

1

GOING DIGITAL

Choices and challenges for international organisations

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Introduction

The global spread of new digital communication technologies has profoundly transformed the way individuals, states and businesses operate and interact with the outside world. The present volume explores the impact of digital technologies, with a focus on social media, for one of the major actors in international affairs, namely international organisations (IOs). IOs such as the European Union, the Commonwealth Association, and the United Nations have increasingly embraced social media as tools to manage their internal and external communication. Whether as organisations or as individuals representing them, IOs have established an active digital presence on the most popular social media platforms, from Twitter to Facebook and Instagram. In turn, a growing number of private users and groups around the world are virtually engaging with IOs, following their social media accounts, sharing information about them, and commenting on their actions. As a result of these developments, IO bureaucracies, which until recently have been perceived as rather obscure and impenetrable, have become more visible and “sociable” on the global digital stage.

Due to their rapid spread and potential impact on the management of global affairs, digital technologies have started to attract the attention of International Relations scholars (Jackson 2018; Carpenter and Drezner 2010; Copeland 2013; Bjola and Holmes 2015; Hocking and Melissen 2015; Pamment 2016). These scholars recognise that the dynamics that characterise the current “global information age” (Simmons 2011), an era defined by “the ability of individuals to create, transfer, and access information *globally*” (ibid, 595, emphasis added), have created new opportunities for international actors to enhance their power on the international stage. Simply put, digital technologies are perceived to act as “influence amplifiers,” helping governments and IOs to increase their diplomatic

clout in a manner that they might not otherwise be able to achieve. Social media, as a popular form of communication, enhance these opportunities thanks to their global reach and ability to connect a broad spectrum of private and public actors (Ghannam 2011, 6).

One of the most promising areas of research on the role of social media in international politics is the emerging subfield of “digital diplomacy,” which has been broadly defined as the use of social media for diplomatic purposes (Bjola and Holmes 2015, 4). Studies on digital diplomacy have examined how political leaders and foreign policy officials use new technologies to increase their engagement with foreign audiences, highlighting how social media platforms have become an influential foreign policy tool (Khatib, Dutton and Thelwall 2012). These works show that the adoption of digital technologies has transformed the traditional practices of diplomacy, especially those involving communication with local stakeholders (or what is known as “public diplomacy”; Melissen 2005; Cull 2019). With social media, public diplomacy is no longer restricted to the relay of information, promising instead “the interactive construction and leveraging of long-lasting relationships with foreign publics” (Bjola and Jiang 2015; Kampf et al. 2015). With the emergence of digital diplomacy, foreign policy officials have become directly involved in the shaping of public opinion and advocacy activities. The digital diplomacy literature has also examined the role that social media has had in shaping national images and “brands,” and the efforts that democratic and authoritarian regimes have deployed to manage their country’s reputation on the world stage (Manor and Segev 2015; Bulovsky 2019).

By focusing on foreign affairs ministries and officials, the digital diplomacy literature has thus far analysed the role of social media in world politics through the prism of states and their interactions (Pelling 2016; Hocking and Melissen 2015; Spry 2019). The state-centrism of research on digital diplomacy is apparent from the dearth of studies on IOs and other actors digitally active on the world stage, such as NGOs (Seo et al. 2009; Thrall et al. 2014; Pagovski 2015; Hocking and Melissen 2015). The literature on digital diplomacy has also paid less attention to the organisational implications of the emergence of new communicative technologies for international politics. These issues have been addressed more explicitly by works in the field of Communication and Media Studies (Watson and Hill 2015), and, more specifically, the subfield of Organisational Communication (Livingstone and Lievrouw 2006). This literature emphasises how social media are part of a “communications technology revolution” that has “redefined the relationship between producers and receivers of online information” (Carpenter and Drezner 2010, 256).

