Article

Blended Diplomacy: The Entanglement and Contestation of Digital Technologies in Everyday Diplomatic Practice

Rebecca Adler-Nissen (iD)
and Kristin Anabel Eggeling
University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Abstract

This article develops a new theoretical approach to digitalisation in diplomacy, resituating conventional understandings of the relationship between diplomacy and technological transformation. Challenging the conception that 'traditional' diplomacy is being supplemented or challenged by new forms of 'digital diplomacy', we show how the ubiquity of digital devices and technologies makes disentangling analogue from digital diplomatic practices practically impossible today. The argument is developed through ethnographic observations of everyday diplomatic work in the European Union (EU) multilateral setting in Brussels as well as interviews with ambassadors, attachés, seconded diplomats, spokespersons and interpreters. To understand the place of digital technologies in diplomatic work, we develop the concept of *blended diplomacy* by which we mean the dual process of the entanglement of technical and social doings and the contestation regarding how this entanglement impacts professional diplomatic imaginaries and relations. Drawing on insights from practice theory and the sociology of science, technology and professions, we show how diplomatic actors demarcate their professional territory and protect their positions through boundary work. They draw *horizontal* boundaries between what they see as 'real' diplomatic work and distractions and *vertical* boundaries between themselves and other diplomatic actors, ranking people around status and skills. Overall, digital technologies are implicated in deeper struggles regarding what it means to be a diplomat. A focus on the *blended* character of diplomatic practice opens new avenues for research on how digitalisation, in contradictory and uneven ways, shapes norms, identities, and social relations and how it – through reflexivity, anxieties and contestation – may shape international politics.

Corresponding author:
Rebecca Adler-Nissen, University of Copenhagen, Øster Farimagsgade 5, Copenhagen DK-1353, Denmark.
Email: ran@ifs.ku.dk

Keywords

Introduction

International diplomacy has always evolved in tandem with technological change. This article explores how diplomatic actors work and organise themselves in relation to digital technologies, understood as digital soft- and hardware, from social media, file-sharing and email to computers and mobile phones. Rather than arguing that digitalisation[1] has a particular effect, for example, making diplomacy more transparent (Grant, 2005: 12), we focus on unravelling experiences, anxieties and disagreements among diplomats themselves concerning how they should handle digitalisation, charting conflicting answers to what technological change is all about. Digitalisation, we show, involves deeper struggles regarding professional hierarchies, identities, boundaries and, ultimately, what it means to be a diplomat.

In recent years, International Relations (IR) and diplomatic scholars have offered different analytical vocabularies to theorise the meeting between digitalisation and diplomatic practice. A distinction is often drawn between 'traditional' and 'digital' diplomacy (Gilboa, 2016; Hedling and Bremberg, 2021; Hocking and Melissen, 2015; Kampf et al., 2015). 'Traditional' diplomacy, the story goes, takes place without digital mediation: for example, face-to-face meetings, lunches, cocktail parties or phone calls. The ideal-typical diplomatic meeting is immediate and physically embodied (Wheeler and Holmes, 2021) and resonates with stories of it being an 'intimate art' (Constantinou et al., 2016). 'Digital diplomacy', on the contrary, is a term used to describe diplomatic activities that happen with or via the use of digital technologies such as digital screens, computers or smartphones, generally connected to the Internet without direct personal interaction (Bjola and Holmes, 2015).

The main challenge to theorising diplomacy in the digital age, we suggest, is that our understandings have not yet rid themselves of a limiting dichotomy between the analogue and the digital, which inaccurately implies that we could go back to a 'traditional' way of doing diplomacy or that we may be on our way to purely digital diplomacy. Neither, we argue, is the case.

We base our alternative theorisation on experiential accounts of how diplomatic practitioners use and understand digital technologies. With IR practice theory, we inquire into the social doings through which international institutions are run and how these, in turn, *make* the institution they are part of (Pouliot, 2008). As such, this article is a response to the recent calls within IR to develop more 'nuanced' perspectives on the digitalisation of diplomacy (Cornut and Dale, 2020: 833) and encouragement for 'the practice turn to develop a sensitivity to material infrastructures' (Constantinou et al., 2021: 575). Responding to this call, we draw on insights from the sociology of science, technology and professions and original material gathered through long-term ethnographic research to analyse how digitalisation is woven into everyday diplomacy. In this spirit, we ask,

How do diplomatic actors handle and experience digitalisation, and how can we conceptualise their practices and experiences?

The empirical site of our theorisation is Brussels, the seat of the European Union (EU) and a key site of multilateral diplomacy. A myriad of daily activities provides insights into how technology affects diplomatic practice: a constant stream of meetings; coordination within and between permanent representations (PERMREPs) and member state capitals; staff training and onboarding of new personnel; and continuous information exchanges among different participants in the diplomatic field and beyond. To understand the role of digital technologies in this daily work, we conducted long-term ethnographic fieldwork from 2018 to 2021, generating two kinds of data which form the foundation for this article's argument: first, fieldnotes containing 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) of how diplomats attend meetings, write reports, engage with each other, gather and share information, and perform coordination work; and, second, interview records with 50-plus members of the Brussels diplomatic field, including ambassadors, attachés, seconded diplomats, spokespersons, interns, politicians, assistants, interpreters and bureaucratic staff, on how they perceive and experience the 'digitalisation' of their field. While our theorisation can be exported to other diplomatic and international settings, our methodological approach emphasises the situated nature of digitalisation in social practices.

What we observed in Brussels is our primary motivation for writing this article, as we sensed what was happening 'on the ground' was not being captured in scholarly writing. To *show* rather than merely claim this conceptual gap, the first section of the article presents a thick description of the use of digital technologies in everyday diplomatic life in Brussels. In the second section, we interpret this material first through the lens of the current state of the art. Then, after pointing to several conceptual gaps, we introduce our theorisation of what we call 'blended diplomacy'. The third section unpacks this concept, illustrating it with additional examples from the field.

Blended diplomacy, we argue, captures two parallel processes characterising diplomatic practice in the digital age: first, the entanglement of technology and social doings, and second, the contestations provoked by this entanglement. In their everyday use and engagement with digital technologies, diplomats engage in two types of boundary work inducing reflexivity and (re)negotiation of the diplomatic profession's already unstable 'social imaginary' (Abbott, 1988; Taylor, 2003: 23–25): diplomats draw (1) *horizontal* boundaries between what they see as 'real' diplomatic work and other types of activities and (2) *vertical* boundaries of ranking themselves and others around professional status and skills. These contestations, we find, relate directly to and upset existing theorisations of diplomatic work (e.g. Cornut, 2018; Dittmer, 2017; Kuus, 2015; Neumann, 2012; Pouliot, 2008). We end by reflecting on the implications for IR scholarship of our understanding of digitalisation and international diplomacy.

Digital technologies in everyday diplomatic practice

To capture how digitalisation is implicated in everyday diplomacy, we must clarify two questions upfront. First, what is everyday diplomatic practice? Second, what counts as the use of digital technology?

Every day, diplomats worldwide tie their shoes, have lunch, shake hands and write texts. Some may also play golf (Nair, 2019), sweat in saunas (Chaffin, 2016) or wear extravagant outfits (Kuus, 2021). There is a potentially endless range of practices for the scholar of diplomacy to choose from. In what follows, we adopt the broad definition of practices 'as the things that we do, the organised activities that we encounter and participate in' (Kustermans, 2016: 177). We pay special attention to everyday practices deemed 'professional' in Brussels and linked to negotiation, the imagined core of diplomatic work in multilateral organisations (Adler-Nissen, 2014; Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, 2014; Pouliot, 2016). Self-reporting from our field locates negotiation in information sharing, consensus building, attending meetings, exchanging with colleagues, situation monitoring, proposal probing, liaising with the capital and connecting with journalists and the public.

