; Collins & Bekenova, 2019).

As part of their digitalization, MFAs have mastered the art of visual narration as they now create visual content that is as appealing as that spread by media institutions (Manor & Crilley, 2019). Importantly, visuals are not mere ornaments. As Roland Barthes (1977) argued, visuals function as ideological devices. They promote certain values while shaping how publics make sense of the world around them. Visuals shared online are a potent public diplomacy tool given that digital publics increasingly turn to social media to learn about their world (Pew, 2020).

However, only few studies to date have investigated diplomats' use of visuals on social media (Dickinson, 2020; Duncombe, 2018). This is a substantial gap for two reasons. First, digital platforms are visual by nature as images convey large amounts of information in a short duration of time. Due to the short attention span of digital publics, much of the content found on social media is in visual form (Andalibi, Ozturk & Forte, 2017). Second, visuals are more likely to elicit an emotional response from users. As emotions lead to influence, citizen journalists and social media celebrities rely on visuals to attract and influence digital publics (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2015). This is also true of diplomats whose online content is readily accompanied by visuals (Mazumdar, 2021).

This study seeks to address the aforementioned gaps in two ways. First, this article investigates how diplomats practice visual narration as part of their online public diplomacy campaigns. Second, it examines if MFA visuals serve as ideological devices that may influence digital publics' worldviews. To do so, this article draws on Barthes' semiotic approach to image analysis.

From Tweeting to Campaigning

This study asserts that MFAs' use of social media was initially *reactive* as diplomats hastily established social media profiles while attempting to master new forms of diplomatic engagement (Seib, 2012; Strauss et al., 2015). From 2015 onward, MFAs advanced to *proactive* digitalization as they became strategic and linked online activities with offline priorities. East African embassies increasingly used Facebook to strengthen ties with distant diasporas (Manor & Adiku, 2021) while the Lithuanian MFA employed LinkedIn to connect with academic expats and reverse a "brain drain" (Paulauskas, 2019).

As part of *proactive* digitalization, diplomats also began using social media to formulate public diplomacy campaigns. A campaign tries to obtain an offline policy goal by promoting a set of arguments on social media. Scholars studying these campaigns have begun to pay attention to diplomats' use of visuals. For instance, Bjola & Manor (2018) analyzed the Obama administration's use of Twitter to 'sell' the 2015 Iran Deal to skeptical users. Visuals included infographics and video testimonials of American negotiators and scientists.

The Russian Embassy to the UK managed a Twitter campaign to deflect allegations that Russia tried to assassinate former double spy, Sergei Skripal, in Salisbury, UK. One argument insinuated that the UK investigation into

the attack was inept. Another implied that the nerve agent used in the attack actually originated in a UK chemical lab, and that the accusations against Russia were a 'cover-up.' Visuals included memes mocking UK authorities (Chernobrov, 2021). To date, scholars have used a host of theories to investigate diplomats' use of visuals, as explained next.

The Rhetoric of the Digital Image

Studies examining diplomats' use of visuals on social media have employed different theoretical lenses. Pamment (2014) asserted that MFAs have been mediatized as they embraced the logic of media institutions. As media actors integrated visuals into their online reporting, so did MFAs. Seib (2016) postulates that visuals help diplomats vie for the attention of digital publics opposite media actors. Manor and Crilley (2018) examined the use of visuals through framing theory, arguing that visuals anchor the meaning of a tweet thus amplifying diplomats' messages.

Building on previous research, this article asserts that diplomats now strategically use visuals on social media. For example, Manor and Crilley (2018) found that the Israeli MFA refrained from tweeting pictures of Palestinian children during the 2014 Gaza War. Instead, Palestinian children were depicted through cartoons. They hypothesize that the MFA sought to prevent negative emotions from clouding public assessment of Israel's online messages. When examining the Indian government's use of social media to manage diaspora philanthropy, Dickinson (2020) found that visuals simultaneously positioned Indian diasporas as territorial stakeholders who are part of the domestic community while also representing diasporas as an extra-territorial, global public. Dickinson postulated that visuals helped strengthen

the emotional bond that binds a diaspora with its origin country.

What the aforementioned studies have in common is that they fail to account for diplomats' intentions, as scholars did not interview diplomats who create visuals or review policy papers that outline a campaign's rationale. Similarly, these studies failed to identify the stated goals of public diplomacy campaigns. Even more importantly, diplomats transitioned from *reactive* to *proactive* digitalization as they have established dedicated units tasked with creating visuals that are shared on social media (Curiel, 2021). Diplomats are thus visual narrators, and studies examining diplomats' use of visuals must first uncover diplomats' intent and only then may investigate how visuals contribute to an MFA's social media campaign. That is the approach taken by this study. The following section reviews studies that have analyzed the use of visuals by diplomatic actors.

The Image in the Age of Digital Reproduction

Studies in the field of political communication have sought to investigate visuals shared on social media by diverse actors. Lalancette and Reynauld (2019) examined visuals shared by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Instagram. The scholars differentiated between the "structure and content of images" versus the "structure and content of captions," or text. Employing quantitative analysis, the scholars found that Trudeau's visuals focused on his official duties rather than his personal life. While this quantitative methodology provides a quick portrait of Trudeau's social media presence, it does not offer a clear method of deconstructing a visual and articulating its intended meaning.