One of the key insights of this scholarship is the recognition that the flow of information is a source of power (Marlin-Bennett 2013). This insight is valid for social media as well. Social media, as tools of direct communication, allow for circumventing traditional media organisations, thus providing more control over public communication (Van Dijck and Poell 2013). Social media also inspire organisations to articulate network connections within and outside their

boundaries (DeNardis and Hackl 2015, 762; Jackson 2018). The organisational communication literature also highlights how the impact of digital technologies for organisations is not limited to its public relations dimension. Social media influence the functioning of organisations in all the phases of the policy-making process, from agenda-setting to decision-making, planning, implementation and policy evaluation (Bjola 2017; Bjola and Ren 2019).

While mainly focused on the role of communication in “domestic” settings, the organisational communication literature has branched out to examine “global” communicative dynamics beyond national borders (Thussu 2009/2018; Alleyne 2016; Murphy et al. 2003). When IOs have been explicitly addressed, however, the focus has been until recently on the role of traditional media and communication tools (Gilboa 2005; Dimitrov 2014; Risso 2014). Works in this field have started to expand to include IOs’ use of digital technologies, highlighting the growing role of social media within these organisations’ public relations strategies (see, for instance, Ecker-Ehrhardt 2018b; Dimitrov 2014; Corrie 2015) and their “operational” functions in crisis management situations and the provision of public services (e.g. disaster relief; Gao et al. 2011).

These works, however, are not yet part of a coherent research program and lack systematicity. Moreover, there is still limited engagement with debates occurring within the International Relations-inspired literature on digital diplomacy; despite the apparent overlap in terms of themes addressed in both literatures, these bodies of scholarly work have not been in dialogue with each other yet. In bringing together these two literatures, the present volume seeks to fill the gaps in the existing literature by offering a theoretically grounded and empirically driven analysis of the impact and implications of the emergence of digital technologies as communicative tools for international organisations. The volume’s premise is that IOs’ engagement with social media, while sharing some of the experiences of other “domestic” public and private organisations (e.g. national governments, NGOs), raises a series of unique theoretical and empirical questions about the role of communication, technology, and power in global affairs, questions that to date have not been the object of in-depth academic scrutiny (Jackson 2018).

These questions, in turn, stem from some of IOs’ key distinguishing features as organisations and the context in which these entities operate, namely the international system. IOs, like other public organisations, are complex bureaucratic structures of different sizes and resources that operate according to specific decision- and policy-making procedures. What distinguishes IOs as public organisations is their status as semi-autonomous entities created to address specific common global problems, and that operate in a setting (the international system) characterised by the lack of central authority (Simmons and Martin 2002). The following sections elaborate on these issues, focussing on four analytical themes that will inform the contributions to this volume: 1) the nature of the IOs’ “digital universe”; 2) IOs and digital autonomy; 3) IOs and digital legitimacy; and 4) IOs and digital contestation.

International organisations' "digital universe"

The first theme addressed in the volume relates to the structure and dynamics that characterise IOs' presence on social media. The broad reach of IOs' presence and activities means that the community of social media users engaging with IOs is global, and it encompasses a multitude of individuals and groups that are active both within and outside these organisations around the world. This global network involves a multitude of users and accounts active both within and outside these organisations. Within IOs, accounts are run by secretariats, agencies, member states' delegations, and by staff members in their personal capacity. Outside IOs, the network comprises accounts run by various stakeholders such as NGOs with consultative status, pressure groups, companies, individual citizens (journalists, experts, advocacy organisations, corporate lobbies) in countries around the world. These actors play different roles and have different influences on IOs' social media communication practices. In the organisational studies language, these actors function either as "gatekeepers" or "liaisons" or "bridges," depending on whether they mediate interactions with the outside world or convey communication upward within the organisation (Thussu 2018). The ongoing digital communication that occurs among these actors create the IOs' global network. This network's spatial configuration, "thickness," and location of major "nodes" vary due to IOs' different sizes and degree of presence and penetration on social media, the activity of its users, and the salience of the global issue IOs are addressing at a particular time.