Many of these practices have in recent years become digitally mediated. Digitalisation, IR scholars argue, has led to 'the emergence of new practices of "digital diplomacy"' (Hedling and Bremberg, 2021: 1–2), such as interns posting photographs on embassy social media accounts, diplomats networking with tech companies in Silicon Valley or state leaders using Twitter in ongoing negotiations (Duncombe, 2017; Hedling and Bremberg, 2021). This has transformed existing ways of doing diplomacy. To share information, diplomats continue to meet face-to-face, but they also send emails, write text messages, or feed and follow social media accounts (Bjola and Manor, 2022). Emerging literature attempts to trace how digital artefacts such as tweets are produced and shape diplomatic routines (Adler-Nissen et al., 2021) and reconceptualise online meetings in diplomacy as 'synthetic situations' (Eggeling and Adler-Nissen, 2021) connecting physical and virtual sites.

Retelling a typical diplomatic workday: writing ethnographic material through vignettes

To give a live impression of how diplomats experience digitalisation in their work, the first part of the article presents 10 vignettes that relay typical scenes of diplomatic work in the EU today. The vignettes are written in the form of 'impressionist tales' (Van Maanen, 2011), that is, 'personalised accounts of fleeting moments in fieldwork' that place us directly into the research situation (Van Maanen, 2011: 96–103). In an impressionist tale, the reader 'is [invited] to relive the tale with the fieldworker' with the intention to not just to tell them what to think of an experience but to 'show them the experience' itself (Van Maanen, 2011: 103). This way of writing achieves two things: first, to evoke an open, participatory sense while reading; and second, to present the 'doing of fieldwork rather than simply the doer or the done' (Van Maanen, 2011: 101).

The impressions we retell are based on live observations, told recollections and interview conversations generated over 4 years of fieldwork in Brussels.[2] To present how digital technologies influence diplomatic life, the vignettes are compiled to resemble an ordinary Brussels workday followed by a weekend morning.[3] While the experiences we write about did not actually all happen on the *same* day, they did all happen at the time of the day they are assigned. The pace at which they occur and the amount of time they take, moreover, reflects our experiences and those of our participants. The partial

simultaneity is purposeful to convey a sense of the multiple processes and events that happen in Brussels during an ordinary day. Next to giving insights into how digital technologies are handled and experienced, the vignettes thus also tell us something about the general rhythm of diplomatic work and the multiple tasks and pressures EU officials and diplomats face every day.

When our participants speak, we use their own expressions and highlight them in *italics*. Our own interpretive work is the text around them that situates what is happening in the diplomatic field. In the text, our authorial voices and presence in the field thus mix with those of our research participants. Besides pointing out who we meet and at which time, we moreover place the vignettes in specific locations in and around Brussels to anchor what we observe and hear 'in situ' (Nair, 2021: 15). This increases the dependability of our ethnographic data by making it 'trackable' (Wilkinson, 2013: 136). Key sites mentioned include the offices of different PERMREPs, rooms in the EU institution buildings, cafés on the Schuman roundabout and other well-known locations in Brussel's European Quarter. Later on, particularly in the section 'Boundary work of blended diplomacy: "real" diplomacy and "essential" diplomats' of the article, we cite additional interviews (I: Date) and observations (O: Date) that speak to our research question but could not be cited as extensively given space restrictions. We present our empirical data in this way not merely to illustrate our theoretical argument: following other examples in ethnographic writing (Pachirat, 2011: 19), the tales from the field are part of the argument itself.

07:00, at home in the suburbs of Brussels

Sitting at his breakfast table, Jack swipes up and down his smartphone screen. His wrists rest on a stack of local and international newspapers, but his eyes are fixed on the digital headlines of his POLITICO Pro subscription. He has been sitting like this for half an hour trying to catch up on *what's going on in town and around the world*. These early morning hours are also the only time when Jack feels he can *contribute to the circulation of social media posts*. He *never tweets during the workday*. He would be *too scared that [his] colleagues think if he had time to tweet, he was not working hard enough*. At the same time, Jack is annoyed that *Twitter and other social media apps have virtually displaced all small moments of downtime* from his day. Rather than *looking up and around room*s, he now finds himself *scrolling up and down timelines*. Jack thinks social media is *terribly passive* and *leaves you with a horrible feeling. It is a bit like eating McDonald's: in the moment it feels good and satisfying, but you also don't quite know why you are doing it, and just a few minutes later feel empty and hungry again*. Jack also hates texting, which makes him *feel like a distracted teenager*: he prefers talking to his colleagues face-to-face. Just below the rank of ambassador, Jack has a busy day ahead. Since starting his Brussels job around 5 years ago, he has *left this phone behind only once for a single afternoon*. If he forgets to take it, he will *get back to it a few hours later to be greeted by tonnes of messages and at least three missed work calls*. Before leaving the house, Jack checks his pockets several times. The phone is there. He's good to go.

10:00, in a European capital, preparing a Presidency summit meeting

We need to make sure to post the tweet at the right time, Filip says to his colleagues on the communication team. They have been responsible for running their PERMREP's social media accounts for the duration of the Council Presidency. More than halfway through their term, Filip feels like he has *finally got the hang of this thing* and is happy he negotiated with Facebook and Twitter to switch their presidency handles back to their normal accounts at the end of the year, in order to keep all the new followers. *The more followers you have, the better!* Today, Filip and his colleagues feed the Presidency online channels with pre-planned posts about a summit meeting back in the capital. He tells his colleagues they need posts that set the stage for this discussion and signal to the European people and the other negotiation parties that the Presidency is pro-enlargement. He requests some *memorable quotes from the President on past enlargement questions that we can post just before the meeting*. His colleagues show him some options: Filip slowly taps through them on the screen. This one is perfect, he says, holding up his phone. It *frames the conversation from the beginning* and allows us *to manage expectations and set the tone around our ambitions, red lines and desired outcomes for today. We can never be sure what will happen at the meeting*, he continues, and this one is *positive enough and sufficiently vague to be framed as a success back home* irrespective of what may happen. Well done, he says, and they nod in unison as Filip hits tweet.

11:00, on a Webex call

Alfred's head is buzzing. He has been on this Webex call for 2 hours, listening to a Commission policy officer laying out a new legislative proposal for the European employment sector. *The officer speaks broken English*, and Alfred is *close to losing it*. Even though a clear PowerPoint presentation is shared on the screens of the 100-plus attendees, *the slides do not match the content or speed at which the presenter is speaking*. The meeting was booked into everyone's Outlook calendar a few days ago, along with a 1400-page document forming the basis of the conversation. Alfred is trying not to be cynical but is intensely *annoyed with the unwritten expectation that people should read and prepare positions on a file of this length at such short notice. Usually, when extensive documents are sent around only a few days before, the organiser does not want people to read them in detail*. In the meeting, Alfred feels like he is experiencing *death by PowerPoint . . . Even the best slides cannot save this kind of presentation*, and the virtual diplomatic meeting turns into a form *of absurd digital slideshow*. As digital technologies move into the diplomatic every day, Alfred thinks *diplomatic training courses should no longer only cover how to speak, make connections, use cutlery and hold a wine glass, but also how to articulate oneself* [in a foreign language] *online, assure stable Internet connections and hold a PowerPoint presentation*. Otherwise, what happens is personally frustrating, potentially undemocratic and against the European political spirit: it is fair enough to have a dense presentation on a technical topic that requires a 1400-page document, *but meetings for these kinds of negotiations need to be appropriately set up*. Irrespective of the topic to be negotiated, *the presence or absence of digital skills are becoming a new fault line in Brussels: those who do not have them alienate their*

listeners and those who do have them can use them for their advantage. Because he was comfortable taking the lead in online settings – Alfred is convinced – *he ended up steering the agenda of working group meetings receiving requests from PERMREPs across town on updates on the negotiation status, without officially being put in charge*.