Crilley, Gillespie and Willis (2020) used a descriptive analysis to investigate how RT (formerly Russia Today)

reenacted the 1917 Russian revolution on Twitter. While descriptive analyses may help unearth the meaning imbued into visuals, they do not offer a systematic methodological approach that enables a robust analysis of visuals published by different public diplomacy actors.

Seo (2014) clearly articulated six research questions used to analyze visuals shared on Facebook during a violent conflict between Israel and the Hamas movement. Among these were: 1) What are the prominent themes of the images tweeted by both actors? 2) What frames are prominent in the images tweeted by each actor? 3) What are the main human characters featured in the images of each party? While Seo's analysis offers a more systematic approach, it precludes an understanding of how diplomats employ visuals outside of conflicts.

One study that warrants attention is Huang and Wang's 2019 analysis of China's "panda public diplomacy." The authors argue that official Chinese social media accounts routinely publish images of pandas in an attempt to amplify China's 'soft rise' campaign, which seeks to portray China's ascent to global leadership through a 'soft' lens that does not intimidate other nations (Wu, Thomas & Yu, 2021). Rather than share visuals of military troops, China shares pictures of pandas. This work approximates the meaning imbued into diplomats' visuals as the authors identified a Chinese foreign policy goal and then assessed how online visuals help promote this goal. Yet, the authors did not interview the diplomats who actually created these visuals.

To summarize, different scholars have adopted different methodologies in their visual analyses. This article offers a unifying approach that may systemize the analysis of visuals shared by public diplomacy actors. By borrowing from Barthes's methodology, this study strives to demonstrate

how diplomats' visuals serve as ideological devices that promote a set of norms and values, or a certain worldview.

The Rhetoric of Barthes's Image

Barthes' *The Death of the Author* (1977) argues that a text is made of multiple writings conversing and reiterating one another, and it is the reader who sits at the site of this "multiplicity." Barthes's arguments are of relevance to social media platforms as comments and memes iterate new meanings to different subsets of users and weaken originality as a claim to authorship. The impact of the tweet sits with the reader/viewer rather than the author.

In *The Rhetoric of the Image*, Barthes suggests that images are never neutral (1977, p. 36). Rather, they are imbued with both cultural and ideological meaning (Aiello, 2006). Aiello adds that a semiotic approach focuses on deconstructing codes, or "sets of rules that are agreed upon within a given cultural system, and that allow the members of the same culture to understand each other by attaching the same meaning to the same signs" (Aiello 2006, p. 90). Visuals, ranging from journalistic photographs to advertisements, are signs. While such signs may be open to a range of subjective interpretations, the producers of images create them to obtain certain goals (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001). Images are thus encoded with messages that are meant to be decoded by the viewer (Aiello 2006, p. 91), and the analysis of images is actually a search for meaning (Bouzida, 2014).

Barthes (1977) argued that visuals operate on two levels. The level of the denotation "corresponds to the literal meaning of an image" or the immediate meaning arising from what is "objectively represented in the image" (Aiello, 2006, p. 94). To paraphrase Sigmund Freud, at the level of the

denotation, a cigar is just a cigar. The level of the connotation corresponds "to the symbolic or ideological meaning of an image," which manifests itself through the codes included in the image (ibid). It is these codes that allow members of the same culture to draw the same meaning from a visual. At the connotative level, a cigar is anything but a cigar. In one culture it may represent masculinity while in another a health hazard. In Fisk's words, "denotation is what is photographed. Connotation is the result of human intervention such as camera, angle, focus, color, lighting" (cited in Parsa 2004, p. 849).

Barthes maintained that different cultures may interpret the same visual in different ways, as codes may mean different things to different people. One notable example is Barthes analysis of an advertisement for the pasta brand Panzani (1977). In the ad, the denotative meaning includes a fishnet overflowing with pasta and canned tomato sauce, a plentiful of tomatoes, onions and mushrooms, and a pack of grated cheese. The dominant colors are red, green and white. Its connotative meaning, according to Barthes (1977), is "Italianicity." The Panzani pasta brand supposedly contains within it all the tastes and sights of Italy. The brand is overflowing with Italian authenticity as is made evident by the colors of the Italian flag. However, Barthes stipulates that this connotative meaning may only be decoded by French audiences. Italian audiences may arrive at a very different connotative meaning. As such, the interpretation of visuals may not always carry across cultural borders.

Despite the fact that diplomats are now visual narrators, and despite growing interest in the digitalization of public diplomacy, few studies have employed semiotic analysis to public diplomacy campaigns disseminated on social media (Dickinson, 2020). This article addresses this lacuna.

Research Question and Hypothesis

This study seeks to understand if visuals published by MFAs on social media serve as ideological devices that help promote a certain worldview and obtain foreign policy goals. Given the explanatory nature of this study and the innovative use of semiotic analysis, this study does not nullify a specific hypothesis. Rather, this study takes a grounded approach as interviews with diplomats, used to answer RQ1, serve as the basis for the semiotic analysis used to answer RQ2.

RQ1: Are social media-based public diplomacy campaigns used to obtain offline policy goals?