This unique configuration of the IOs' digital universe is reflected in the structure, form, and content of the communicative practices that take place within it. These practices take place between organisations, downward from the organisation to the stakeholders, and upward from stakeholders to the organisation (Mumby and Kuhn 2018). These practices can take different forms (textual and/or visual) depending on the platform used (e.g. tweets, FB posts), and their content can be either formal or informal. The informality of communication is one of the most significant innovations of social media for IOs, as these entities have traditionally been quite cautious and restrained in their external communication. As Cornut states (2019):

Traditionally, diplomats are expected to uphold a certain level of decorum, but this tweet crosses the boundaries of propriety. In the digital era, it is socially acceptable to present information in non-formal ways on social media as long as the message is clever and – to the point ... The ability for a diplomat to have a cheeky/clever outlook on current events has a positive effect as it aids in promoting his/her country's position. Not only does a clever response effectively summarize complicated events, making it easier for regular citizens to understand, but its humorous nature also contributes to the popularity of the Tweet itself – resulting in a more widespread message.

Besides mapping IOs' digital universe, the volume also seeks to examine its origins and evolution. The exponential rise and expansion of IOs' reliance on social media raise questions about the rationales and the conditions under which international organisations have adopted and used social media. One of the most prominent arguments is that IOs have become digitally active because of the mimicking of norms and practices developed within domestic politics and outside (Cho 2014, 381). In this reading, IOs are replicating what other public and private organisations have been doing domestically in their public relations efforts. Another potential reason for why social media have become so popular in IOs is the result of the emerging trend towards the personalisation of international politics and diplomacy (another example of "spilling over" from domestic politics; see Marlin-Bennett 2013), a trend that has emphasised the role of the personal(ised) communication in promoting a particular message on behalf of an organisation. In the IO's context, this is encapsulated in the rise of the phenomenon of "celebrity IO ambassadors" (Adler-Nissen 2016).

These arguments about IOs' digitalisation, however, do not take into account that bureaucratic organisations are unlikely to invest resources in a new communication strategy without a modicum of planning and assessment of its value and impact, and without the structures in place to manage new digitally based initiatives. Indeed, over the last decades, IOs have enhanced and professionalised organisational capacities for public communication (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2018a). The role of new media has become prominent in IOs' communication strategies, and additional resources have been deployed to reinforce IOs' digital presence. How different IOs have implemented these strategies, however, has not been examined in depth. Moreover, while social media have been hailed as having a positive impact on private and public organisations in terms of meeting their mandates and performing their functions (Collins and Bekenova 2019; Sandre 2015), less is known about their impact on IOs. This volume assesses whether and how social media have improved the ways in which IOs work, make decisions, and engage with stakeholders. At the same time, it also questions whether digital tools are providing added value to IOs' communication strategy and diplomatic practices, or whether, instead, they might hinder them.

Addressing these questions, Matthias Ecker-Ehrhardt argues in Chapter 2 that the widespread use of social media opens entirely new opportunities for international organisations to directly communicate with and engage an increasingly aware and assertive public. Using a time-series cross-section regression methodology for a stratified-random sample of 49 IO accounts on Facebook and Twitter, Ecker-Ehrhardt finds that the application of social media for public communication purposes is informed by multiple factors. First, external contestation and the opening of IO bodies for representatives of transnational civil society is strongly associated with the adoption of social media, which suggests an underlying imperative for self-legitimation. Secondly, organisational mandates shape IOs' demands for social media, for example, by calling for the direct implementation

of multiple policy programs on the ground. Lastly, centralised public communication also facilitates the adoption and extensive use of social media.

In Chapter 3, Michał Krzyżanowski addresses the question of how IOs accommodate and integrate digital technologies into their analogue patterns of public communication. The chapter looks at how social/online media – using the example of Twitter – were used by the European Union for communication at a critical time (2014–2015), when the organisation faced multiple crises and was in acute need of effectively engaging with the European demos. Proposing a critical discourse framework for the analysis of the politico–organisational use of Twitter, the chapter shows that the new digital platforms did foster change or “modernisation” of EU political communication patterns. At the same time, social media helped sustain some of the deep-seated dispositions of EU communicative and organisational practices as well as political discourses. As deployed by the EU’s – and specifically by the European Commission’s – spokesperson service, social media helped solidify some controversial patterns of EU political communication.