12:00, lunch at Café EXKi Schuman

Oliver has been working in the Secretariat of the European Council for almost 30 years. Today, he is having lunch at the Café EXKi on Place Schuman with a researcher. A box of leafy salad in front of him, he explains that the Council had been working on developing a new vision for digital working methods right before the pandemic started. *It was all there*, he says; we *had just made a roadmap for the delegate's journey in the digital era* in February 2020. *Imagining what the work and experience of a Council delegate could look like in 5–10 years, the ambition was to develop a strategy for providing a hassle-free and inviting experience to delegates when they use the organisation's physical and digital facilities*. We want *to minimise stress and friction so that whether delegates are accessing a digital platform or a building, looking for a file or a conference room, or meeting online or in Brussels, they can focus entirely on the subject of their meetings and the people they are meeting. Shortly after*, Oliver says, chewing, *we almost found ourselves in this future world – but a dystopian version of it. As a physical meeting operator, the Council had turned into a virtual platform provider* during the pandemic. *In the next 10 years*, Oliver thinks, *more will change than in the 30 before that. When I first started here, we were using typewriters and stencils. Electronic typewriters, but typewriters. There has been, and there will be constant renewal in this field, but the institutions will never be the first mover. We will always play catch up and lag behind. But it is also not our job to be on the technological cutting edge. We are a cautious institution. All these norms and rules are there for a reason. We need to have an environment of trust next to an atmosphere of effectiveness, so we need to be careful how we grow and develop.* Oliver makes a note on his smartphone to email some documents to his lunch companion.

13:00, at a PERMREP office on Avenue de Cortenbergh

Daan is having a busy day. He is his Representation's spokesperson for the Council of the Permanent Representatives (COREPER II) and rushes from *meetings in Council and coffees with journalists* to an interview with an academic. The latter's theme is digitalisation and diplomatic work; Daan arranged it by sending a meeting invite from his phone. He gets back to the PERMREP just in time, and buzzes his visitor through two glass entrance doors and up to an empty meeting room on the third floor. He does not have too much time but thinks it is his job to *communicate how Brussels works to interested citizens*. Daan talks about his daily tasks and the hype around everything digital. He considers the most significant change is *reporting is no longer bound to daily newspapers but to a constant 24/7 stream to fill platforms with content. Much of this information flow*, he thinks, *resembles noisy opinions of some people throwing out the dirt of what has just happened in a meeting* or *someone trying to influence a negotiation by leaking a*

document or nudging public opinion. In this digital environment, everything can be news and relevant, and you will always find a platform to publish your statement. But, Daan says – more to himself than to his visitor – much *of this is missing the point of our work and the point of classic diplomacy. Classic diplomacy will always be about influencing people by talking to them, interacting with them, understanding where they are coming from, where their problems lie and seeing how your interest can convert theirs. This has not changed over the last thousand or two thousand years*. That is diplomacy. All that has changed is the scope. You can talk to someone in Council, talk to newspapers or talk on Twitter. And you have to know *which frequency the others around you are talking on. When everyone is on Twitter, but you are still only talking to the newspapers, good luck. So part of the audience has shifted, but it still boils down to the same thing: diplomacy is about influencing and convincing others of your point of view. And for that, there is no such thing as e-diplomacy and diplomacy. There is just diplomacy*. Daan looks up at his visitor, busy taking notes. He finishes his thought: we *cannot completely ignore that world because there is lots of helpful information online, like when a meeting happened, who attended or when it will start. But it is still more important for me to always have one foot on Schuman*, he says, tipping his head in the direction of the roundabout. *One foot on Schuman, and perhaps one or two toes online*.

15:00, in COREPER II

Once a week, the EU ambassadors meet in COREPER II. They discuss three to five issues on an agenda during an extended afternoon session. Two or three attachés or aides typically accompany the ambassadors. During the pandemic, the ambassadors had to *go in alone*, suddenly taking on notetaking and reporting duties. Usually, an intern *takes the meeting minutes and drafts the reports*. COREPER II meetings are *long and dense affairs. We typically meet for hours*, Ambassador Jakob reflects on a meeting he recently attended: *not everybody is always interested in every single item on the agenda. So, people are doing other things too: reading their mails, giving instructions to their staff, getting input from their capital, thanks to the technology we now have*. But there are also issues with this: *it is now much easier to be overwhelmed and get distracted from the 'real work'*. Choosing a metaphor from medicine, Jakob is especially worried about the effects of social media on diplomatic negotiations. *Do you think you would see a lot of use of social media among the surgeons in the operating room in a hospital? No. They operate. They need peace; they need quiet. And at the end of the process, they can inform the public if the operation was successful. But you don't need social media from the point of the surgeon entering the operating room until the point of leaving it. That is what diplomacy is. We are like surgeons. And if we don't do our work in peace and quiet, we could blow it, and our patient would, well, die. If I knew one of my COREPER colleagues was tweeting what was going on in our room before we finished our operation, I would not feel comfortable speaking anymore.* The transparency that social media promises, Jakob thinks, would become *a false transparency*. There would be suspicion and reluctance rather than more trust in the process. *And this is something we cannot afford at this level. Then COREPER would break up, and we would no longer be able to run the show.*

16:00, at a PERMREP office on Rue d'Arlon

Clara sits at her desk, fiddling with the wire of the landline telephone. Hesitating, she turns to one of her colleagues to ask whether she should follow-up with a colleague who said many things in a meeting with a third country ambassador this morning; she was not sure if she understood him correctly because he spoke French. *Yeah, I think you should just quickly follow-up*, the colleague says. *You're right*, Clara beams – *this way, I can also put it in the report email back to the capital.* Clara turns to her computer and opens a contact list for her working group. She inherited this list from *the woman who held her post before.* Even though she still has not personally met all the people on this list, Clara feels confident about calling them at any time. For the next 30 minutes, she is on the phone with her German counterpart, saying things like *I didn't know it was already voice-cleared in PSC, now we need to make sure that it is also said in COREPER*, and *he had a clear sense of who was saying what, also in our internal EU meetings – he had done his homework. Did you get the same sense – is that what you heard too*? Clara scribbles notes in a small black-and-red notebook when her colleague speaks. Twice she rejects a call notification on her computer screen. A few desks over, Clara's colleague Alfred rubs his left wrist: having just returned from a Council meeting he has realised he forgot to put his watch back on. He lifts his briefcase and pulls on the sleek steel band of his Apple watch. Even though no one specifically asked him to take it off, he has heard some colleagues joke that it may *soon be illegal to wear those devices to specific meetings*. As a precautionary measure, he removes it when he heads to Rue de la Loi.

