

Cultural diplomacy forms an integral part of public diplomacy, wherein the focus is oriented towards the foreign, global audiences. As citizen-aimed diplomacy, it combines the cultural practices with the existing structures and framework of public diplomacy. Different from traditional diplomacy in the manner of its conduct which usually involves official meetings, visits and issued statements, cultural diplomacy is aimed at a wider audience, wherein their values, needs and demands occupy an important position.

An age-old concept which still is relevant in the present international system, cultural diplomacy has been perfectly defined as an exchange of information, arts, culture, ideas among people of different nations to foster mutual exchange. This definition of cultural diplomacy looks at governments as the sole channel to further the exchange of culture. However, many new non-state actors like private entities, civil initiatives have emerged to widen this sphere of cultural diplomacy.

According to the [2016 European Commission report](#), there are three approaches to conduct cultural diplomacy. They include - 'public diplomacy approach' wherein government controls the exercise of cultural diplomacy, 'strategic interests approach' here the government may not exercise entire control but view cultural diplomacy as means to further certain strategic interests; and lastly, 'cultural relations approach' wherein nations solely aim at forming a bond based on dialogue and collaboration. Some of the most prominent uses of cultural diplomacy have been to improve the 'brand' image of a country, promote its various foreign policy goals and enhance social cohesion at the domestic level.



Pravasi Bhartiya Divas in Yangoon (2019)/ Image source: India In Myanmar

Traditional cultural diplomatic practices consist of arranging for scholarships, academic exchange programmes, art exhibitions, musical concerts, cultural programmes, language and religious centres, etc. Furthermore, advancing trade, economic, political relations along cultural lines also form an integral part of cultural diplomacy.

The UK based [2007 report](#) on 'Cultural Diplomacy' stated that "new technologies should become the basis for innovative new working strategies and online tools should reflect the full range of possible contributions to cultural diplomacy ". Thus, it can be observed that the extent of use of digital diplomacy for international cultural promotion has been expanding. It can play a decisive role in the policy frameworks developed by the UNESCO and the European Commission, which include: "[preservation of cultural heritage, access to creative content, protection of cultural diversity, strengthening intercultural dialogue, as well as fostering development and the creative economy](#)".

The development of digital diplomacy and the subsequent changes in the timeworn conduct

of traditional diplomacy have been influential in the practice of cultural diplomacy as well. The online world is making it easier to reach out to the people and engage with a variety of public. Effective use of information technology could play a booster to the soft power of the countries. This is in addition to the phenomena of globalization, neoliberal trade frameworks and the emergence of non-governmental organizations playing a decisive role in determining states' relations. The virality of information makes it important to establish "[the appropriate digital channels for \(your\) foreign ministry \(requires\) to understand\(ing\) the current environment and the needs of \(your\) citizens and the host country. It also requires a clear vision to set goals and guidelines](#)".

With the introduction of the internet, [France](#) was one of the first countries to have a foreign ministry website by 1995. Also, it opened a Twitter account (@francediplo) as early as 2009. The French foreign ministry website receives as many as 1.5 million visitors each month. Social networking platforms are expanding the sphere from state-to-state relations, and making space for civil society - state relations. Today, French Foreign Ministry has Twitter accounts in multiple languages - English, Arabic, Russian, German, Spanish. It even has a separate account for issuing travel advice (@ConseilsVoyages). It has established a substantial presence on other platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube as well. To enhance communication in China, the French Embassy is employing the Weibo platform, thus, catering to the local masses by adapting to the commonly used applications in the region.

To enhance the dialogue with French and foreign civil society, to provide quality diplomatic service to the public and to support the French diplomatic network are the 3 major goals of the French digital communication strategy. The benefit of employing these virtual portals as seen "[in 2018, more than 40 million Internet users visited the 268 sites of French embassies and consulates abroad which communicate in some 15 languages](#)".



Apart from delivering diplomatic duties, these online platforms are essential in upholding the French brand image. For example, the Institut Francais maintains a number of online portals to promote different aspects of French arts and culture through [IFcinéma](#), [IFmapp](#), [IFmobile](#). Simultaneously, in an effort to promote the French language, projects like Afripedia (providing content in association with the French Institute) and *Mondoblog* (a group of French-speaking bloggers) are initiated and supported.