In Chapter 4, Natalia Grincheva examines the efforts undertaken by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), a non-governmental international organisation under formal relations with UNESCO, to update its mandate and restructure itself. To this end, the chapter focuses on the case of the 2019 online global crowdsourcing campaign that ICOM launched in the search for a new museum definition capable of bridging internal divides and political expectations regarding the future role of the organisation. Employing content analysis, Grincheva’s research examines the multitude of museum definitions submitted to the ICOM platform from different corners of the world and demonstrates how digital activities have collided with traditional procedures and bureaucracies of large international organisations. The case is important as it offers valuable insight into the role of digital technologies in facilitating vs undermining democratic systems of global governance.

International organisations and digital autonomy

The second theme that the volume addresses concerns the role that social media plays in shaping international organisations’ autonomy as actors on the international stage (Haftel and Thompson 2006, 255). In the case of IOs, autonomy is “the ability to operate in a manner that is insulated from the influence of other political actors – especially states” (Haftel and Thompson 2006, 256, Kenneth Abbott and Duncan Snidal 1998, 9). Since states create, support, and direct IOs, the latter’s independence is, by design, constrained. IOs nonetheless can make autonomous decisions and have a degree of discretion in their actions (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). Moreover, since the 1990s, IOs have expanded their authority and, as a result, the scope of their activities (Hooghe and Marks 2015; Zürn, Binder, and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012, 107–112). This trend, which has started to reverse more recently, is to a large extent the result of states’ growing

willingness to delegate their power, which involves the offloading of control of fundamental tenets of the policy-making process at the international level, including agenda setting, decision-making, implementation, and enforcement (Haftel and Thompson 2006, 256).

Communication, and new media in particular, is playing an increasingly central role in facilitating and, in some cases, expanding IOs' autonomy. This state of affairs is due to the way IOs exercise and project their power. IOs' power can take different forms, but it is typically not direct. IOs do not dictate their will or rules on other international actors; instead, they tend to act as "orchestrators" (Abbot et al. 2015). Orchestration entails the use of persuasion and incentives, and the reliance on intermediaries (e.g. NGOs), which are induced to collaborate in achieving a particular goal or in shaping the policy process. An international organisation's ability to be a successful orchestrator is premised on the existence and projection of a unique and coherent corporate identity vis-à-vis relevant stakeholders (Cho 2014; Mumby and Kuhn 2018). A corporate identity refers to the consistent and durable set of values that an organisation possesses, and that differentiates it from other entities. IOs develop a corporate identity by building a "narrative" about who they are and what they represent, a narrative that is typically outlined in internal strategic documents, and it is articulated publicly by their official representatives.

IOs' identities, however, are not static, and they are shaped by an organisation's interaction with its environment (Cho 2014, 377). In turn, over time, IOs adjust their original identity to reflect the (sometimes negative) feedback they receive from their environment (Cho 2014, 378). NATO's communication strategy, for instance, has evolved as a result of its alleged "image problem," stemming from the perception in the popular imagination of being a "global policeman," "a tool of the U.S. to achieve its end," and "an unnecessary post-Cold war leftover" (Pagovski 2015, 13). As they have done for private companies, social media have provided an invaluable tool to IOs to collect information about themselves and to reformulate their identity narratives accordingly, making them potentially more effective and coherent.

Crucial in the exercise of "soft" power is the role of communication, as IOs need to proactively establish channels of communication, convey relevant information, and engage in dialogue with relevant stakeholders in their effort to cajole and persuade them to collaborate towards the achievement and implementation of IO-sponsored policy goals or initiatives. In this context, digital technologies have become a popular new "baton" deployed by IOs' officials to lead their orchestrating efforts. Social media, in particular, have expanded IOs' ability to exert their power by helping them define and consolidate their digital autonomy in different ways. First, by offering a platform to directly engage with stakeholders, thus circumventing official channels, especially if member states are involved. Second, by signalling their intentions, a particularly valuable feature during negotiations. Thirdly, by coordinating actions, especially with intermediaries during campaigns, but also for crisis management. Finally, by calling out

stakeholders or shaming them in order to influence their behaviour. While social media platforms promote a more visible digital presence, their decentralised, informal, and personal nature, combined with their capacity to multiply the number of voices within IOs who speak on behalf of these organisations, means that the message they convey can come across as inconsistent and confusing, and, as a result, it weakens their efforts at projecting a coherent identity. In this way, social media can exacerbate an inherent tension that characterises and IO's identity, namely that between an IO's collective identity and states' individual identities (Cho 2014, 376).