16:15, at a shadow room meeting[4] in Albert Borschette conference centre, room 3A

Three large screens are lowered from the ceiling, the tinted windows blocking out the last of the daylight. The meeting of the Commission working group has been in session for nearly 5 hours, but the room is almost empty. Louise, who is interpreting the meeting, was lucky to get one of the booths in the room. Three Commission staff members sit on the far side of the oval meeting table, facing the screens across rows of empty chairs and muted microphones. On the middle screen, a Swedish delegate responds to a statement given moments before by a representative from the Netherlands. *We agree with what Amber has just said and would like to support her and others in the same cause*, echoes through the wires of the headphones plugged into the communication consoles. *Thank you*, the Chair of the meeting says into the red microphone in the room. *Next? Finland.* A young woman appears on the same screen, asking in a thin voice, *Can you hear me – can you hear me now, hello? Yes, we can hear you*, the Chair confirms, *please, the floor is yours*. While the Finnish delegate responds to the proposal on the table, the VTC platform displayed on the two smaller screens show contact details. PowerPoint slides are mentioned in the chat window; participants' names popping up and disappearing again. No one else is raising a hand to request the floor. What is going on here is a virtual meeting hosted in a 'shadow room' in a Commission building. The Chair and some bureaucratic staff are physically present, but all delegates attend online. The interpreters are here too, struggling to hear the delegates' statements, simultaneously translating into six

languages and feeding their own voices into the virtually empty room and the empty room of virtuality. *This set-up reminds me of Star Wars*, Louise says quietly, her microphone muted. *You know, when they have these intergalactic assemblies where the people speak in these disembodied screens, robots float around and talk to each other. It is a bit like that, a sort of intergalactic float.*

19:00, walking on Rue Froissart

It's been a rainy day in Brussels, and Jack picks up the pace as he walks across Place Jourdan. Turning onto Froissart, he almost bumps into an oncoming umbrella. *Excusezmoi*, he says in accented French. Looking down, he suddenly stops. He pulls his phone from his coat pocket and takes two photos of a puddle on the pavement right outside the PERMREP. Once inside, he uploads the photos onto the representation's Twitter account. The puddle had *almost the exact shape of his member state* and *the reflection of the streetlight is perfect because it is right where the capital would be*. Over the following hours, *the image gets much traction on Twitter.* Indeed, it becomes the PERMREP's most retweeted post. Ironically, Jack reflects, *it has nothing to do with diplomacy but encouraged many people to interact with the PERMREP's account*. Replies under the post include people uploading their own images of pieces of bread or clouds that look like the country, and someone seems to have downloaded Jack's puddle photo to turn it into their phone's screensaver. *You never know with Twitter*, Jack contemplates. *Sometimes you post something serious, and no one picks it up, and sometimes you post something silly, and it trends. Therefore, it can be good not to have a communication strategy and just engage online spontaneously.*

Noon the next day (a Saturday), hiking around Brussels

Ambassador Lukas feels a buzz in his back pocket and pulls out his smartphone: a new WhatsApp message in the PSC Ambassadors' chat. He takes a closer look to see which of two groups the message was posted in: the *one focused on private musings [or the] one focused on shop talk*. Recently, Lukas suggested to his colleagues in a closed-door meeting that the original single group should be split along these lines. Before that, *the chat had high school class dynamics where everyone was just talking about everything. But then, occasionally, people started making comments about what statements to make in the Council. This was happening in parallel [with] personal messages about which football team they did or did not like, and that didn't fit together. It is all well and good that we can communicate on this channel*, he said to his colleagues, *but we should separate it. One of the groups should be for personal messages, and one should be for 'getting a feel' for what the colleagues in the Council are thinking. People should also be free to ignore the messages about football – maybe they just don't care!* The message on the screen was sent in the serious chat group, and Lukas stops to take a closer look. It is a reply to an idea for a statement that he himself had sent out earlier in the morning before leaving home. He receives some support from his colleagues, and more positive messages buzz in as he walks on. *In a way, this is remarkable*, Lukas thinks; just *imagine what you had to do around 20 years ago to get a feel for your colleagues' reflections. And*

now it's possible to get it while hiking. He slips the phone back into his pocket. Looking ahead, he ponders the *Janus-faced character of the small tool.* He feels at once reassured and bugged that the weekend hike became part of the meeting floor and a restful Saturday morning part of the negotiation process.

Theorising *blended*, not 'digital diplomacy'

How do diplomats handle and experience digitalisation? The vignettes above tell a different story than the one provided in most scholarly accounts of 'digital diplomacy'. Digital technologies are all-pervading but often inconspicuous in diplomatic life. At the same time, digital technologies shape how diplomatic competencies, self-understandings and professional roles are performed and contested.

So far, the literature on digitalisation of diplomacy has primarily focused on the intentional and strategic use of digital technologies, leading to what is described as a new kind of diplomacy: 'digital diplomacy' (Bjola and Holmes, 2015). Discussing how practitioners well versed in digital tools can gain influence on social media and develop new forms of public diplomacy (Ausserhofer and Maireder, 2013; Seib, 2012), scholars have addressed the hands-on challenge of getting digital diplomacy 'right' and avoiding its 'dark sides' (Bjola and Pamment, 2018). They have also analysed challenges related to professional training demands and generational gaps in the diplomatic corps (Bjola, 2016; Cassidy and Manor, 2016) or have pointed to the emergence of a distinct discourse of feminist digital diplomacy (Aggestam et al., 2021). Such elements of explicit forms of 'digital diplomacy', we find, are clearly at play in the multilateral setting of Brussels, but this attention on intentional use overlooks how diplomats today seldom choose to use digital tools or actively decide to be online. Instead, digital media and technologies are more deeply intertwined in everyday diplomatic life (see Adler-Nissen & Drieschova, 2019). As Daan reflects, 'there is no such thing as e-diplomacy and diplomacy. There is just diplomacy'.

Our observations also require us to re-examine more sweeping views of how digital technology transforms the diplomatic profession. Beginning with the 'traditionalists', consider the pronouncements that digital technologies (coupled with the 'densification' of diplomatic subjects and actors) denote the 'end of diplomacy' (Ramel et al., 2020: 309). This views the career diplomat as existentially threatened (see Owen, 2016). As Sharp (2019) argues, 'Diplomats [. . .] look less and less like diplomats and do work which looks less and less like diplomacy' (p. 89). Yet for most practitioners in Brussels, such discourse does not fully resonate. Filip's strategic use of tweets to frame meetings including the endorsement of a tweet that is *positive enough and sufficiently vague to be framed as a success*, for instance, does not seem to support the notion that Twitter is '*un*diplomatic' (Cornut et al., 2022). Instead, it suggests that diplomatic jargon works its way into social media posts. Similarly, Oliver highlights that diplomats understand the need to pace their engagement with technology, respecting existing institutional rules and norms.

Turning to scholars and former diplomats embracing digital transformation, the argument is often that democratisation and informalisation require diplomacy to change. As Daryl Copeland (2009) writes, if diplomacy is to remain relevant in a globalised and

digitally interlinked world, it must transform itself into 'guerrilla diplomacy'. Awaiting instructions and doing things 'by the book' will not fit the fast-paced, high-risk environments of modern world politics (Copeland, 2009: 146). Instead, the guerrilla diplomat makes diplomacy relevant and transparent by using digital technologies to engage individually, informally and playfully with people outside the embassy walls (Copeland, 2009). Former UK ambassador Tom Fletcher (2017) agrees: protocol and pomposity get in the way of diplomats' ability to engage and influence. Both Copeland and Fletcher rightly point out that digital technologies are interwoven with diplomatic outreach and transparency attempts. However, this process does not turn analogue career diplomats into digital 'guerrilla diplomats'. Instead, digital technologies weave themselves into everyday life, triggering reassessments and debate among practitioners. Jakob's reflections exemplify this point. For him, tweeting from the negotiation room disturbs the peace and quiet needed to negotiate, and he warns about tweets creating 'false transparency'.