This study argues that diplomats' use of social media has progressed from *reactive* to *proactive* digitalization. This study postulates that MFAs now strategically use social media sites to obtain concrete policy goals. This is achieved through social media-based public diplomacy campaigns. The question that comes to the fore is: how are campaigns devised? RQ1 seeks to understand the manner in which a public diplomacy campaign is decided upon and how it is linked with offline policy goals. It is possible that campaigns are devised by MFA departments looking to obtain policy goals, while the digital diplomacy unit merely curates relevant content. Yet it is also possible that campaigns are devised at the level of the digital diplomacy unit. Equally important, what are the building blocks of a campaign? Is a campaign planned around certain events or certain arguments disseminated online? Finally, as social media campaigns rely on visuals, it is necessary to understand how campaign-related visuals are created and by whom. Do MFAs employ graphic designers, or do they use online image banks?

RQ2: Do diplomats' visuals serve as ideological devices?

While RQ1 examines the process of visual narration, RQ2 seeks to unearth the meaning of diplomats' visuals. RQ2 may best be answered by understanding the foreign policy priorities of diplomats and their stated goals when publishing visual content on social media. For instance, the UK Foreign Office (FCO) is currently promoting the Global Britain campaign that depicts the UK as a globally engaged actor that exited the EU but not the world at large. By unearthing the communicative intention of British diplomats, this article assesses how FCO visuals helped promote the messages of the Global Britain campaign. The following section details the study's methodology, sample and coding technique.

Methodology

Sample

This study examined the visual narration of three MFAs: Israel, the UK and Lithuania. Selected MFAs needed to be avid users of social media given that *proactive* digitalization rests on a process of trial and error. Second, selected MFAs had to be active on social media for more than four years. This criterion recognizes that digitalization is a long-term process. MFAs that have just recently migrated online may have yet to realize that social media are visual platforms (Seib, 2012).

The Israeli MFA first migrated to social media in October 2009. Since then, the MFA has established a dedicated digital diplomacy unit as well as a social media presence that spans multiple platforms (Yarchi, Samuel-Azran & Bar David, 2017). The majority of Israeli embassies are active on social media while the MFA offers digital training to all diplomats. The UK's FCO launched its social media profiles in 2008.

The FCO was among the first MFAs to offer diplomats digital training (Israel MFA, 2016), and it operates a dedicated digital unit. The FCO maintains an extensive social media presence, and the majority of UK embassies are active online while some ambassadors have amassed hundreds of thousands of followers (Fletcher, 2017).

The Lithuanian MFA first migrated to Twitter in December of 2010. Notably, the process of *proactive* digitalization in the Lithuanian MFA has sped up over the past four years as digital officers have undergone extensive training by foreign governments (Paulauskas, 2019). In 2014, the MFA established the Strategic Communications Division, tasked with managing issue-specific campaigns such as rebuking Russian disinformation campaigns (ibid).

Procedure

Interviews with Diplomats

To answer RQ1, interviews were held with those diplomats managing MFA social media accounts. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews took place via Zoom. The first interview was held in June 2020 with two Israeli diplomats: Yiftah Curiel, head of the digital diplomacy unit, and Gal Rudich, a longtime member of the unit. The interview lasted 45 minutes. An interview guide, consisting of six open-ended questions was used to understand the process through which public diplomacy campaigns are devised. Notably, this study focused on diplomats' use of Twitter given that MFAs are most active on Twitter and that Twitter limits diplomats to 280 characters (Kampf, Manor & Segev, 2015; Sevin, 2017). As such, visuals may play an important role on Twitter as they enable diplomats to disseminate more elaborate messages.

Next, interviews were held with two members of the Lithuanian MFA's digital diplomacy apparatus: Mykolas Mazolevskis, Chief Digital Officer, and Vismantė Dailidėnaitė, Attaché at the Strategic Communications Division. Both interviews were held during March 2021, and both lasted 30 minutes. Due to the pandemic, it was not possible to interview British diplomats as they were engrossed in the task of repatriating citizens. Thus, the UK case study focused on a campaign promoted heavily on the FCO's Twitter account: the Global Britain campaign. The goals of this campaign were identified by reviewing a series of reports published by the British government, public addresses by the UK Prime Minister and previous studies that assessed the campaign's communicative goals.

Semi-structured interviews were used as these are designed to acquire subjective responses from respondents relating to an experience. In this study, it was imperative to ascertain diplomats' subjective assessments of campaign goals (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Semi-structured interviews are best employed when there is enough objective knowledge about a phenomenon, but subjective knowledge is lacking (Morse & Field, 1995). This is precisely the case with diplomats' use of visuals on social media, which has been theorized by academics but not investigated with the aid of diplomats. Importantly, semi-structured interviews constitute a flexible framework, which encourages the sharing of insight and experience (Bartholomew, Henderson & Marcia, 2000; Dearnley, 2005).

Image Analysis

Following diplomats' interviews and review of FCO policy papers, a sample of tweets published by each MFA was analyzed. First, all tweets published as part of a campaign were collected. In each case, the study evaluated a campaign

identified by interviewed diplomats, or major policy shifts in the British case. For instance, Israeli diplomats stated that their primary campaign revolved around delegitimizing Iran on the international stage. Thus, all tweets that were part of the Iran campaign were gathered. Twitter's "advanced search" engine was used to gather Israeli tweets mentioning Iran between January 2019 and July 2020. Specific terms included "Iran," Iranian," "nuclear," "Ayatollah" and "Irani." This yielded a sample of 65 tweets. Next, tweets were categorized based on topics. This analysis followed the roadmap of thematic analysis offered by Clarke and Braun (2014). Two coders were asked to categorize tweets into issue-based categories. For instance, a large number of tweets focused on Iran's role in the Syrian Civil War. Thus, a category named "Syria" was created. Similarly, several tweets highlighted Iran's sponsoring of terrorism. Thus, an "Exporting Terrorism" category was created. Once all tweets were categorized, they were coded yet again to ensure the relevance of the thematic analysis. This often led to the creation of sub-categories such as "Iran's treatment of LGBTQs."