The chapters in this section explore the different ways in which social media have become tools to promote IOs "brand-making" and considers whether these practices are consistent with those of other private and public organisations. The volume also assesses whether new digital tools provide a viable platform to increase IOs' digital autonomy vis à vis states, or whether they merely reproduce this subordinate relationship, thus testing the claim that "digital orchestration" helps IOs increase their power in international affairs.

In Chapter 5, Caroline Bouchard investigates how and to what extent the introduction and adoption of new digital communication and information technologies (ICTs) have affected UN processes. Changes have been observed both in the ways UN actors interact within the organisation and the ways the organisation communicates with external audiences. Drawing from the International Relations (IR) literature on UN processes, studies on new media, and research on the diffusion of innovations theory, the chapter presents results from a case study analysis that focuses on a key UN entity: the Department of Global Communications of the UN Secretariat. Bouchard argues that digital ICTs have affected three UN processes: rules of procedures, strategic interactions, and informal relationships. The chapter shows how specific UN actors played key roles in the integration and diffusion of digital tools in the UN process. It also contends that new digital ICTs have created unintended and undesirable consequences for the organisation that the UN has to grapple with.

Noting that IOs were established during the height of the industrial age, in Chapter 6 Nabeel Goheer examines four challenges – relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, and visibility – that have haunted international organisations since the dawn of the digital era. As bureaucracies, IOs were designed and tuned by their political masters to respond to the exigencies of the industrial age that worked like a CLOCK – Complicated, Logical, Ordered, Closed, and Kinetic. They have struggled to adapt to the digital reality, which is Complex, Large, Open, Unpredictable, and Dynamic (CLOUD). Drawing on the case of the Commonwealth Secretariat's digital transformation journey since 2015, the chapter discusses the strategic, structural, and systemic shifts that have helped morph the organisation from a bureaucracy to a network by unleashing its digital power in the form of data, display, delivery, and discovery. The chapter provides ex ante assessment and ex post evaluation of the digital reform process, and makes a case that a networked redesign, an innovative outreach, interoperable

processes, and value-creating visibility are the digital ways to recalibrate IOs' autonomy in a CLOUD world.

International organisations and digital legitimacy

The volume's third theme relates to the role of social media in boosting (or undermining) IOs' legitimacy. Like other public organisations, IOs need legitimacy, namely a set "beliefs of audiences that an IO's authority is appropriately exercised" (Tallberg and Zürn 2019, 4) in order to perform their functions effectively. Stakeholders' support (or lack thereof) determines the degree of IOs' relevance as primary forums where global problems are addressed (Morse and Keohane 2014). This support also influences the ability of IOs to introduce and implement new policies and ensure compliance with legal and normative commitments (Sommerer and Agné 2018). Moreover, legitimacy helps IOs counter the charge that they lack fundamental democratic credentials (Held and Koenig-Archibugi 2005). With few exceptions (e.g. the European Union's elected parliament), IOs do not formally obtain their legitimacy directly from citizens, as is the case with other public organisations at the national level.

Because of the lack of direct, bottom-up sources of legitimisation, IOs typically rely on the assessment of their "output," namely what they do, and how, to determine their legitimacy (Steffek 2015). IOs' output is, in turn, evaluated based on how they are perceived to conform to established procedural and performance standards (Tallberg and Zürn 2019, 18). Procedural standards refer to features such as efficiency, legality, and expertise. Performance standards refer to effectiveness but also the protection of democratic rights and processes. The latter element points to the fact that IOs are not just technocratic entities created to solve common problems, but also carry a more normative mandate (Tallberg and Zürn 2019, 19). Whether it is assessed based on procedural or performative standards, IOs' legitimacy is never constant, as it changes depending on the particular audience and timeframe (*ibid.*, 9).

