



# Diplomats as Skilful Bricoleurs of the Digital Age: EU Foreign Policy Communications from the COREU to WhatsApp

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## Summary

The article analyses how and to what effect diplomats navigate a landscape in which the physical and the digital have become inextricably intertwined, with emphasis on written communications in the European Union (EU) foreign policy system from the 1970s to the present. Putting International Relations literature into dialogue with Management Studies (particularly media richness theory and sense-making), it looks at how diplomats work their way through different forms of digital written communications. It addresses the effects of diplomacy's digitalisation in terms of time, space and confidentiality. Digital tools have hastened diplomacy's tempo and affected security considerations, while they have had mixed effects in terms of centre-periphery relations in diplomatic conversations, particularly for gender and wealth. The EU foreign policy system exemplifies these dynamics, from the spectacular rise of the COREU system to its decline in favour of faster, easier-to-use technologies such as e-mail and texting.

## Keywords

European Union (EU) – foreign policy – diplomacy – digitalisation – COREU network – e-mail – WhatsApp/Signal – sensemaking

## 1 Introduction

A British ambassador once remarked that a good diplomat's qualities have not changed in five hundred years.<sup>1</sup> In the digital age, these would no longer suffice without a smartphone, a strong signal and preferably a secure laptop. Digitally mediated communications, written or otherwise, have come to play a critical function in any diplomatic service, including the European Union (EU) foreign policy system. As digital technologies have taken hold, new foreign policy practices have come to the fore and a new sub-discipline of International Relations (IR) has developed, devoted to the study of digital diplomacy and largely inspired by the 'practice turn' in IR.<sup>2</sup> This literature addresses how, in their daily work, diplomats navigate a landscape in which the physical and the digital have become inextricably intertwined, the aim being to analyse how the digital age has been 'reshaping' the diplomatic profession.<sup>3</sup> To this goal, this article aims to understand how bundles of online/offline practices make diplomacy what it is today. In particular, it asks: how do diplomats navigate across the digital spectrum of written encounters? How do they move not only from offline to online and from face-to-face to mediated interaction, but also from one digital tool to another? What considerations and consequences apply when diplomats opt for an e-mail or for a secure telex rather than sending a text on WhatsApp/Signal? This article investigates how diplomats engage with communication practices and communication tools at their disposal, and to what effect, with a particular emphasis on peer-to-peer, written, confidential communications. The purpose here is to provide a social- and human-centred view of how digital diplomacy works in everyday life, by relying on the EU foreign policy system as a key example.

'Digital diplomacy' has become a new buzzword in IR literature. Given communication's centrality to diplomacy,<sup>4</sup> the digitalisation of information and

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1 These are 'a quick mind, a hard head, a strong stomach, a warm smile and a cold eye'; Meyer 2013, 260.

2 On the 'practice turn' in IR, see Neumann 2002; Pouliot 2010; Adler and Pouliot 2011.

3 Hedling and Bremberg 2021.

4 Constantinou 1996.

communication technology (ICT) has had a significant effect on the practice of and the literature on diplomacy. While early analyses centred on the new forms of public diplomacy that social media opened up,<sup>5</sup> others have examined issues such as the role of trust in the online world.<sup>6</sup> Much of the debate has considered the diplomatic field *tout court*, addressing how technology and social doings have become inextricably entangled.<sup>7</sup> It thus caught up with the literature in Management and Sociology on the rise of the information society and the impact of digitalisation on professional practices,<sup>8</sup> which had indicated earlier on how new technologies such as videoconferencing facilities and mobile phones would turbocharge change.<sup>9</sup> While part of the IR debate has juxtaposed ‘traditional’ and ‘digital’ diplomacy, the notion of ‘blended diplomacy’ suggests that diplomatic life is now ‘inescapably digital’.<sup>10</sup> It is thus physical, analogue and digital, simultaneously offline and online, situated on a ‘new frontier’ to be practically explored and academically investigated. Due also to the COVID-19 pandemic, diplomacy has entered the digital age.<sup>11</sup>

This article examines this new landscape by tackling two aspects, related to the ‘how’ and to the ‘to what effect’. First, by putting IR literature into dialogue with Management Studies in general and with media richness theory and sensemaking in particular,<sup>12</sup> the article explores how the blending in ‘blended diplomacy’ is done in practice, that is, *how* diplomats navigate the vast variety of online/offline communication practices and across the online spectrum. In particular, the article looks at how diplomats work their way through different forms of digital written confidential communications. While face-to-face contacts are often considered the beating heart of diplomacy,<sup>13</sup>