Our observations, therefore, might seem to fit better with more recent concepts of 'hybrid diplomacy' (Bjola and Manor, 2022; Hocking, 2020). With hybrid diplomacy is understood 'a new phase where physical and virtual engagements integrate, complement and empower each other' (Bjola and Manor, 2022: 1). What we observe in Brussels, however, goes beyond hybrid diplomacy. First, while we also see virtual meetings complementing in-person diplomacy (Bjola et al., 2019), it is not merely a case of 'doing both' (Hocking, 2020: 80) or 'deciding when and where digital resources are appropriate (Hocking, 2020: 80). Second, explaining 'hybrid diplomacy', Bjola and Manor (2022) distinguish between 'adaption' as a response to external changes such as the Covid-19 pandemic and strategic 'adoption' of digital technologies for specific purposes. Yet our observations cannot be easily captured as either responses to external shocks or proactive initiatives to use digital technologies. Instead, the digital is more ubiquitous, implicated in an internal struggle over what kind of diplomatic work is valuable and who is important. While Alfred is forced to meet his colleagues in hours-long Webex meetings, Jakob and Lukas can continue to meet with the other ambassadors in person. Meeting online, for Alfred, is tiring and is experienced as a professional downgrading as his tasks are not deemed essential enough to be face-to-face. As these rules revert once Covid-19 retreats, the pandemic reveals how digitalisation shapes norms and hierarchies in the diplomatic field. The notion of hybrid diplomacy captures the active use of digital technologies, but is less attuned to more slow-burning dynamics in diplomatic life. So, how can we capture the inseparability of digital and analogue elements of diplomatic practice today? And how can we, at the same time, take seriously diplomats' own reflections and resistance to the presence of digital technologies?

Blended diplomacy: entanglement and contestation

Theorising from our empirical material, we suggest that the uptake of digital technologies in diplomacy can be conceptualised as *blended diplomacy*, involving a dual process of entanglement and professional contestation.

Entanglement, the first dimension of blended diplomacy, captures how diplomatic life is now also inescapably digital: analogue and digital ways of doing things have become

inseparable. Today, the digital is everywhere and nowhere. Digital devices and processes are integrated so profoundly into diplomats' everyday tasks that they are often taken for granted. By entanglement, more specifically, we mean the inseparability of human life from technologies in everyday diplomatic practice (Scott and Orlikowski, 2014: 873). What we see is an 'intertwining of humans and technology' (Orlikowski, 2007: 1437). While still relatively underexplored in Diplomatic Studies, it is an established observation in Science and Technology Studies that digital and analogue worlds are not separate but entangled in socio-material practices (Law and Mol, 2002; Orlikowski, 2007; Suchman, 2007). Accordingly, digitalisation is 'best understood as folds within existing socio-technical configurations rather than as an external driver of epochal disruption or change' (Kaufmann and Jeandesboz, 2017: 1). As Barad (2007) further explains, entanglement is not simply the joining of separate entities, but the lack of independent, self-contained existence (p. ix). The mobile phone, for example, has become an essential tool in the diplomatic toolbox. Lukas' use of the phone on the weekend hike and Jack's anxiety about forgetting his phone at home show that the phone has become a kind of extension of the diplomatic self. Boundaries between different domains of life, office versus home, work time versus free time, real work versus distraction, dissolve as diplomats use their phones to facilitate work and personal life activities regardless of temporal and spatial location. The constant, rather, is the device itself. Clara's experiences highlight another dimension of this form of everyday mesh. Even without knowing many of her colleagues in person, Clara reaches out to them via the screen using digital contact sheets, email and word-processing as a habitual part of her daily work. Understanding the meeting of diplomacy and digitalisation in terms of entanglement focuses attention on the subtle ways in which technologies shift everyday habits and workflows and the practices through which distinctions are produced.

The second dimension of blended diplomacy has to do with how digital technologies are made sense of and resisted among diplomats themselves. Beyond the subtle forms of entanglement, the use of digital technologies produces new tensions in diplomatic identities and relations. Charles Bazerman (1999) argues that technology must not only succeed materially; it must also succeed symbolically.[5] This contestation is decisive in diplomacy because the embrace, use patterns and disagreements surrounding digital technologies make visible more profound questions and disputes about diplomacy's 'boundaries' (Gieryn, 1983) and the 'core of the profession' (Abbott, 1995). The ultimate meanings of technologies like videoconferences, smartphones or emails depend on situated forms of boundary work, the demarcating of 'real' diplomacy from distractions and the carving out of exclusive spaces, times and positions for diplomatic work. Alfred worries about being spied on by his digital watch, Jakob fears smartphones destroy confidentiality in meetings, and Daan denies that the constant noise of online communication competes with the core of his task as a COREPER spokesperson, while unable to wrap his head around how on- and offline communication environments relate. Daan's account illustrates how the introduction of new technology entails a phase of uncertainty and ambivalent negotiation that entails both rejection and creative exploration.

The twin processes of entanglement and contestation make up what we call 'blended diplomacy'. Rather than an analytical claim about empirical distinctiveness, the distinction between them is a heuristic move to study how digitalisation shapes diplomatic life.

This move is helpful because it allows us to inquire into the connection between how things are done and what practitioners take them to mean – the element of practice notoriously 'tricky' to get at (Bueger, 2014: 388; Eggeling, 2021: 152–153). 'Blended' conceptualises this linkage and forms the article's core theoretical argument: the entanglement of humans and digital technologies in social practice and the ways diplomats make sense of and contest this entanglement need to be seen *together* to understand what is happening to diplomacy in the digital age. In the next section, we lay out the entanglement and contestation of digital technologies in the Brussels diplomatic field.

Boundary work of blended diplomacy: 'real' diplomacy and 'essential' diplomats

Diplomatic actors express both frustrations with and enthusiasm about digital technologies. They question not only if and how to use a (new) technology, but what it does to their imaginaries of the ideal diplomat. When Jack is worried his colleagues might think he is not working hard enough if he is tweeting throughout the day, he distinguishes between 'real work' and 'diversions'. Similarly, when Jakob frowns at his colleagues tweeting from inside the negotiation room, he is drawing a line between confidential work and the 'false transparency' of social media, which, in his experience, undermines trust and threatens the very practice of negotiation.

Examining Jack's and Jakob's remarks, we can see that they engage in boundary work. Boundary work, originally derived from the sociology of science (Gieryn, 1983), is a concept that can help make sense of how entanglement induces reflexivity and (re) negotiation of professional standards. Initially, boundary work designates the practical and symbolic activities whereby scientists distinguish their own realm of cognitive authority from 'non-science' or pseudo-science (Gieryn, 1983). Transposed to the sociology of professions, the term is widely used, including within IR, to analyse how professional groups like nurses or lawyers demarcate their own domains of expertise and control from those of other professions, consumers, market forces and state agencies (Seabrooke, 2015). Conceptualising blended diplomacy, we employ the notion of boundary work as meaning the ongoing struggle concerning the symbolic and material delimitations (Lamont and Molnár, 2002) of diplomatic insiders and outsiders and the reproduction of a professional imaginary of what counts as 'real' diplomatic work. Boundary work is thus linked to distinction practices to improve the legitimacy and prestige of the community as well as of single actors' statuses within it.

In contrast to Gieryn's focus on boundary work at the external borders of science, we focus on demarcation work within a field – internal boundary work performed between different diplomatic actors. Such an 'internal' perspective is the principal focus of this part of the paper. Two types of interrelated and overlapping boundary work are at play as diplomatic actors make sense of and handle digital technologies in their everyday lives. First, diplomats draw *horizontal* boundaries between what they see as 'real' diplomatic work and other types of activities. Second, they draw *vertical* boundaries between themselves and other diplomatic actors, ranking people around status and skills.

Horizontal boundary work: 'real work' versus distractions

As digital technologies become folded into everyday diplomatic practice, they unsettle established distinctions within the diplomatic profession between 'real work' and distractions. We learn from the vignettes and our broader fieldwork that the entanglement also challenges ideas about diplomacy's proper time and space. Diplomats do not dismiss digital technologies altogether, assuming this to be impossible, as illustrated by Oliver's expectation of even more significant technological transformation in the coming decade, Louise's reliance on digital tools to master complex interpretation tasks, or Daan's admission that social media platforms, besides creating noise, also spread useful information. Instead, appropriate use becomes the critical question for diplomats. When Ambassador Lukas complains about the mixing up of professional and private content in the ambassadors' WhatsApp group, he is objecting to how entanglement subverts a serious conversation between ambassadors with 'unimportant' chatter about football matches. In this case, his boundary work succeeds. Inside the app, a distinction is drawn and a second, private channel is established in parallel to the professional diplomatic channel.