Of the 65 Israeli tweets, 35 were selected for semiotic analysis. These tweets include a visual (i.e., picture, video, GIF) and dealt with messages identified by Israeli diplomats (e.g., terror sponsoring). The semiotic analysis was conducted by three coders: an American master's student and research assistant at the USC Center on Public Diplomacy with a background in art history; an Israeli post-doctoral fellow with extensive knowledge in digital diplomacy and a former British civil servant who worked in the UK's Brexit ministry. All three coders were familiar with Barthes's work, and two had previous research experience in using Barthes's semiotic approach. The connotative analysis of all coders was compared and merged, thus offering a broad interpretation of visuals that may carry across cultures. A similar process was repeated for 31 British tweets and 35 Lithuanian tweets.

The results section is structured in the following way. In each case study, the insight gained through interviews with diplomats or the review of policy papers is shared, allowing the reader to understand the goals of each MFA's campaign. Next, insights from the analysis of three visuals that were part of the campaign are presented. This enables the reader to first identify diplomats' authorial intent and then understand how this intent was communicated visually to social media users.

Notably, the results of this study offer but one possible interpretation of the meaning that arises from MFA visuals. Given that visuals are by nature open to subjective interpretation, other digital users may have decoded these visuals in different ways. And yet, by linking the visual analysis to the stated goals of diplomats, and by offering a cross-cultural interpretation, this study illustrates the role that visuals may play in shaping public perception of world events.

Results

Interview with Israeli Diplomats

Israeli diplomats stated that the MFA was in the midst of a yearlong, MFA-wide effort to isolate Iran internationally. In 2015, the Iran Nuclear Deal was signed, promising economic sanction relief in exchange for Iran abandoning its nuclear weapons program. At the time of the interviews, the Iran Deal had already fallen apart given the Trump administration's decision to renege on America's obligations. However, European nations had continued to negotiate with Iran, hoping to shape a new agreement.

According to the Israeli diplomats, the Iran social media campaign sought to delegitimize Iran and its leadership.

As such, the social media campaign was part of an MFA-wide effort with a clear policy goal: isolate Iran. Notably, this campaign may have been part of a broader effort to prevent European nations from negotiating a new deal with Iran (Horobin, Pancevski & Marson, 2018). The campaign, authored by the digital diplomacy unit, consisted of five core messages: 1) Iran had lied in the past to the international community and could thus not be trusted; 2) While Iran was negotiating with European countries, it was advancing its nuclear weapons program; 3) Iran sponsored terror groups in an attempt to destabilize the region; 4) Israel had a quarrel with the Iranian leadership, not the Iranian people; and 5) The Ayatollah's regime is oppressive in nature.

As part of its campaign, the MFA also focused on societal issues, which were used to portray Iran as opposing the values that underline the 'liberal world order.' Two core messages were: 1) exposing Iran's 'evil' nature (e.g., radicalization of children) and 2) contrasting the 'liberal' values that Israel, the U.S. and the EU subscribe to with the 'radical' values that Iran adheres to (e.g., LGBTQ discrimination).

When asked what role visuals play in the campaign, Israeli diplomats stated that visuals can simplify complex issues such as nuclear negotiations. The Iran Deal, for instance, was a complex issue not only because of technical jargon (e.g., "threshold state") but because it impacts the interests of many actors ranging from Iran and Israel to world powers and local states such as Egypt. Moreover, diplomats stated that visuals lead to an emotional response among social media users, with emotion serving as a gateway to influence. Visuals were mostly created by an in-house graphic designer that was part of the public diplomacy division.

Visual Analysis of Israeli Tweets

Visual Number 1: Shared Values

The first visual analyzed was a 12-second video published by the MFA on June 12, 2019.

At the level of denotation, the video begins with pictures of a joyous celebration. In one picture stands a lush, green tree. At the center, one finds a shirtless young man and a young, smiling woman. Above them, a large rainbow flag flies in the wind. Other individuals are waving, suggesting that a crowd is present. The dominant colors of the picture are those of the rainbow flag. Next, the individuals are enveloped by a roped noose and then disappear altogether replaced simply by a suffocated rainbow flag dangling from a rope.

This video best resonates with the 'shared values' core message of the Iran campaign. In the first part of the video, hope springs eternal. Hope is represented by the lush, green tree, by the youthfulness of the individuals and their smiles. This hope is then violently contrasted with a roped noose that engulfs all actors. The narrowing of the noose creates an image akin to a seeing portal through which the future is glimpsed, a grim future in which LGBTQ individuals are sentenced to death. Markedly, the image bares no national emblems. This could be a Pride event in Tel Aviv, Rome or Barcelona. As it was published during Pride Month and bears no national emblems, the video suggests that all LGBTQ individuals are at risk from Iran.