Since IOs have traditionally been shielded from popular scrutiny, until recently their legitimacy has been relatively invisible as a subject in public and academic debates. Of late, however, attention to their actions has increased, and, as a result, IOs have become more sensitive about their public perceptions and more active in seeking support from stakeholders. These stakeholders – be it within the organisation or outside – can increase the support for IOs through a series of "legitimation practices" (Gronau and Schmidtke 2015).¹ These practices are inscribed in official texts and public statements, and they include "public justifications of institutional reforms, framing of IO policies, use of value-laden symbols, and other rhetorical measures aimed at nurturing beliefs in the legitimacy of an IO" (Tallberg and Zürn 2019, 13). The form these legitimation practices takes is communicative since it involves the relaying of information to an audience (*ibid.*, 9).

As a popular means of communication, social media represent a novel and authoritative source for the discursive practices of legitimation involving IOs

(Denskus and Esser 2013). These digital practices can range from individual posts to full-fledged social media campaigns. IOs can actively employ social media to improve their image among targeted audiences. By communicating directly with these audiences, IOs have the opportunity to showcase their accomplishments and signal their continuing relevance. At the same time, social media offer a channel for audiences to engage directly with IOs and express their opinions on these organisations. The content of these opinions can, in turn, be used by IOs to adjust their narrative.

As an interactive platform to engage citizens, social media can represent a democratic tool that fosters a more open, inclusive, and participatory policy process involving IOs. Social media can increase IOs' accountability, as they "facilitate the articulation of complaints and grievances" (Buchanan and Keohane 2006). By directly reaching their targeted audience, social media also increase the ability of IOs "to effectively raise public awareness for global problems, publicly shame governments for not complying with international commitments teach norms and knowledge to citizens," obviating for the lack of "hard" power (Pamment 2016). This volume expands on these themes to explore how social media influence IOs' legitimacy and the challenges IOs face in their efforts to boost their digital legitimacy.

Looking at the UN and its use of Twitter, in Chapter 7 Matthias Hofferberth advances a theoretical account of how international organisations use social media to reach out to their potentially global constituencies and maintain their legitimacy as global governors. Drawing on the normative dimension of Habermas' theory of communicative action and its applications in International Relations, the chapter examines how different stakeholders and actors, both individual and institutional, within and towards this global organisation communicate through tweets. More specifically, Hofferberth employs qualitative content analysis of UN tweets from the 73rd UN Session in 2018 to reconstruct the UN Twittersphere and to determine how and whether this global organisation engages its public audience. He also assesses the communicative action potential of this engagement with the purpose of articulating a new line of normatively informed IO research on digital communication. In so doing, the chapter calls attention to the understated normative dimension of digital technologies in shaping public perceptions of the legitimacy of IO actions and activities.

Ilan Manor's chapter connects the question of IO legitimacy to the ability of member states to use IO's fora to enhance their digital influence relative to their peers. To this end, he examines how digital diplomacy provides opportunities for diplomatic actors lacking in material resources to overcome prestige deficits. The study adapts approaches used in earlier studies to calculate the material and ideational components of diplomatic prestige to the online sphere – in terms of presence, centrality, and reputation. By analysing the Twitter accounts of 67 foreign ministries and 33 United Nations missions, he finds that the traditional markers of diplomatic prestige do not automatically translate online and that significant effort is required to maintain prestige

in online diplomatic networks. He also finds that the flexibility and transience of online networks do allow diplomatic actors a degree of prestige mobility. Nations with limited diplomatic networks may use Twitter networks to gather information from their peers, thus anticipating policy changes or shocks to the international system. Moreover, nations may attract many of their peers on Twitter, enabling them to assess possible objections to their own policy agenda. Hence, this study is highly significant for understanding how prestige is managed and strategically influenced in digital diplomacy and the extent to which this competition for online prestige may indirectly contribute to the legitimacy of IOs.