Boundary work is tricky. Diplomacy as a profession has never fully accepted the distinction between public and private life. Stationed abroad, attending and organising social gatherings, diplomats have juggled different spheres of life for hundreds of years (Towns et al., 2018: 196). Yet Neumann (2005) suggests that while the personal is public for diplomats, given all the representation and personal touches needed, there is also a private realm 'that does not come into play at all' (p. 91). Diplomats guard their backstage. Such division of self (public, personal and private) is blurred when mobile devices afford the possibility of being always present and connected, even when diplomats are at home, or, like Ambassador Lukas, hiking out of town on Saturday.

Paradoxically, it is the very possibility of connecting spontaneously during a hike that enables the ambassador to successfully call for a boundary between private and professional exchanges on WhatsApp. Multi-tasking enables him and his colleagues simultaneously to speak inside COREPER, contact their capitals at home and circulating text snippets, thus in parallel performing classic 'real' diplomatic tasks. At the same time, this constant online presence fuels Jack's frustrations with his phone, which encroaches on his precious 'downtime' *and* takes his thoughts away from the 'real work'. He feels like a *distracted teenager*, not like a professional diplomat. Constant fiddling with the attention-grabbing device undermines both the 'real work' of diplomacy and 'real life' outside work, leaving Jack with a sense of emptiness and loss of control over his own professional and private life. For Jakob and for Oliver, moreover, boundary work distinguishing 'real' diplomacy from distractions does not only concern management of their time, but ultimately also the moral grounds and basic meaning of diplomatic work and diplomacy as an institution. Digitalisation, Jakob warns, creates a 'false transparency'.

In some of the vignettes and our broader observations and interviews, we find an existential questioning most evident in emotional outbursts about being overwhelmed, annoyed or anxious about the loss of a space for safe, confidential and tactful deliberation. As one diplomat notes, Twitter – with its focus on being either funny or offensive – is simply 'the opposite of diplomacy' (O: 28 March 2019). Such statements reveal what

some diplomats imagine as 'the core of their profession' (Abbott, 1995: 554). Yet the boundary work shows a more complex negotiation of what counts as diplomatic. Rather than a neat categorisation of 'real diplomatic work' or 'not diplomatic work', tweeting, for instance, may be seen as necessary, as a distraction or as a destructive practice. While some practitioners embrace Twitter, claiming if you are not on social media, 'you're communicating on the wrong frequency' (I: 23 November 2018), others distance themselves from digital tools via irony or sarcasm: 'Do I really need to be the 500th person to retweet a tweet from the spokesperson of [Jean-Claude] Juncker?' (I: 19 March 2019). Others get angry when receiving hundreds of emails containing 'pointless information' which they need to use valuable time to sort through, push around and somehow 'get rid of' (I: 19 March 2019). Encountering digital technologies, diplomats may experience alienation or a sense of being reduced to a teenager – and a feeling of inferiority – or exhaustion through *death-by-PowerPoint*.

Notably, while diplomatic actors are aware that there are sometimes official guidelines for using digital tools or social media, often they do 'not know them very well' (O: 28 March 2019), or guidelines are still being made, as Oliver explains, referring to 'The Journey of a Delegate and a Policy Officer in the Digital Era'. Instead, it is mainly up to the diplomatic actors to navigate the uncodified use of digital technologies. The rules for how to use smartphones and social media, one ambassador reports, 'are only selectively and rarely applied', the most straightforward perhaps being 'specially restricted sessions, in where there are no phones' (I: 26 March 2019). But, he continues,

> there is one thing that I think should be a rule, although it is not, and that is that these meetings should take place in an atmosphere of certain confidentiality, so one should not tweet what somebody else is saying in the meetings. (I: 26 March 2019)

This echoes Jakob's fears and the danger of COREPER breaking up should social media infringe on real diplomatic work requiring *peace and quiet*.

As digital technologies become implicated in a mesh of diplomatic practices, they become part of the pre-existing struggle within the diplomatic profession between the ideals of the 'career diplomat' and the 'guerrilla diplomat'. For example, Jack reflects on having accidentally created the PERMREP's most retweeted post with his image of a puddle on the sidewalk, saying 'it has nothing to do with diplomacy', yet the tweet *performs* as diplomacy, revealing what the fast evolution of digital platforms can do. This experimental 'guerrilla mode' comes with personal anxieties, and for diplomats themselves, sometimes surprising sensations of virtuousness and accomplishment. The tweet is not merely adding a layer to existing routines. Rather than simply making the diplomat a more efficient machine, tweeting makes Jack – or diplomacy – more fully human, and, arguably, a better diplomat. This ideal also draws upon a different discourse for representing the nature of diplomatic work. Rather than identifying diplomacy with tact and self-control, diplomatic work is constructed as a medium for expressing self-efficacy, as a source of personal and social identity and even personal and national self-esteem.

Yet the 'career diplomat' remains an essential ideal, illustrated in Clara's story about being on the right email lists or Oliver's defence of the cautious approach of the EU,

insisting on protecting the institutions against too much change. Here, the 'core' of the diplomatic profession is imagined as involving the meetings and exchanges between selected diplomats in confidential spaces. As articulated by Oliver, this ideal sees digital technologies as potentially destructive, but it is not only a negative discourse; it also paints a picture of diplomacy as cautious, tactful and superior in its self-control. While other professions may jump on the hype, diplomacy will keep doing what it has done for the past couple of thousand years, if we follow Daan.

However, the darker side of digital technology is that it messes up the separation of the private, personal and public, violating established norms, diplomatic information control and confidentiality. Crucially, not just for Daan but for many of the diplomats we observe, leaking does not only impact 'live' negotiations and the outcomes of political processes, but also risks undermining the trust binding the diplomatic community and sustaining it over time. As Jakob puts it, diplomats 'are surgeons' and need peace and quiet for their work. Explaining the negative impacts of social media, one diplomat noted that 'through . . . social media leaking, people get afraid of saying things in meetings because they think that everything could be used against them' (O: 27 March 2019). Another noted that people publishing from within the room take away the collective 'wiggle room, the space needed for open negotiation' (I: 23 November 2018).

> There are always things that you don't want to have published when you have conversations about your mandate, [he explains,] because it gives away your position. Transparency is important, but it is not an end in itself. Diplomacy is still about compromise and that is not always best served by throwing everything out in the public [sphere]. This is no different from working together in a corporate setting or in the university: it's better to first discuss an agreement amongst yourselves before you commit it to paper and say publicly 'this is the agreement we have'. (I: 23 November 2018)

Despite such strong professional norms, the mere presence of digital technologies in negotiation rooms may thus change how diplomats express their positions. Efficiency and availability are given new moral valence. This change is neither one-directional nor inevitable but is negotiated, improvised and resisted.

The blended nature of diplomacy reveals that the professional standards over which diplomats have fought for decades are idealisations. Whereas recent analyses of diplomatic professional identities have examined their internal contradictions (Neumann, 2005) or the challenge from economic consultants (Seabrooke, 2015), international lawyers (Hurd, 2015), liminal and post-colonial performances (McConnell and Dittmer, 2018), or globalisation and global governance (Sending et al., 2011; Sharp, 2009), digital technologies have not played a major part in these accounts. However, in everyday practice, diplomats experiment with different types of diplomatic personae, spaces and times of being diplomatic. The most cautious diplomat is also tweeting, and the most techno-enthusiast also exhibits traits of the career diplomat. The more dramatic consequence of digitalisation is that it forces diplomats to reflect on their own positions. Recognising that their already pressured profession is digitalising brings both defeatism and enthusiasm.