5 See, for example, Bjola and Holmes 2015; Manor 2018; Duncombe 2017.

6 See, for example, Wheeler and Holmes 2021; Aggestam, Rosamond and Hedling 2022.

7 Hocking and Melissen 2015; Manor 2017; Adler-Nissen and Drieschova 2019; Cornut and Dale 2019; Bjola and Manor 2022; Cornut, Manor and Blumenthal 2022; Adler-Nissen and Eggeling 2022; Hedling and Bremberg 2021.

8 See, for example, Van Dijk 2020a, 2020b; Nadkarni and Prügl 2021; Raisch and Krakowski 2021.

9 Friedman 2005, 185. In analogue technologies, information is transformed into electric pulses of varying amplitude (as in sounds or waves), whereas digital technologies are based on the transformation of information in binary format (0-1). Data stored in digital technology is thus easier to process and transmit. The difference might not be immediately visible, though, as phones have been traditionally based on analogue technologies but have switched to digital.

10 Adler-Nissen and Eggeling 2022, 651.

11 Baklitskiy and Shakirov 2020; Maurer and Wright 2020; Naylor 2020; Bramsen and Hagemann 2021; Bjola and Coplen 2022.

12 Daft, Lengel and Trevino 1987; Ishii, Lyons and Carr 2019; Weick 1995.

13 Wong 2016; Holmes 2018; Holmes and Wheeler 2020; Bramsen and Hagemann 2021.

written communications are arguably one of the most traditional forms of diplomacy, dating back to Babylon.<sup>14</sup> Preliminary contacts, tentative coalitions, confidential papers, lines to be negotiated and confirmation of speaking intentions are now shared via digital technologies, with diplomats shifting from one tool to another according to their own readings of the situation and their socio-cognitive needs. The aim here is to analyse how they do it to produce a smooth, skilful and competent diplomatic practice. Second, the article addresses the effects of diplomacy's digitalisation in terms of time, space and confidentiality. While it is uncontroversial that digital tools have hastened diplomacy's tempo, fast-paced exchanges tend to favour ease-of-use rather than security considerations. Moreover, digital communications have had mixed spatial effects. While they have 'flattened' geography and allowed enhanced participation of some distant actors,<sup>15</sup> they have also made it more complicated for others to participate, particularly in relation to gender and wealth.<sup>16</sup>

More generally, this article argues in favour of a socio-human perspective on digital diplomacy. It argues that on average diplomats are skilful bricoleurs, able to engage with new communication technologies with improvisation and creativity, extracting a wealth of socio-cognitive content from available means in their aspiration to make sense of and weave together diplomatic narratives across borders. Rather than passively driven by technology, diplomats navigate the online/offline boundary of the new digitalised environment with flair (though at times also with frustration, sufferance or incompetence) and they expertly browse the expanding toolbox of digital communications not only because of casual encounters with technology in their private lives, but also thanks to a long experience of working across conceptual and physical boundaries. While diplomacy as an institution is a conservative endeavour that can work against digital innovation,<sup>17</sup> diplomats are resourceful and curious creatures, able to mediate across shifting landscapes and bend technology to their own uses (and misuses) despite institutional strictures and limited budgets. Therefore, even though technology seems at times to drive the world of affordances, social practices and individual creativity constitute the diplomatic bricolage that supports everyday diplomacy in the digital age.

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14 '[H]istorically, text communication had to be able to clarify intentions, build trust, and settle disputes, for it was, in some cases, the only way for parties to interact'; Wheeler and Holmes 2021, 731; see also Cohen and Westbrook 2000.