Death by hanging is also of significance as it may evoke historical and emotional connotations, be it the Nuremberg trials or the lynching of African Americans. In this way, the video creates a moral dichotomy between Israel and 'liberal'

countries where diversity is supposedly celebrated, and an evil Iran where such diversity is punishable by death. This dichotomy is reinforced by the question: "What are your values?"

The noose might evoke a sense of terror that corresponds with the tweet's text that links Iran's LGBTQ policies with terrorist activities. The video forces the viewer to choose a side. The question, "What are your values?" is really a call to action asking followers if they shall remain silent while their states engage diplomatically with an 'evil' regime that opposes Western 'liberal' values. The connotative message arising from this visual may be a question posed to viewers: pride, or prejudice?

A GIF was published on July 29, 2019 and analyzed for this study. At the level of denotation, the GIF presents the viewer with a conveyor belt of 'before' and 'after' images. The text implies that if Iran's weapon exports to regional terror groups are not halted, the region will be dramatically reshaped as terrorists will acquire more sophisticated technologies.

At the connotative level, this GIF represents a factory assembly line. Yet instead of assembling consumer products, it suggests that Iran is assembling weapons of war. The lack of colors in the GIF and the constant transformation from simple to advanced weapons create a menacing vision in which terror groups are no longer armed with machine guns but with tanks and fighter jets. According to the text, this assembly line goes undisrupted. The GIF's conveyer belt may resonate with iconic images of the factory floor, such as the one depicted in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*. Yet there is no comedic relief in this GIF, only a constant reiteration of threat.

This sense of repetition may also suggest that the world can expect unstoppable waves of Islamic terrorism, an argument often used by populists (Oztig, Gurkan & Aydin, 2021). The GIF may have thus resonated with preexisting fears among Twitter users. This GIF is global in orientation, as the text states that Iran will "threaten the region and beyond." Iranian terror is thus a menace to the world at large.

Notably, the assembly line metaphor may also hark back to WWI and the introduction of industrial-scale wars. WWI was marked by both rapid advancements in mass-arms production and staggering death tolls (Clark, 2012). This GIF promotes Israel's core message to depict Iran as a country that may have a terror industry.

Visual Number 3: The Banality of Evil

At the denotative or explicit level, a cartoon was created by the Israeli MFA that depicts then-Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Zarif holds two suitcases overflowing with missiles while leaving a trail of money. The cartoon includes a woman, dressed in a hijab, and young boy marked by the Iranian flag. Both are wearing masks, surrounded by small, threatening Coronavirus particles.

At the connotative level, the Iranian woman and child are "shoved" in the corner. Unlike the foreign minister, they are immobile, besieged by a flurry of Coronavirus particles. Markedly, the Iranian mother and child are merely the background of the cartoon, suggesting that Iran is more eager to arm brutal regimes than to save the lives of Iranians killed by COVID-19. This is made evident by the phrasing, "At whose expense?"

This cartoon could possibly diminish the regime's credibility, suggesting that even a state visit by Iran's foreign minister is but a guise for delivering weapons to oppressive regimes.

Unlike Zarif and Assad, which are quickly identifiable, the woman and child are anonymous and thus signify all Iranian women and children. This generic portrayal may make it easier for viewers to identify with the woman and child, as viewers are accustomed to politicians who prioritize dubious deals over public welfare. There is also a possible reference to another populist argument: that Muslim regimes are the most oppressive toward women, forcing them to cover their bodies (Oztig, Gurkan & Aydin, 2021). Ultimately, this cartoon resonates with the Israeli core message of Iran's illegitimacy.

Lithuanian diplomats stated that their ministry had just published a 10-page policy brief outlining the its strategic communications goals. The document, shared with all Lithuanian embassies, emphasized three communication "pillars," or core messages. The first core message, referred to as the "safe neighborhood" pillar, focused on Lithuania's active participation in the NATO alliance. Tweets published under this pillar highlighted NATO's contribution to Lithuania's security, especially in light of tense relations with Russia.

The second core message, referred to as the "My Europe" pillar, sought to emphasize Lithuania's membership in the European community of nations. Tweets in this pillar stressed the strong and historic relationship between Lithuania and the EU. The third core message, referred to as the "Freedom Fighters" pillar, dealt with Lithuania's renewed independence after decades of Soviet occupation, while stressing the contribution of Freedom Fighters.

Lithuanian diplomats estimated that 90% of MFA social media content is accompanied by visuals. These play three roles in social media-based public diplomacy campaigns. First, images capture the attention of social media users. Second, visuals enable diplomats to expand their messages. Though Twitter limits diplomats to 280 characters, visuals help them deliver more information. Finally, when dealing with historic issues, archival visuals can increase the credibility of the MFA as these bare the "imprint of truth" (Sontag, 2001). MFA visuals were mostly created by digital officers.

An image that was published on March 29, 2021 celebrated Lithuania's 2004 induction into NATO. The visual is symbolic as flags represent nation states. Indeed, nation states are often symbolized visually through flags (Eriksen & Jenkins, 2007).

At the denotative level, the visual consists of three pictures. One picture depicts two uniformed individuals displaying the flags of NATO and the EU. Both flags are stretched as if put on display. In the top-right corner, two Lithuanian flags surround NATO's flag while the text states #WeAreNATO. The final picture depicts NATO headquarters in Brussels, where the flags of all member states encircle NATO's flag.