Vertical boundary work: essential versus non-essential staff

The second dimension of boundary work concerns how digital technologies shape hierarchic relations between diplomatic actors. As digital technologies are entangled with diplomatic practices, they upset how diplomats rank themselves and others in hierarchically stratified social positions. Previous work has documented a range of hierarchies within diplomacy. For example, Pouliot (2016) has shown how diplomats uphold and contest an 'international pecking order' in the multilateral system; one critical resource being practical know-how (p. 67). Towns (2020) has examined how feminised figurations of the diplomat challenge and reveal the instability of dominant masculinised subject positions in diplomacy. Our evidence clarifies that digitalisation is quite substantially implicated in such contestations of hierarchy. While the ambassador continues to occupy the apex of the pyramid with administrative and assistant secretaries, bureaucratic staff, translators and interpreters occupying the lower positions of the diplomatic setting, practices such as tweeting or organising a virtual meeting unsettle long-established authorities and some of the influence ingrained in formal diplomatic positionalities. Alfred reflects that he became a de facto working group leader only because he was comfortable leading virtual meetings. Hitherto unknown or irrelevant skills become a means of influencing the diplomatic field, accelerated by the Covid-19 lockdown (Bramsen & Hagemann, 2021). A different dynamic emerges in the case of Clara. She is dependent on her predecessor's electronic file, a list of emails and phone numbers, to reach other PERMREP colleagues; the email list thus draws boundaries around who is privy to the communication and is on the inside of an everyday communication channel.

Sometimes vertical boundary work in relation to digital technologies becomes physical. Physical exclusivity is a way of demarcating space hierarchically. As digital devices enable instantaneous leaks from inside negotiation rooms, diplomats have responded by creating secure rooms in the EU buildings, where digital devices are forbidden or Internet connections can be 'jammed' (I: 19 March 2019). Indeed, many of the meeting rooms of the Council, in the Justus Lipsius and Europa buildings, and the Commission, in the Alfred Borschette building or the Berlaymont, have laminated printouts with crossed out phone symbols stuck to their doors and walls. Symbolically, delineating and separating physical and digital spaces, these printouts remind diplomatic actors of proper codes of conduct.

'Secure rooms' with jammed Internet connections are the next security step up. They are rooms in 'normal buildings but with very thick walls' of which there exist 'around five or six across Brussels and the Commission offices' (I: 4 December 2019). Such designated spaces for diplomacy underline that the essential diplomatic space is a restricted, superior, confidential space. This physical boundary work not only separates areas but also reveals or accentuates social hierarchies among diplomatic actors themselves. When the Council secretariat blocks the Internet connection for an important meeting, the interpreters cannot look up words and are thus prevented from doing their jobs as well as they otherwise could. One interpreter reports that she has used this example in a job interview with another organisation, to highlight her own professional competency:

> I am one of the ten hand-selected interpreters to attend the meetings of the Commission College. A major challenge for interpreting at these meetings is that the level of the meeting is so high and the agenda points are at times so sensitive that the 4G network will be switched off. This presents a challenge because it means we can no longer look up terms or translations of very technical specific words on the Internet. So you have to be all present in the room and you can only use the knowledge that you can yourself bring into it. (O: 13 October 2021)

In such moments, it seems that the commissioners' and ambassadors' need to build trust comes first, and the creation of ideal working conditions for interpretation comes second. Similar feelings of being downgraded as 'part of the furniture' were reported by the EU interpreters during the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic (Eggeling and Adler-Nissen, 2021: 9). Yet such signals are contradictory because at the same time, the EU institutionally insists that translation – the full language regime – is 'essential'. Who attends and which practices, including interpretation during multilateral meetings 'essential' to diplomacy, becomes uncertain in this context because distinct diplomatic norms of confidentiality and the need for a satisfactory language regime are colliding.

This shows how digital technologies do not in themselves aid or hinder a rise in status. Instead, they weave themselves into the struggle over positions and essential skills. Moving up the diplomatic ladder, being in a digitally free room is seen as a sign of the importance of the meeting and of those who participate in it, relegating as inferior the dystopian empty rooms with multiple screens as recounted in Louise's participation in a shadow meeting and virtual meetings at working group levels as retold by Alfred. The most striking examples of this practice happen at European summits, when the EU27 heads of state and government convene in Brussels. Daylong summit negotiations are normally split into five blocks: morning session, lunch, afternoon session, dinner and evening session if necessary. In recent years, numerous such meetings have been declared digital-free zones. A recent example is the meeting of the European Council on 16 December 2021. 'At #EUCO @eucopresident has now switched to debate in #Belarus and #Ukraine', Barend Leyts, the spokesperson of Council President Michel, tweeted in the late afternoon, 'To ensure confidentiality, the discussion takes place without electronic devices'.[6] Taking electronic devices out of the room is not the most extreme way of creating professional intimacy, however: the final step is also to rid the room of administrative aides, including interpreters.

> During the morning, afternoon and evening sessions, [the interpreter further explained,] the interpreters are all in their booths, translating between all 23 official languages. Yet, during the lunch and the dinner, held in the same room, they are asked to leave and sit in an adjoining room where they watch and listen to what is going on in the council room through TV screens. We are still interpreting, [she clarifies,] but we are sent out of the room so that the heads of state can really only be among each other, and maybe sit with a glass of whisky in their hand and talk about whatever it is they need to discuss. (I: 16 August 2019)

In such moments, she becomes an 'invisible interpreter' connected to the words in the room only through live transmission. These dinners form the most intimate part of the day to give the EU leaders a 'feeling of being amongst their peers, amongst their equals, of being "almost alone in the world"' (I: 16 August 2019).

Understanding these intimate and electronic-free spaces as more genuinely diplomatic, however, would be misleading because the very same leaders and ambassadors who barricade themselves into Internet-free zones are also encouraged by their capital cities to engage in digital outreach (I: 9 March 2019). While one foot needs to be *firmly on Schuman, one toe* also needs to be *online.* Such calls come at different levels of forcefulness (I: 19 March 2019, I: 14 November 2018). Especially concerning the use of social media – the technology generally positioned as being at the heart of 'digital diplomacy' – there is 'no formula'; no clear codes or established ways of 'doing outreach'. Rushing off after an interview, one of our participants told us that he had

> an Instagram recording with our media person at the mission now, where I'll be explaining in basic terms what I do . . . mainly for [our domestic] audience to understand what we do here, and this time it's my turn, so I get ten minutes to explain what I do. (I: 27 March 2019)

The end product will be an Instagram video; the production of that video is part of the ambassador's blended communication practice. While this participant might not have been happy to have to rush, he had no objection to compressing what he was doing into an Instagram story either. Even something like a social media post is not purely 'digital' but entangled into diplomatic activities by being embedded into our participants' workdays and, crucially, as revealing the continued importance of the embodiment of the state in and through the (filmable) body of the diplomat. At the same time, and somewhat contradictorily, the ambassador demarcates himself from the 'media person', thus upholding a boundary around the diplomatic profession: he is the one delivering the diplomatic content, the media person merely the one capturing and sharing it.

This attitude is more broadly applicable in Brussels. Many higher-ranked diplomats report that it is the 'task of the intern to do social media work' or that they 'do not have enough staff to do social media outreach' (I: 16 November 2018). At one event at a large Brussels PERMREP in January 2020, moreover, we observed how the office interns spent almost the entire evening 'texting and swooshing around on their smartphones, their heads facing downwards, towards the screens in their hands' (O: 21 January 2020). 'People always criticize our generation for being constantly on the phone', one of them says to the other at some point, 'but I must say I was never as much on my phone as since I started working here'. 'It's all for the boss', the other replies. 'Yes', the first replies with a sigh, 'other colleagues hire staff only for this; it's basically a full-time job' (O: 21 January 2020).