15 Friedman 2005.

16 See, for example, Aggestam and Towns 2018.

17 Neumann 2012.

These aspects are illustrated here with the case of written communications within the multilateral EU foreign policy system, from 1970 to the present. EU foreign policy offers an especially apt case study to investigate the mechanisms and effects of digitalisation across time. The need to communicate in-between meetings emerged from the very early days of foreign policy co-operation among Member States, when European Political Co-operation was created.<sup>18</sup> It led to a secured, ciphered communications network (known as COREU, from *COR*respondence *EU*ropéenne) connecting all participants via a 'contact point' in each Member State's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and in participating European institutions. The 'contact point' is generally a mid-ranking diplomat called the 'European Correspondent',<sup>19</sup> responsible for all communications on matters of foreign policy between the institution they represent and the rest of the EU.<sup>20</sup> This combination of COREU network and local European Correspondents (COREU network for short) has been an extremely successful endeavour, which has allowed Member States to undertake the vast majority of policy activities without having to meet face to face, with European Correspondents forming a 'community of practice' devoted to communications in the EU foreign policy system.<sup>21</sup> Since the early 2000s, however, diplomats have progressively moved to faster, more user-friendly technologies, and digitally mediated exchanges have come to consist mostly of e-mails, WhatsApp/Signal messages, videoconferences and other digitally mediated forms, as this article explores.

The article primarily relies on qualitative methods. Descriptive quantitative data captures the traffic of the COREU network from 1983 to 2022.<sup>22</sup> This data is complemented by 25 semi-structured and in-depth interviews with seventeen European Correspondents and their deputies, representing fourteen Member States, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the General Secretariat, the goal being to collect personal views from a variety of national backgrounds and European institutions, as well as across gender (six women and seventeen men). The interviews aimed at eliciting the respondents' views about appropriate standards, the decline of COREU traffic, the subsequent

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18 Nuttall 1992.

19 While only a few are at ambassadorial levels, the vast majority proceed to ambassadorial positions after their tenure as European Correspondents, which is considered a demanding position due to 24/7/365 commitments.

20 Bicchi and Carta 2011.

21 Bicchi 2011.

22 1983 is the first available year for COREU data, which was kindly provided by the General Secretariat of the Council. Interview Methods Appendix at the end of this article.

preferred methods of communication in the EU foreign policy system and the perceived advantages/disadvantages thereof, as well as perceived effects of digital means' reliance in general. While practice approaches might call for participant observation or practice tracing, there was no alternative to the use of interviews here, not only because of time lag,<sup>23</sup> but also because of the very high level of secrecy and confidentiality. As a practice, European Correspondents tend to refrain from even using the word 'COREU' in written communications (substituting it instead with C\*\*\*, as in 'I will send a C\*\*\* soon on this'). As both authors are as familiar with the COREU network as is possible for external observers, we believe we were able to situate interviews in context. All interviews, lasting between 40 minutes and nearly two hours, were conducted online, either through videoconferencing platforms or over the phone, between 2020 and 2022 (see Appendix for details). While this option was initially due to practical and logistical considerations and the widespread view that in-person interviews represent the 'gold standard' in qualitative research,<sup>24</sup> COVID-19 made this the only available option and certainly contributed to bringing the point home.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, by screen sharing we were able to use figures and data (e.g., on the level of COREU traffic) as visual prompts. Most interviews were not recorded but interview notes were transcribed immediately after the interview and subsequently checked by both authors for consistency and completeness. Anonymity was guaranteed to all interviewees.

The article begins by situating its contribution within the fast-expanding literature on digital diplomacy and putting it into dialogue with part of Management and Knowledge Management in particular (section 2). It then proceeds to trace the evolution of the COREU system as a specific (later digital) communication technology, documenting its rapid rise and subsequent decline (section 3). The article then focuses on the transition to other digital means in the EU foreign policy system, with the rise of e-mail and texting (section 4). In the last section, the article explores digitalisation's effects, and how it both constrains and enables European diplomatic practices (section 5).

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23 Cornut, Manor and Blumenthal 2022, 9.

24 Seitz 2016; Weller 2017; contra Jenner and Myers 2019; Archibald et al. 2019.

25 Seitz 2016; O'Connor and Madge 2017.

## 2 How Practitioners Navigate the Online/Offline Communications Landscape, and to What Effect

The emergence of an increasingly digitalised landscape for diplomacy chimes with an interest in the role of technology for communications in work environments. Diplomacy's digitalisation affects its tools (e.g., 'Zoom diplomacy', 'Twiplomacy'),<sup>26</sup> topics (e.g., cybersecurity) and contexts (e.g., digital geo-economics). In other words, it concerns the entire gamut of international affairs.<sup>27</sup> But the key issue is how best to conceptualise the bundles of diplomatic practices that constitute diplomacy via written means in an increasingly digital age. How do mediated diplomatic practices of communication combine (or not) with physical presence to produce a smooth, professional diplomatic experience? What drives the mix, and to what extent does it ultimately shape diplomatic processes and outputs? We contend that the most comprehensive answer to these questions can be provided by combining the insights of Management Studies and Knowledge Management for practitioners in any work environment, with the existing IR literature on digital diplomacy.