At the connotative level, the uniformed individuals could allude to NATO's *raison d'être*: enhancing the security of member states through a military alliance. As the tweet's text indicates, NATO secures the lives of one billion people. The flags' display by uniformed individuals might also allude to NATO's resolve to safeguard its members. It is a picture that exudes confidence and even pride in the alliance. The text states, "Lithuania is proud" to be part of NATO.

The third picture exhibits the relationship between all NATO member states. The angle of the picture bestows a sense of awe on the circle of flags. This might signify that NATO serves a higher, loftier purpose: the promotion of democracy. The democratic ideal is represented by the equal size of all flags. This visual best resonates with the Lithuanian core message of active participation in NATO. The connotative meaning might thus be, "Lithuania is NATO." A second visual that dealt with Lithuania's role in NATO was published on April 27, 2021. The text indicates that in this visual, Lithuania's ambassador to Spain visited a local airbase to bid farewell to troops that would be deployed to Lithuania to police the skies of the Baltic states.

At the connotative level, the blue suit of the ambassador in the picture and the soldiers' blue uniforms could signify the alliance's blue flag. The ambassador is guarded by soldiers, while to her right stands a commanding officer wearing an olive green uniform and beret. Taken together, this picture might signify the safety offered by NATO to member states as the Lithuanian ambassador is guarded by soldiers, while a commander stands to her right in a location usually reserved for bodyguards. In the background one finds a large hangar, while behind it are gray skies filled with clouds. The color palette of this visual is not an optimistic one; the lack of color might be a reference to military readiness and the gravity of the risks facing NATO as storm clouds gather above. The storm itself might signify increased tensions with Russia as the depicted troops would safeguard Baltic skies from Russian military incursions.

The picture in the top-right corner is dominated by a fighter jet. The soldiers seem small by comparison, perhaps attesting to the military capabilities of NATO, which is armed with advanced fighter jets. Due to the angle of the picture, the soldiers appear to be shielded by the fighter jet's large

wingspan, possibly alluding to the soldiers' upcoming mission: protect NATO's skies.

The picture in the bottom-right corner is one of troops 'going into battle.' The soldiers in military formation receive a salute from their commander before being sent on a military mission. It is in this third picture that the hangar depicted in the first picture gains significance, as the hangar houses the powerful fighter jet that dominates the picture and shields the troops below.

The connotative meaning of this visual, which again resonates with the core message of active participation in NATO, may be: combat readiness. In this visual, NATO is not a collective of nations but a well-armed, well-trained military power.

The third visual analyzed was a two-minute video depicting the Vilnius St. Christopher Chamber Orchestra preforming the EU's anthem, Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" on a moving train. At the denotative level, the video begins with a stranded train station bearing the flags of Lithuania and the EU. Next, a yellow train approaches carrying a platform filled with classical musicians wearing black clothes. These are led by a conductor standing on an elevated platform. The video then transitions between closeups of the orchestra musicians, wide shots of the entire train platform decorated with the flags of the EU and Lithuania, and a bird's-eye view of the train making its way through rural areas filled with green forestry.

This video begins with a symbolic representation of the relationship between the EU and Lithuania through the two flags. Next, this relationship gains a physical presence as a Lithuanian orchestra plays the EU's anthem. The first scenes might be a reference to the historical relationship between

Lithuania and Europe. This is signified by Lithuanians playing a melody composed in central Europe in the 19th century. The connotative message might be that Europe and Lithuania share a common history and a common culture.

The transition between closeups of specific orchestra players and wide shots of the whole orchestra may be an analogy to the EU itself. Indeed, one musician can create music. But realizing Beethoven's vision requires a full orchestra in which many individuals play in sync to create harmony. By extension, the EU is a collective of nations working in concert to promote shared values.

The train's continuous motion throughout the countryside may suggest that the EU is also in motion, moving forward together. This is a powerful message set against the backdrop of Brexit and the EU's increased inability to reach consensus on foreign policy issues (Michalski & Danielson, 2020). According to this visual, the EU overcomes these challenges while working harmoniously to obtain shared goals. This harmony is represented through the green forestry that surrounds the train, or at a symbolic level, the EU itself. The visual thus suggests that Lithuania and the EU also have a shared future. As such, this visual resonates with Lithuania's core message of belonging to the European community of nations. The connotative meaning may be: Ode to Europe.

The Global Britain Campaign: Context and Goals

In the previous case studies, interviews with diplomats determined which campaigns would be analyzed. Given that the author could not interview British diplomats, it was decided to focus on the British "Global Britain" campaign, given that it was launched following Brexit, one of the most important foreign policy decisions in UK history. Moreover, the British government has published numerous policy

papers outlining the goals of this social media campaign. Thus, the author could identify British diplomats' authorial intent. For instance, a report published by the British Parliament's Select Committee on International Relations (2018) outlined the goals of the Global Britain campaign.

Launched in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, three core messages that arise from this report are: 1) the UK will maintain a global presence and remain a globally engaged actor, 2) the UK will remain outward-looking, hoping to boost economic ties with many nations and 3) the UK will influence world events by working closely with its allies.

As part of this campaign, an infographic published March 13, 2017 asserts that the Commonwealth includes four of the fastest-growing economies in the world and associates this with color blue. Using the color yellow, it also states that the UK's trade with the Commonwealth relies on economic ties with six specific countries.

