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Thesis for a Master's Research Report

Chinese and US digital diplomacy in South Africa: An analysis of Facebook during the Covid-19 lockdown

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ABSTRACT

Digital diplomacy is a new concept in diplomacy generally and more specifically in public diplomacy. It emanated from the emergence of the internet and digital technologies in the 1990s and has been practised since then.

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2019 (Covid-19) ushered in novel communication and diplomatic practices. Diplomats still needed to influence and improve their countries' image to their foreign publics. Digital diplomacy was the most viable option for them to successfully ply their craft during a pandemic. Since the 1990s, diplomats and ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) have been going digital.

The gaps in the field and the scarcity of literature on the topic highlight the importance of and the need for more research. Due to the novelty of digital diplomacy, there is no formal definition of

the concept yet; instead, there are myriad definitions influenced by a different understanding of scholars who define it from their different vantage points.

This study focused on Chinese and US digital diplomacy because their digital diplomacy strategies have not focused on the Global South or South Africa. The study established their successes and failures in using digital diplomacy strategies towards South Africa.

The research is significant in that it highlights the need for diplomats to adapt in practising their craft. The study highlights the complementary nature of digital diplomacy to public diplomacy and its importance during a pandemic. The significance of the study is in its ability to demonstrate the symbiotic relationship between digital diplomacy and public diplomacy and how it contributes to the field of journalism and diplomacy since the advent of social media.

The research used digital diplomacy and media theories, such as agenda setting and framing, alongside the qualitative network analysis method. The data collection approach was by means of surfing the relevant embassies' Facebook pages to find posts that fell into the chosen period for this study through sampling and by creating a code sheet. The methodology section below explains in detail how we used the method, how data was obtained, and the period.