The state of the art in IR literature almost unanimously argues (and this article largely agrees) that diplomatic communications in the digital age are driven by a sort of 'muddling through' process,<sup>28</sup> driven by a mix of chance, virtuosity,<sup>29</sup> private experiences transferred into the public sphere and technological progress. According to a more rationalist analysis, this path goes from adaptation to adoption.<sup>30</sup> External offline events, such as the Arab Spring or the 2014 invasion of Crimea, induce a process in which diplomats encounter the effects of new digital technologies. This preludes a more reflective process in which MFAS 'try out and assess' digital technologies, before choosing which ones to embrace.<sup>31</sup> In fact, as a less rationalist analysis adds, diplomats not only adapt to digital means and adopt them during their daily diplomatic practices. They also improvise and adapt the new digital means to traditional diplomatic purposes and vice versa in a relatively smooth way, pressing them into service, as shown in the case of WhatsApp use in multilateral negotiations.<sup>32</sup> The results are 'new ways to work' and a 'synthetic diplomatic spectacle',<sup>33</sup>

26 Šimunjak and Caliandro 2019.

27 Kurbalija and Höne 2021

28 Lindblom 1959.

29 Cornut 2018.

30 Bjola and Manor 2022.

31 On adoption, see also Sevin and Manor 2019.

32 Cornut, Manor and Blumenthal 2022.

33 Eggeling and Adler-Nissen 2021, 7.

bringing together diplomatic bodies and digital technologies. The ubiquitous smartphone becomes an appendix to the diplomat's hand, like a prosthesis, to augment diplomatic practices.

According to much of the IR literature, this process hinges around affordances.<sup>34</sup> The relationship between diplomats and technology is driven by what individuals 'see' in an object, that is, what they perceive it would allow ('afford') them to do. Track-change word processing, for instance, presents negotiators with various opportunities.<sup>35</sup> It enables a broader set of actors to work on the same document at once (shareability), it foregrounds changes to facilitate compromises (visualisation) and it significantly increases the speed at which exchanges take place, allowing for a faster-paced diplomacy (immediacy).<sup>36</sup> While affordance is a relational concept bringing together persons and technology,<sup>37</sup> technology ends up influencing the overall practice, including unintended consequences on negotiation practices. In 'track-change diplomacy', for instance, technology can become a goal in and of itself, when the diplomatic process is ultimately driven by the desire to get rid of unresolved linguistic expressions on the technological medium regardless of content. Similarly, in the context of European diplomacy, 'synthetic situations', that is, social exchanges mediated by digital technologies,<sup>38</sup> have resulted in exhaustion, over-exposure and significant demands on diplomats' personal lives.<sup>39</sup>

Management Studies complements this 'muddling through' and affordance approach with suggestions about what practitioners actually 'see' in the communication technology they reach for, thus rebalancing the risks of technological determinism. Management and Knowledge Management in particular have paid much attention to work communications, initially spurred by e-mail's introduction, 'the most successful computer application yet invented'.<sup>40</sup> As electronic communication devices made their way into business organisations between the 1980s and 1990s, organisational scholars of then-called 'computer-mediated communications'<sup>41</sup> began researching how practitioners navigate an increasingly diverse array of communication channels, be they

34 The concept was first formulated by Gibson 1977. For a review see Chong and Proctor 2020.

35 Adler-Nissen and Drieschova 2019.

36 Adler-Nissen and Drieschova 2019.

37 Adler-Nissen and Drieschova 2019, 534.

38 Knorr Cetina 2014.

39 Eggeling and Adler-Nissen 2021, 5.

40 Whittaker, Bellotti and Moody 2005, 1.

41 For a review, see Walther 1996.



digital, analogue or physical,<sup>42</sup> and to what effect. Already in the mid-1980s, it was argued that the evidence was not entirely negative, as for instance ‘computer conferencing ... promotes rationality by providing essential discipline [and] minimizing social influence (influence of status, interpersonal “noise”, and so on):<sup>43</sup> These topics sound familiar to post-COVID-19 ears.