At the connotative level, this visual might reference to two historical, British assertions. The blue color scheme might signify the oceans of the world, invoking the historic assertion that Britannia rules the waves. Importantly, Britannia ruled the waves thanks to its Royal Navy, which played a crucial role in the formation of the British Empire. It was the Royal Navy that led the expeditions of Charles Darwin and that laid the first telegraph cables. All of the nations mentioned in this tweet were once part of the British Empire, an Empire woven together by the Royal Navy (Wilson, 2013).

Yellow represents the global, financial reach of the UK. Yet yellow might resonate with another historical British assertion: that the sun never set on the British Empire. Indeed, the infographic suggests that the UK's current financial reach spans from Southeast Asia to Africa and North America. In

this manner, the Commonwealth of today is linked with the Empire of yesteryear. It was the Empire and British colonial rule that established the commercial links that presently bind the UK to the world's fastest-growing economies. In this way, Britain's imperial past strengthens its present day economic prosperity.

The infographic corresponds with the core messages of maintaining a global presence, while also relying on traditional British institutions. The UK's global, financial reach rests on the Commonwealth, or the modern incarnation of the British Empire. Importantly, the infographic may have offered users a sense of continuity amid the uncertainty of Brexit as the UK will continue to rely on its historical relationships and institutions to ensure its financial prosperity. The connotative meaning arising from this infographic might be: Britannia still rules the waves.

Another picture published in February 2017 depicts commuters emerging from the Canary Wharf Underground Station in London. The majority of commuters exit the station's gaping arch and walk toward the camera. In addition, the picture includes the sign of the London Underground, although one can only make out the iconic shape of the red, round sign. The picture also includes three clocks, while the commuters are adorned by a host of vibrant colors including red, pink, purple and blue. Behind the gaping arch, one finds a row of green trees illuminated by the morning sun.

At the connotative level, this picture captures a familiar scene- the hectic, morning commute to work in a large city. Yet the commuters are outward-looking, as nearly all of them face the camera. The red, round sign of the underground does not necessarily relate to the Underground, as evident in the lack of focus. Rather, the round shape might echo a round world. The three clocks found in this visual also relate

to a worldwide or global outlook, as in films the world is often symbolized through several clocks telling the time in different capitals. This visual therefore resonates with core message of an outward-looking UK.

The gaping arch itself corresponds with the tweet's text as it looks like a futuristic transport station, the kind that one might find in *Star Wars* films. The invocation of *Star Wars*, a global movie franchise, again links the UK with a global community. The diversity of colors adorned by the commuters might symbolize the UK's desire to engage with different nations and diverse cultures as part of its post-Brexit, outward orientation.

Crucially, though the picture depicts a hectic morning, all the individuals are walking in an orderly fashion. There is no visual reference to the mayhem that accompanies morning commutes in major cities. This creates an organized visual, a possible attempt to counter the sense of chaos brought about by Brexit. Yet the picture includes a natural element in the form of trees grazed by the morning sun. This might allude to London's very nature as a diverse, global city that is home to different cultures and ethnicities, represented by the bold colors worn by commuters. Thus, in this picture, the UK's commitment to engaging with diverse cultures is already realized in the diverse city of London. The connotative meaning of this picture might be: an already Global Britain.

Another picture posted by the British MFA published April 6, 2017 consists of a split screen. The left side, colored in blue and yellow, informs the viewer that the UK is supporting its allies by training Afghan security forces. The right side of the screen consists of five individuals, four of whom are blurred and caught in mid-action, while a fifth aims his gun directly at the viewer. In the background, one finds an open-hooded car and two large, white containers.

Without the accompanying text, one might conclude that this is a menacing picture as an Afghan security officer has the viewer 'in his sights.' Yet taken with the text, the picture might attest to the competency of Afghan forces, which receive training from the UK and are thus poised to face their enemy. The open-hooded car might refer to the expertise that the UK affords the Afghan forces, who are ready to face terrorist threats such as car bombs.

The colors used in this picture, blue and yellow, are subtle colors and do not match those usually associated with violence or threats (e.g., red). They are, in fact, the colors of a sun-filled sky and impart on the picture an optimistic tone. This again suggests that the picture emphasizes the relevance of training Afghan forces, and not the blood-soaked reality of war.

The text and the picture imply that the UK faces security threats by collaborating with allies. In other words, the UK does not act alone, nor does it stand alone in the post-Brexit world. This picture corresponds with the core message of working with allies, as well as with UK statements that adversaries must be aware of Britain's capacity to protect its interests. The connotative meaning of this picture might be that through alliances, the UK's enemies are: within its sight.[1]

Discussion and Conclusions

This study had three goals. First, to draw scholars' attention to diplomats' strategic use of visuals on social media. Second, to argue that diplomats are now visual narrators as they use visuals to influence the worldviews of digital publics. Third, to offer a methodological approach for analyzing visuals used in social media-based public diplomacy campaigns.

Notably, Barthes's *Death of the Author* (1977) constituted the birth of the reader. Barthes argues that the impact of visuals sits with the reader rather than with the author. Moreover, Barthes acknowledged that by nature, visuals are open to subjective interpretation (ibid). This study partially resurrected the author. It argues that analyzing diplomats' visuals necessitates an understating of their communicative goal, given that diplomats use visuals with a specific intent in mind. These communicative goals can be understood by interviewing diplomats who manage an MFA's social media apparatus.