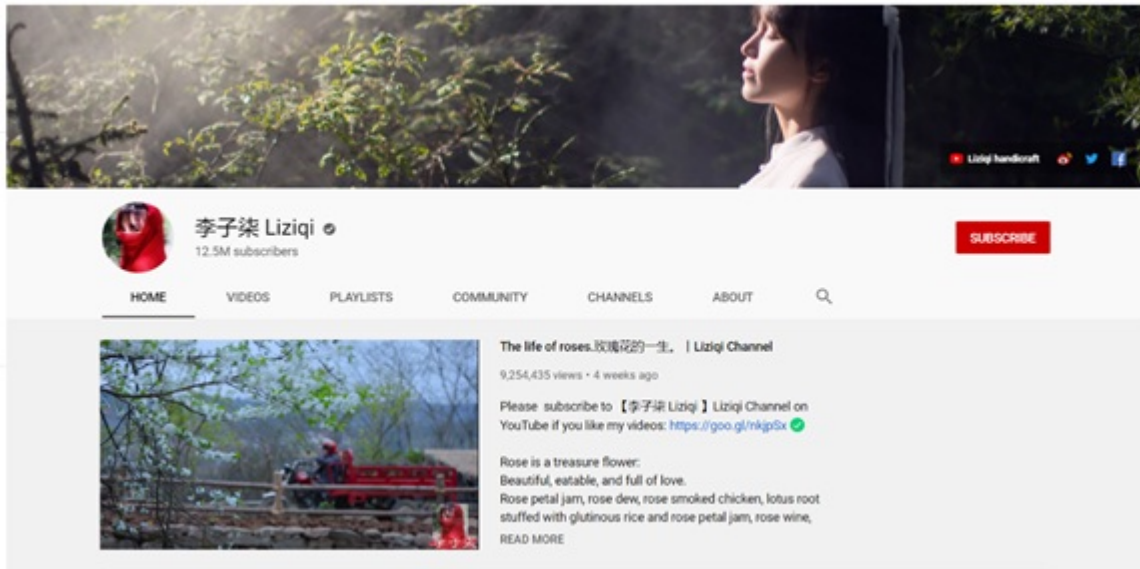
Online platforms serve as one of the prime mediums for enabling a dialogue, networking and advocating for a cause. French foreign ministry employs its online platform for providing support to the freedom of expression, human rights, especially in oppressive regimes. The Ministry has contributed to International Federation of Human Rights League (supporting human rights defenders), initiatives by Reporters Without Border, Safirlab programme (training programmes to bloggers).

From providing social web training programme, standard website and social network templates, to refresher courses, tutorials and online assistance, the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs has been providing all kinds of support to strengthen online diplomatic communication. The broadening horizons of cultural diplomacy through online

communication channels can be, thus, witnessed.

Cultural diplomacy, also, forms a vital tool in the conduct of a country's soft power policy. After the Second World War, international organizations like UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization) were established as a platform for cultural diplomacy. Initiatives like Voice of America, the international broadcaster of the USA, was utilized as a part of America's foreign policy against the Soviet propaganda under the pretext of cultural diplomacy. Until the end of the Cold War, countries like Britain, France, USA and USSR extensively employed [external cultural policy](#). The establishment of national cultural institutions with a global presence in an attempt to pursue soft power such as the British Council, the Goethe Institute have, often, been associated with the rise of 'neo-imperialism'.

With digital diplomacy becoming the new normal, soft power dissemination, too, is turning towards new media and communication tools. The negative connotation associated with cultural diplomacy, concerning its practice as a mere propaganda network is worrying in the digital age, especially, with a widening diplomatic network. For example, China is witnessing an increasing reliance on [internet celebrities](#) to highlight the 'apolitical' side of the country on the international front. Chinese blogger Li Ziqi, with 12.5 million YouTube subscribers is famous for displaying traditional Chinese arts and showcasing beautiful Chinese rural countryside. She has been praised for "promoting Chinese culture internationally" and holding as much influence as the Confucius Institutes and CGTNs (Chinese Global Television Network). China suffers from a soft power deficit, owing to its assertive nationalism as demonstrated on the international stage and the absolute government control over cultural diplomatic activities, which is viewed as unreliable and controlling. The rise of internet personalities like Li Ziqi has been careful with this trend, and have persisted on presenting a "softer, diversified and apolitical" perspective of the Chinese society to the international audience.



The Chinese leadership is adopting a top-down approach as a measure to improve its international communication as well as to “present a true, multidimensional, and panoramic view of China” and in turn enhance the country’s soft power. Efforts like Communist Youth League promoting internet celebrities under the 2018 ‘good young netizens’ campaign, hiring CD-Rev (gangsta rap music group) for composing nationalistic rap songs are undertaken to appeal to the foreign audience. However, they have often been connotated as propaganda in the West.

Furthermore, with Xi Jinping in power, tighter internet regulations have been imposed, making it difficult for cyber celebrities to operate and produce content. In 2018, Yang Kaili, a very famous online celebrity was jailed for casually singing the national anthem. During the Hong Kong protests, Chinese celebrities were made to show online solidarity with One China Policy. The dilemma for Chinese authorities lies in striking a balance between letting the crowd of online celebrities flourish against their controlling hand making them mere Party mouthpieces. As on the international stage, content focussing on a light-hearted, multicultural and apolitical version of China is appreciated. It is one of the most promising bids for the country to manage its falling international image.