A staple in this literature is media richness theory (MRT),<sup>44</sup> which takes its cues from critical Organisation Studies and especially from sensemaking.<sup>45</sup> It posits that media choice depends on practitioners’ social and cognitive needs, as they aim to make sense of the world.<sup>46</sup> It suggests that practitioners and their institutional settings engage with a variety of communication channels to address two challenges: uncertainty, which depends on the lack of data, and equivocality, which depends on the existence of conflicting interpretations of data.<sup>47</sup> Of the two challenges, equivocality is the biggest one. To put it differently, the aim of professional communication is to identify not only data and information, but also and especially the socio-cognitive frames that structure data and information into knowledge,<sup>48</sup> as well as the intentionality and commitment of utterers. In fact, equivocality reduction is ‘a basic reason for organizing’ *tout court*,<sup>49</sup> and arguably *the* main challenge in the digital age, in which data oversupply clouds the definition of interpretative frames, including partners’ commitments.

From this perspective, the ‘richer’ the communication medium, the better suited it is to overcome such challenges, with face to face the richest of all. The richness of a medium depends on four criteria: (1) instant feedback (questions can be asked and corrections made instantly), (2) multiple cues (including social cues and body language), (3) language variety (whereby natural language can complement hard data) and (4) personal focus (the message can be

42 Notice that the difference between digital and analogic is that in the latter there is a direct relationship between the real magnitude and the symbol expressing it (e.g., the bigger the magnitude, the bigger the number expressing it) whereas in the former there is no relationship (e.g., as in a phone number). See Bateson 1973. This has inspired some organisational scholars to suggest that tacit knowledge embodies the analogic quality, whereas explicit knowledge is digital and discreet, with the implication that tacit knowledge cannot be translated into digital.

43 Johansen, Valleee and Spangler 1979, p.3

44 The reference to media and medium theory has a long history. For a summary of its early stages, see Meyrowitz 1994.

45 Weick 1995.

46 Daft and Lengel 1986; Daft, Lengel and Trevino 1987; Rudy 1996; Ishii, Lyons and Carr 2019.

47 Daft, Lengel and Trevino 1987.

48 Tushman and Nadler 1978; Huber 1991.

49 Daft and Lengel 1986, 54; see also Weick 1979.

tailored to the specific receiver and situation at hand). Face-to-face exchanges would thus be the richest medium (Fig. 1), as they enable rapid and mutual feedback, allow one to pick up any social cues and body language, use high language variety and can be most easily tailored depending on the interlocutor(s). The message can thus be adjusted and clarified instantly. At the other end of the spectrum, reports, bulletins and more generally impersonal, mediated communications help to address uncertainty by providing data, but they are relatively ‘poor’ media because they do not allow for instant feedback, multiple cues and personal focus, while they limit language variety. At their worst, unaddressed documents feel like an unrequested/spam e-mail reaching into your mailbox on a Friday afternoon. Instead, long-form and short-form addressed documents, such as e-mails and texts — this article’s focus — are richer than reports and bulletins, as they fulfil several criteria (notably personal focus, some language variety, traces of multiple cues and the possibility of semi-instant feedback), even though they are less rich and interactive than phone calls, videoconferencing and face-to-face encounters (see Fig. 1).

These insights agree with the well-known arguments about face-to-face superiority, which are supported by a large body of studies on trust and sociability in international negotiations.<sup>50</sup> According to this strand of research,

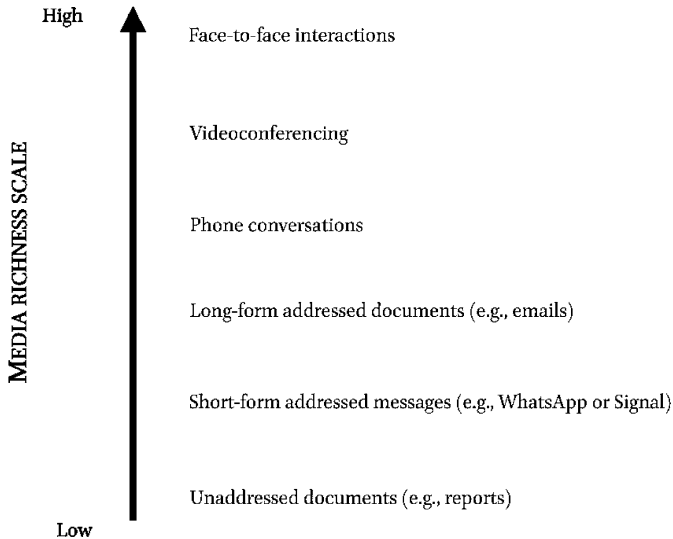


FIGURE 1 Media richness scale

SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM TREVINO ET AL. 1990, 76

<sup>50</sup> Wong 2016, 2020; Holmes 2018; Holmes and Wheeler 2020; Maurer and Wright 2020; Naylor 2020; Bramsen and Hagemann 2021.