The interviews conducted in this study demonstrate that diplomats' use of social media platforms has advanced from *reactive* to *proactive* digitalization. Diplomats in both the Israeli and Lithuanian MFAs stated that social media-based public diplomacy campaigns are used strategically to obtain offline foreign policy goals. This was also evident in British policy papers stating that the goal of the "Great Britain" campaign was to influence public understanding of an offline policy initiative (Brexit). Israeli and Lithuanian diplomats also stated that social media campaigns comprised a series of core messages that are intended to narrate events and actors while shaping the worldviews of digital publics. Israel's social media campaign sought to delegitimize Iran and isolate it internationally. By framing Brexit as an embracement of the world, the FCO hoped to manage expectations of the post-Brexit world. The Lithuanian MFA used social media to obtain two foreign policy goals: strengthen ties with Europe and defend Lithuania against Russian aggression. These interviews and policy papers answered this study's first research question.

Notably, this study used a cross-national comparison to demonstrate that diplomats throughout the world have become visual narrators and that there is therefore a need

for scholars to examine diplomats' new role. The cross-national comparison also enables one to identify important similarities across MFAs. First, all MFAs were able to integrate unfolding events into their visual narration. Israeli tweets lambasting Iran included references to the COVID-19 pandemic, while Lithuanian images responded in near-real time to Russian policies in Europe. Thus, diplomats have gained the ability to visually narrate events in near-real time. This attests to a high level of skills and proficiency.

Second, all three used visuals to manifest national values. The UK led the struggle for gender equality in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe; Israel celebrated LGBTQ diversity; and Lithuania contrasted its commitment to democracy with Russia's commitment to occupying territories. Norms and values may have played a central role in diplomats' visual narration given that morality breeds legitimacy on the international stage. Nations that are seen as adhering to positive norms and values, be it democracy or human rights promotion, may encounter less resistance to their foreign policies (Quelch & Jocz, 2009; Van Ham, 2013). Morality also increases the credibility of an actor (Mor, 2012). The more credible an MFA, the greater its ability to shape public perceptions as social media users are less likely to reject diplomats' messages.

Additionally, all three MFAs disseminated visuals that may have triggered an emotional response from Twitter users. Such was the case with the Iranian noose strangling LGBTQ individuals or Afghan forces pointing their weapons at social media users. Diplomats may have attempted to evoke an emotional response as emotions facilitate influence, which is still the goal of public diplomacy activities (Pamment, 2012). By triggering an emotional response, diplomats may have also been able to summon the gaze of digital publics, thus successfully competing with media actors who also

seek to shape digital publics' perceptions of world events (Seib, 2016).

Lastly, this study evaluated MFAs' disseminated visuals that were created 'in-house.' Israeli graphic designers created GIFs and cartoons, while Lithuanian diplomats created rich collages. These findings illustrate another facet of *proactive* digitalization as MFAs have acquired the skills necessary for visual narration. By conceptualizing digitalization as a two-step process that includes a *reactive* and a *proactive* phase, this study offers a novel prism for understanding diplomats' use of visuals that goes beyond communicative theories of mediatization and framing used by other scholars (Pamment, 2014; Seib 2016).

The semiotic analysis demonstrates that diplomats' visuals are more than mere ornaments used to drive higher engagement rates (e.g., re-tweets). Visuals were rich with meaning. Yet even more importantly, visuals served as ideological devices. In line with Barthes's assertions, the visuals used by diplomats were not neutral but filled with cultural and ideological meaning. All three MFAs sought to shape the worldviews of social media users, be it by labeling Iran a menace to the world or depicting Brexit as a re-embracement of the world.

The connotative analysis incorporated elements identified by Fisk (in Parsa, 2004). The analysis of NATO's circle of flags took note of camera angle; lack of focus was evident in the Canary Wharf picture, while attention was paid to the color schemes of British infographics. The analysis of elements such as camera angle, light and color schemes should guide scholars looking to employ semiotic analysis in future studies.

The results of the semiotic analysis demonstrate that diplomats' visuals are rich with meaning and that like journalistic photos or consumer ads, diplomats may use visuals to shape public perceptions. This conclusion offers an answer to the study's second research question.

In summary, this study offers several important contributions to the public diplomacy research corpus. By merging interviews with diplomats, policy papers and semiotic analysis, this study offers a methodological approach that may help guide scholars examining diplomats' use of visuals in public diplomacy campaigns. Moreover, the study illustrates the important link between online and offline diplomacy. Public diplomacy campaigns delivered on social media are but a means for obtaining offline foreign policy goals. This link between the online and offline spheres of diplomacy is currently lacking in public diplomacy scholarship. Finally, this study recognizes that diplomats are now visual narrators as MFAs have institutionalized the process of visual narration.

Future studies may seek to examine how publics decode diplomats' visuals, be it through focus groups or analyzing comments posted on social media. In doing so, scholars may examine whether visuals are an effective tool for delivering public diplomacy messages or whether visuals are open to different and even opposing interpretations. Future studies may also expand the diversity of MFAs evaluated as there may be important differences between MFAs' visual narration. Finally, scholars may examine other platforms that are also image-driven, such as Instagram or TikTok.

Author's Biography

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Endnotes

1. Additional images were analyzed for each of the three cases with consistent and confirmatory results.

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