Yet, such seemingly solid hierarchies can also be turned around in unexpected ways. One effect of Covid-19 and the virtual organisations of meetings has been that the apparently influential role of organising a meeting has become more fluid. Reflecting on the difference between face-to-face and virtual or hybrid meetings, one long-term Brussels diplomat notes that things have become 'a bit random' (I: 23 September 2021). Under the changed meeting conditions of the pandemic,

> When you make a meeting and where you meet in the end often depends more on who has a license to a certain software than on your position in the diplomatic hierarchy. Now, it is often not the one hosting the meeting who calls others because maybe the one hosting the meeting

doesn't have a subscription to a certain platform so sometimes it ends up being a random person – like an intern – who calls others in. (I: 23 September 2021)

Conclusion

The study of diplomacy has been focused on a distinction between 'traditional' and 'digital diplomacy'. This distinction, often expressed as an online–offline dichotomy, not only helped pave the way for important insights (e.g. Bjola, 2016; Duncombe, 2017), but it also glossed over how digitalisation has become more deeply ingrained in diplomatic life. Today, diplomatic life is face-to-face, intimate and confidential, but it is also inescapably digital. If you are a professional diplomat, forgetting or losing your smartphone, for example, is not just annoying; you are losing your ability to work. An unstable connection during a virtual meeting, similarly, means losing the ability to negotiate competently. The ability to structure a digital agenda can make you into an implicit leader. To limit our perception of 'digital diplomacy' to the active use of social media or tactics surrounding digital technologies is to disregard that there is no longer any diplomacy that is not somehow digitally mediated, secured or separated. It thus overlooks, the *blended* character of contemporary diplomacy, which we theorised as the dual process of entanglement of the technical and social and the contestation over how this entanglement impacts professional diplomatic life.

Once we move away from an understanding of 'digital diplomacy' as a separate or supplementary practice to 'normal', 'traditional' or 'analogue' diplomatic work, we can more clearly see that digital technologies are at work even when they are actively avoided. Even where laptops and mobile devices are banned or where 'secure rooms' without Internet access have been created, digital technologies shape not only what happens before and after diplomatic encounters, but how diplomats engage with information during negotiations. This is how the digital can work through its absence as a sort of ghost. As the anthropologist Tom Boellstorff (2016) notes, virtual worlds exist even if no one is using them (p. 394).

The fast evolution of digital technology and platforms, including social media, mobile devices and teleconference systems, questions established boundaries in the diplomatic profession. On one hand, this happens through *horizontal* boundary work when diplomats struggle to demarcate what constitutes 'real' diplomatic work from 'the rest'. This struggle, we found, is embedded in practical concerns of separating work and private life, as well as broader social imaginaries of the loss of an exclusive space and time for diplomacy, one where diplomats can meaningfully perform their roles. On the other hand, we found that the use of digital tools, for example, linked to the creation of social media content, leads to *vertical* boundary work as diplomats negotiate internal rankings and most-valued skills among themselves. It becomes increasingly difficult to separate the management of digital devices and networks from a diplomat's overall status, success and legitimacy, yet the understanding of what competent management means is far from settled. At stake in both scholarly and practitioner debates on 'digital diplomacy' is thus always lurking the fundamental question of what diplomacy is, or should become, as an institution in IR.

Our empirical findings and conceptualisation have at least two implications for our understanding of contemporary diplomacy and of how digitalisation is socially negotiated. First, they provide evidence of an ambiguous quality in blended diplomacy, specifically the co-existing but conflicting practices of embracing and distancing digital technologies reflected in diplomats' own accounts. On one hand, digitalisation is primarily a subtle process flowing under the radar of diplomats' attention. Now a habitual and embodied part of everyday life, it has become veritably impossible to experience a workday without digital technologies. Indeed, if one forgets his phone at home, one runs the risk of not being able to work at all. On the other hand, these technologies are still relatively new, with some diplomats questioning what they do to their profession. Like surgeons, some diplomats argue, we do not need to communicate our work digitally while we do it. In the field, we observe contradictory expectations that diplomats are supposed to be constantly online, and at the same time, disciplined confidentiality experts. This tension is unresolved and is likely to produce a range of conflictual and ambiguous practices in the years to come.

This brings us to the second implication of our findings: digital technologies become symbolic resources deployed in subtle yet powerful distinction-making within the diplomatic community. They are part of a broader social transformation in the diplomatic field, involving struggles regarding professional hierarchies, identities and boundaries. Looking across horizontal and vertical boundary work reveals that individual diplomats have diverse and sometimes conflicting experiences with digital technologies. Equally important, those sentiments are not consistent and stable for any given individual. Jack is worried that others may think he tweets too much *and* is encouraged to learn that he has created his embassy's most popular tweet ever. Digital technologies can lead to simultaneous senses of empowerment and loss of control. This is why it is crucial to study not just what the technologies promise but also their actual adoption in everyday social life. To get at this, we need more fine-grained empirical investigations, drawing on multiple methods, not just, for example, interviews, and multiple data sources, not just, for example, tweets. In this article, we worked with both immersive ethnographic methods and alternative writing styles such as 'thick description' to capture and convey the complexity and tensions in the use of digital technologies by diplomats. Our choice of vignettes is only one way in which this material could be (re)presented to bring the reader closer to the experience of practitioners.

In framing our research, we argued that by studying the uses diplomats make of digital technologies, we could not only learn about forms of diplomacy enabled by the entanglement of the technological and the social, but also bring into sharper focus the normative commitments to particular scripts within the diplomatic community. Leaving aside questions of cause and effect in relation to digitalisation, our findings reveal divisions over ideals and structures supporting 'the career diplomat' but also disagreement over new arrangements and practices, often associated with 'the guerrilla diplomat'. Once we begin to take such internal disagreements seriously, we understand that digital technologies are divisive because the practical use patterns and normative disagreements surrounding them reflect deeper questions about what it means to be a diplomat. To get at these struggles, we need more scholarship not just on practices explicitly labelled or

understood as 'digital diplomacy', but also explorations of the sometimes subtle, and sometimes contested processes of digitalisation as they play out in the everyday life of diplomats.

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ORCID iD

Rebecca Adler-Nissen https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7924-9957

Notes

1. By digitalisation, we mean the 'manifold sociotechnical phenomena and processes of adopting and using digital technologies in broader individual, organizational, and societal contexts' (Urbach and Roeglinger, 2019: 1).
2. This material was generated by ethnographic research conducted by Kristin Eggeling from 2018 to 2021. For more detailed methodological accounts of this work, see Eggeling (2021, 2022).
3. All names are pseudonyms. Since names may indicate national origin and since nationality is an important dimension of EU politics, we selected the pseudonyms according to popular names in the participants' sending states.
4. During Covid-19, when many meetings in Brussels moved online, interpretation and administrative work took place in 'shadow rooms', where technical and bureaucratic staff as well as interpreters are physically present, but all member state representatives are digitally connected. Despite a local physical presence, such meetings are officially categorised as 'virtual'.
5. For historically oriented explorations of diplomacy and technological change, see, for example, Der Derian (1987); Leira (2016); Murray et al. (2011).
6. See https://twitter.com/BarendLeyts/status/1471506469010886658, last accessed 11 January 2022.

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Author biographies

Rebecca Adler-Nissen is a Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Copenhagen. Her main research interests are diplomacy, practice theory, digital technologies and international political sociology.

Kristin Anabel Eggeling is a Postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Political Science at the University of Copenhagen. Her research interests are in practice theory, identity politics, diplomacy, interpretive methods and methodologies, ethnography, and fieldwork in international relations.