face-to-face diplomacy is a 'unique signalling mechanism',<sup>51</sup> allowing negotiators to transmit information, understand their respective intentions and empathise with each other, which amounts to reducing equivocality in MRT terms. In the case of peace negotiations, if digitally mediated communications, which lack 'passion' and 'feeling', come to the fore, then the 'sense of peace' is missing. While technology can level the playing field, increase access and improve continuity, it can also hamper the building of relationships and empathy.<sup>52</sup> In-person interactions offer the opportunity for sociability, that is, any form of 'playful social interaction that is pursued as if for its own sake'.<sup>53</sup> Golf-playing in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' diplomacy,<sup>54</sup> or the seemingly amicable sharing of vodka among members of the Soviet elites,<sup>55</sup> are examples of such light social encounters. These playful rituals foster group identity, provide a channel for socialisation and help diffuse contestation.

However, it is this article's contention that mediated diplomatic communications have an important role to play, even if the medium is less rich than face-to-face encounters. Rather than a residual category whenever face-to-face interaction is impossible, written and mediated communications are appropriate also whenever practitioners' socio-cognitive needs are less pronounced. A skilful diplomatic bricoleur is thus able to opt (consciously or unconsciously) for the most appropriate medium so that it best matches the situated ambiguity of the communication task at hand. In layman's terms, there is no need for a meeting when an e-mail 'suffices'. In fact, the precise wording of written communications can be more formal and precise. Intentionality and commitment too are often best articulated through written communications. Therefore, diplomats, acting as bricoleurs rather than a priori engineers or perfectly rational individuals,<sup>56</sup> embrace specific tools for specific purposes based on their experience. Rather than a subalternate role for written communications vis-à-vis face-to-face interaction, the two have different, often complementary, roles to play.

A less rich communication medium is also preferred to face-to-face interaction when a 'genre' develops. This occurs when practitioners come to rely on their subjective understanding of what is a competent, appropriate practice in

51 Holmes 2013, 830.

52 Bramsen and Hagemann 2021, 554.

53 Nair 2020, 197.

54 Nair 2020.

55 Schrad 2014.

56 See Mérand 2012 for the distinction based on Levi-Strauss. See also Cornut 2018 on regulated improvisation, and Wheeler and Holmes 2021 for how diplomats use their imagination to fill in written texts with non-textual forms of written communications (e.g., emojis) to augment them and (to put it in MRT terms) address equivocality.

a given context. For instance, experiencing a specific communication medium (in our case, e-mails, messages via the COREU network or WhatsApp/Signal messages) with specific communication partners (such as other Member States' representatives) and within the same organisation (e.g., the EU) can affect individuals' perception of its appropriateness, regardless of their 'real' information needs.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, as Yates and Orlikowski originally mentioned in relation to e-mail introduction,<sup>58</sup> communications along specific channels can crystallise into 'genres' of their own and intertwine with the practical task they are supposed to facilitate. Writing a political report from an embassy to the capital,<sup>59</sup> suggesting changes to a draft declaration,<sup>60</sup> or sending a COREU message is a specific, appropriate, communicative practice, allowing diplomats to display their competence in a professional environment. But it also becomes a practice partly frozen in time around a specific technological tool, which can be reformed not when other tools become available, but when it becomes appropriate to do so.

Therefore, this article suggests that a micro analysis,<sup>61</sup> inspired by part of Management literature, is useful because it shows the *how* of diplomacy in the digital age, that is, how diplomats 'muddle through' bundles of partly digitalised practices. Diplomats act as skilful bricoleurs and embrace technology because of their socio-cognitive needs, as well as their reading of the diplomatic situation, in their attempt to make sense of their professional world, by reducing uncertainty and equivocality. They thus tap into communication tools other than face-to-face interactions, opening the way for potential 'genres' to develop.