In Chapter 9, Ruben Zaiotti examines the role that social media plays in shaping international organisations' reputation in international affairs, using the European Union and its handling of the refugee crisis as a case study. To study reputation, Zaiotti adopts what in organisation theory is called an "outside in" approach (Manning et al. 2012). In this perspective, the main source to determine an organisation's reputation is the feedback from individuals not affiliated with the organisation, rather than just what the organisation says about itself. Moreover, to redress the existing literature's reliance on traditional media as sources of data, the chapter focuses on how the European Union's reputation is built and evolves on social media. The findings of this study show that the impact of the refugee crisis on the EU's reputation is more nuanced than it has been presented in existing accounts. First, the EU's reputation was only marginally tarnished, if at all. Second, the crisis, while challenging the Union's reputation, has simultaneously increased the organisation's salience and visibility to the global public, thus contributing to the strengthening of its identity as independent actor on the world stage. Crucially, this outcome has occurred despite the lack of efforts on the part of the EU to pro-actively manage its reputation online.

International organisations and digital contestation

The fourth theme in the volume has to do with the role of social media in challenging IOs' authority and how IOs may respond to these challenges. IOs' recent growth in authority, however, has increased their visibility, and with it, the potential for criticism and politicisation (Zürn et al. 2012; Ecker-Ehrhardt 2018b). As a popular means of expressing opinions, social media have become a powerful tool of political contestation. This state of affairs is true for IOs as well. Social media can be deployed to monitor IOs performance and keep IOs accountable. They can, for instance, highlight mismanagement or scandals. IOs can be publicly challenged because their conception of the public interest is outdated, or because their claim to public interest orientation itself has become doubtful (for instance, through charges of corruption). This contestation can take the form of actions against IOs, such as street demonstrations (Gregoratti and Uhlin 2018). For the most part, however, they are discursive, such as NGOs "publicly criticizing IOs for being undemocratic or for pursuing policies that

make the poor worse off, as well as state representatives criticizing IOs for unfair decision-making procedures” (Tallberg and Zürn 2019, 15).

Contestation of IOs can also involve more malicious efforts. In an era of real or alleged “fake news,” social media have increasingly become the target of criticism because of their (mis)use by political agents with a mission to manipulate public opinion (Gronau and Schmidtke 2015). These practices include digital disinformation campaigns and trolling (Bjola and Pamment 2018). Social media have also been used for surveillance and repression (Trottier 2016). Whether because of their mandate and activities, which could impinge on an actor’s core interests (be it state or a terrorist group) or because of ideological reasons, IOs have become a target of this digital warfare, and they are likely to face a more significant number of digital threats in the future.

The chapters in this section explore the benign and malign ways in which social media have contributed to IOs’ contestation and their impact on IOs’ delegitimation. They also look at IOs’ responses. When faced with open contestation, IOs, like other organisations in similar situations, are compelled to respond to avoid further negative backlash, and their task is to rebuild the trust of their audience. IOs thus move from routine to crisis mode of governance (Smith and Elliot 2007, 348–52). Responding to critical situations is particularly needed for organisations such as IOs since they rely heavily on output legitimacy. Yet, the core component for a successful response to a crisis is to focus on its communication strategy, which involves being open to external feedback and adjustments of actions to reflect the public mood (Steffek 2015, 275). Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that contestation has led IOs to prioritise public communication (e.g. in the case of NATO Information Service; Risso 2014), but much less is known about how digital contestation manifests itself in the case of IOs, with what results, and what type of strategies of digital response could prove most effective to contain the more malign effects of digital contestation.