Cultural diplomacy in the digital age has immense power of persuasion, which needs to be exploited for the fulfilment of various national interests. One such successful example is of [Sri Lanka](#). In 2019, Sri Lanka was a victim of a series of bomb blasts during the time of Easter celebrations. The terrorist attacks shook the entire country as churches and luxury hotels were targeted. In its aftermath, the tourism industry of the country, which accounts for 5% of its total economy was severely affected. Almost 12% of the total workforce

employed by the industry were facing unemployment.

Social media in Sri Lanka has often been associated with the spread of disinformation and fake news. Incitement of ethnic violence and riots has been the leading cause of implementation of social media bans on various occasions in the country. On one hand, a majority of the country's population is reliant on internet and in particular on social media to stay connected as well as to consume news. While on the other hand, the government's hostile attitude towards social media has been counter-productive.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in the aftermath of the 2019 Easter bombings employed the help of social media reach to connect with the foreign population, especially the Sri Lankan diaspora. This was done to promote a positive image of the country, deeming it safe for travel and tourism. The hashtag #SriLankaIsSafeToTravel was created to circulate across the social media platforms, mainly Facebook, through a series of short interview videos of international travellers affirming travel safety in the country. The subsequent online sharing and resharing of the videos through a number of Sri Lankan embassies and foreign missions posted across the world, generated the required internet traffic and engagement. The diplomatic network, furthered, this digital strategy by making their own video additions to the circulating hashtag.

Informal channels such as bloggers were contacted by the Sri Lankan Tourism Bureau to spread the message that Sri Lanka was safe for travelling. Accordingly, bloggers with a wide reach, especially in Europe and America toured Sri Lanka to promote the country as a safe, friendly destination. The hashtag garnered a more informal and personal tone with its continuous usage, in and outside of the diplomatic and official government network.

Campaigns like Bring a Friend Home (BAFH) were launched on Facebook and WhatsApp, aimed at inviting Sri Lankans residing abroad to visit the country and take advantage of the discount packages. Celebrities with expansive social media reach like former Miss Sri Lanka Jacqueline Fernandez (32 million Instagram followers) were roped in to promote such campaigns. All these efforts added to the recovery of the tourism industry in the country. By combining private and public sectors as well as adopting formal and informal channels, the country was able to effectively spread the message.

Bring a friend home & Win AMAZING PRIZES #BringafriendhomeSL

RECOMMEND TO A FRIEND

Bring friend home TO SRI LANKA

BRING A FRIEND HOME

The first-ever Bring a Friend Home campaign by Cinnamon Hotels was launched in Sri Lanka as an initiative to support the recovery plan for tourism in Sri Lanka. Jacqueline Fernandez, former Miss Sri Lanka and current Bollywood sensation, was the first visitor under this promotional campaign, sharing special moments with our beautiful island home.

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[“A clear call to action for Sri Lankan citizens made the effort a truly national effort that combined the personal element of friendship with an international digital communications campaign.”](#) Thus, understanding and engaging with social media turned out to be beneficial for the Sri Lankan government. It helped to give a boost to the soft power of the country and the [“message that Sri Lanka was safe now no longer was just shared by the Sri Lankan Government, it had become a global message intended for a global audience”](#).

This implies that there is a need to make the exchange of cultural relations a multi-way process with the emergence of various communication channels as well as cultural actors in the present world stage. The advent of digital space has led the users transition their role from consumers to producers of information and vice versa. This interchange of roles has opened up numerous opportunities but at the same time, has created problems of disinformation, misinformation, hate mongering, propaganda and cyber-attacks, cyber-warfare.

The online world has become commercialized following [clickbait business model](#) engaged in spreading user-generated content. The channels for soft power exchange are driven by non-traditional actors, increasingly moulded by individuals, private entities with no oversight. The growth and success of these multinational corporations are based on the growing tide of internet users, for whom multiple engagement platforms are being devised, leading to more scope for political activism.

The brand image of a country is regarded vital for its positive functioning in international

affairs, which is increasingly depended on online stream of information. This trend has the potential to become a double-edged sword in the expanding sphere of a country's cultural diplomacy. According to German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, "[in liberal regimes, online media, with their millions of forums for debate on a vast range of topics, \(this\) could lead to a "fragmentation of the public" and a "liquefaction of politics", which would be harmful to democracy](#)". Therefore, it becomes imperative that the dark side of digital diplomacy be kept in check for cultural diplomacy to flourish and enable countries to form close cultural connect.

Sources

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