The second contribution this article makes is in terms of the *effects* that this set of practices produces, of which three are analysed: time, space and confidentiality. The literature in IR and across Management is unanimous that standards of appropriateness are shifting towards more speed and a compression of time. 'The conduct of diplomacy has occurred at a progressively faster pace since the invention of telegraphy.'<sup>62</sup> The shift in fact dates further back. From the early times of the Amarna letters in ancient Babylon,<sup>63</sup> to the diplomacy of Renaissance Tuscany,<sup>64</sup> delivery times of written communications

57 Carlson and Zmud 1999.

58 Yates and Orlikowski 1992.

59 Baylon 2017.

60 Adler-Nissen and Drieschova 2019.

61 Cornut, Manor and Blumenthal 2022, 10.

62 Cornut and Dale 2019, 830; see also Solymar 2000.

63 Cohen and Westbrook 2000.

64 Mattingly 1955; Mallett 2001.

already shifted from months/several weeks to a week/several days. As we are going to see, appropriate timing of the COREU network, e-mail and text messaging have also diminished, from a matter of days to a matter of minutes/hours, even seconds. Much of this is linked to technological progress, but social practices defining appropriate standards in competent practices are also key. A changed news cycle has imposed much faster response times and leaves less time to reach a compromise, which in turn may also affect the substance of negotiations.<sup>65</sup> But the key aspect here is how practitioners themselves have 'appropriated' speed and the timing of given diplomatic practices.

The desire for speed in turn justifies less, rather than more, secrecy, and confidentiality becomes less of a concern. This article partly challenges the literature that considers diplomacy as the realm of secrecy and exclusivity.<sup>66</sup> Instead, we argue that appropriate and competent diplomatic standards are increasingly centred on a more fluid approach to security, at least within the EU foreign policy system. The suggestion here is that (considerable) advances in terms of speed's relevance are coming at the (slight) expense of security in communications. In order to engage more quickly, diplomatic practices are less anchored in security practices (including face-to-face encounters). While not completely embracing transparency and accountability to the public, diplomats have become part of the ever-faster policy cycle by bracketing concerns about security, especially in contexts that are more insecurity prone anyway, such as the multilateral EU context. Russia's invasion of Ukraine might reverse this long-term trend, however, as Member States have become more aware of the need to increase cybersecurity.

Finally, while digital technologies have provided diplomats with accessible and fast ways to communicate remotely, they have also had consequences for space (broadly defined), and in particular for who is at the centre and who is at the periphery of diplomatic conversations. Here the expectation in the literature is quite straightforward, but this article suggests an empirically driven research agenda. Digital technologies are said to have compressed physical distances and 'flattened' geographies,<sup>67</sup> divorcing social places from physical spaces.<sup>68</sup> This transformation has enhanced the relevance of 'frontline diplomacy' in embassies and peripheries,<sup>69</sup> as well as the inclusion of people from places where travel is restricted, such as Syria and Yemen, leading to

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65 Adler-Nissen and Drieschova 2019.

66 Bjola and Murray 2016.

67 Friedman 2005.

68 Meyrowitz 1986.

69 Cooper and Cornut 2019.

the erasure of borders.<sup>70</sup> Some practitioners at the periphery have thus been brought closer to the centre of diplomatic practices. However, it is important to maintain a socio-political approach to geographical distance, as virtualisation can also benefit parts of the diplomatic bodies that were previously marginalised in different ways. For instance, in the case of the EU foreign policy system, the issue is how much digital communications challenge 'Brusselisation', a phenomenon highlighting how Brussels is considered the key 'centre' for negotiations among Member States and EU institutions.<sup>71</sup> While Brussels is central for face-to-face meetings and hosts a thick layer of local digital communications, 24/7/365 technological facilities allow capitals and headquarters to claim back some power over the foreign policy making process, as we shall see. But digital divides,<sup>72</sup> for instance in relation to gender,<sup>73</sup> as well as wealth, complicate the picture of who is at the centre and who is peripheral to important conversations.