Addressing these questions, Lemke and Habegger point out in Chapter 10 that diplomacy rests on the idea that a limited number of vetted actors interacts with one another while following a strict set of behavioural rules. In contrast, digital communication is driven by almost countless numbers of actors—many of whom remain anonymous—who interact irregularly and without much oversight or rules to guide their interactions. Their chapter thus argues that the diplomatic and digital practice represent two distinct systems of political communication, which differ not only in scope (i.e., the number of participants) and process (i.e., how these participants interact), but have produced two very different communicative *logics*. For diplomacy, this is the amelioration of international conflict by peaceful means. Digital communication, in contrast, thrives on affect (i.e., gratification) and emotion (i.e., outrage). To test these claims, the authors analyse the Twitter activity of NATO and the Russia embassy in the U.K. They find that @NATO and @RussianEmbassy are not only engaged in quite distinct activities online, but the latter’s tendency to espouse a much more contentious and outrageous style of communication suggests that Russian digital staff recognise

the peculiarity of the digital communication environment and are willing to take full advantage of it despite (or maybe because of) the damage it can do to diplomatic relations.

In Chapter 11, Corneliu Bjola notes that, in the past decade, digital disinformation has become the tactic of choice for many state and non-state actors simply because the gains of engaging in such a practice are perceived to far outweigh any possible risks. Amidst these developments, a glaring gap of significant relevance for the already besieged liberal international order continues to be overlooked in the academic literature: the use of digital disinformation in multilateral contexts, especially against international organisations. To bridge this gap, the chapter draws on the case of the disinformation campaign against the UN Global Compact for Migration (UNGCM) and argues that the potential challenge the UN and IOs, in general, may face as a result of digital disinformation is “manufactured delegitimation.” Drawing on Twitter data collected between September 2018 and January 2019, the study shows that the disinformation campaign against the Global Compact has been successful in shifting public attention away from the UN’s agenda, increasing epistemic confusion about the objectives and provisions of the Global Compact, but without causing a negative escalation of attacks on the UN institution as a whole. The study also calls attention to the empirical difficulties researchers may face when trying to distinguish between legitimate political contestation and disinformation, hence the need for identifying reliable metrics (e.g., corrupted tactics, polarised themes, toxic escalations) for unpacking the unique pathways by which digital disinformation may help engineer legitimacy crises for international organisations.

The volume concludes, in the final chapter, with a discussion of the digital blind spots that IOs may develop and which could prevent them from taking full advantage of the opportunities of digital transformation or, by case, from protecting themselves from the inevitable challenges generated by this process. Epistemic blind spots pose a problem for decision-making as they imply that certain courses of action could be taken without those affected being able to assess the full implications of the available information. Decision-makers may thus miss important signals, form a distorted view of the unfolding events, delay their reactions, or draw the wrong lessons from their experience. IOs are particularly vulnerable to developing weak and strong digital blind spots since the main features of the process of digital transformation (data, intensity, speed, and sustainability) are not easy to reconcile with the traditional ways by which IOs operate. However, if international organisations manage to overcome their blind spots, then there is a real possibility for them to become full-fledged “digital organisations” based on the same core principles that underlie digital technologies themselves: built around personnel with the ability to self-manage and to operate within a non-hierarchical chain of command, relying on resources that are collectively owned and shared among its members, and adopting rules and infrastructures that encourage connections and collaboration among their members, both internally and externally.

To conclude, the volume brings together a multidisciplinary group of scholars and practitioners to tackle important questions regarding the impact of digital technologies in international affairs and to explore the current debates surrounding IOs' use of social media and the future of digital diplomacy. These different disciplinary perspectives offer a nuanced and textured understanding of the multifaceted, complex, and ever-evolving nature of the phenomenon under investigation and highlight its wide-ranging policy implications. These contributions combine engaging theoretical insights with newly compiled empirical material that is analysed using an eclectic set of methodological approaches (e.g., multivariate regression network analysis, content analysis, sentiment analysis). The combination of empirical and theoretical insights thus provides a solid analytical foundation for policy-relevant prescriptions concerning the use of digital technologies by international organisations in their multilateral engagements.

Note

- 1 Legitimation practices are those involving “actors deliberately seek(ing) to make a political institution more legitimate, by boosting beliefs that its rule is exercised appropriately” (Tallberg and Zürn, 2019: 9).

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