Therefore, this article argues two main points. Firstly, diplomats act as skilful bricoleurs in their daily engagements with technological tools of written communication: they 'muddle through' as they reach for a COREU, an e-mail or a text, based on their socio-cognitive needs and their experience of what genre 'works' in a given cognitive situation. Insights from part of Management and Organisation Studies help in fine-tuning a micro-analysis of everyday diplomacy in the digital age. Written communications represent a crucial component of diplomacy, complementing and at times replacing face-to-face diplomatic interactions. Especially in a context of ongoing multilateral negotiations such as the EU, written communications can effectively deliver knowledge, intentionality and commitment. Secondly, diplomacy partakes in the ever-faster policy and news cycle, with an increasing relevance of speed over security in appropriate diplomatic standards. Even though technical standards could potentially be brought up to the same level for all written communications (be they on COREU, e-mail or text messaging), the driving imperative is a fast response to international affairs, even at the cost of (some) confidentiality. This has the unintended consequence of contributing to information overload (particularly relevant for diplomats' private lives) but also to the potential for reshuffling centre-periphery relations in diplomatic bodies, given the increased relevance of operating 24/7/365.

70 Bramsen and Hagemann 2021, 547.

71 Allen 1998; Müller-Brandeck-Bocquet 2002.

72 Van Dijk 2020a.

73 Aggestam and Towns 2018; Wright and Guerrina 2020.

The next sections will explore these aspects in relation to the COREU network (section 3), the shift to e-mail and text messaging (section 4) and their consequences for EU foreign policy communication practices (section 5).

### 3 The COREU Network: Extracting Full Value from Written Communications

The circulation of messages on the COREU network shows how much can be achieved via written communications. The COREU environment anticipated most of the challenges now experienced in the digital age, as the de facto first stage of European diplomacy's digitalisation. The network circulates cyphered messages, akin to a sophisticated telex/fax machine or to a very structured and secure e-mail system. Through it, European diplomats have exchanged information, negotiated and even taken decisions in-between face-to-face meetings since 1973. The COREU network thus confirms that written communications have had a long history and a big role to play in European foreign policy communications. In line with MRT, the COREU network has worked particularly well during technical negotiations about Treaty changes and enlargement rounds, when issues of equivocality and interpretation were limited and technological alternatives were non-existent. The 2004 enlargement, however, engendered a transformation that challenged the network, leading to a decrease in the number of COREUs in favour of other means of communication, the immediacy of which was proved better suited to tackle both uncertainty and equivocality issues. Compared with other asynchronous and remote digital technologies, the COREU network was considered slow and cumbersome — no longer appropriate. However, it has survived as a specific 'genre' in EU diplomacy, one that codifies and archives the established consensus, instead of contributing to achieving it.

The need for European diplomats to communicate between meetings became apparent shortly after the establishment of the European Political Cooperation in 1970.<sup>74</sup> The 1973 Copenhagen Report introduced the position of European Correspondent within each MFA,<sup>75</sup> tasked with drafting summaries of the conclusions reached in ministerial and Political Committee meetings as

74 Smith 2004b, 90-116.

75 The position was also created in the Council General Secretariat and the European Commission, and later in the European External Action Service.

well as with closely monitoring the implementation of political co-operation.<sup>76</sup> To that effect, the COREU network was constituted to circulate drafts, agendas, minutes and suggestions for changes.

Very quickly, however, the COREU network came to cover the entire policy cycle, as Member States considered it appropriate to continue negotiations in-between face-to-face meetings. Thanks to the COREU network, the circulation of information, negotiation and even adoption and implementation of agreed decisions took place entirely 'online' well before this term was invented. At its most basic, Member States used the network to circulate additional information (such as comments on reservations made by non-EU countries). But the network truly came into its own for negotiating EU declarations or operational conclusions of working groups and committee meetings. This occurred through the so-called simplified written procedure (generally known as the 'silence procedure'), according to which a document marked for silence procedure is considered officially approved if no Member State raises objections by the set deadline.<sup>77</sup> Should one or more Member State 'break silence', the network co-ordinator (since 2011 the EEAS) would prompt another round of negotiations based on a new draft text. The written procedure has arguably been the most critical and politically relevant function of the COREU network, allowing decisions to be taken without meeting face to face. Policy implementation occasionally also occurred through the COREU network. For instance, any listing or de-listing requests for individuals under EU sanctions regimes has been transmitted by the Member States to the EEAS via COREUS.<sup>78</sup>

As a consequence, traffic through the COREU network underwent a spectacular increase (Fig. 2) and the system has carried a formidable amount of information over the years, reaching 13,292 messages circulated in 2002. On average at the time, the COREU network carried over 50 messages per working day, a number that more than doubled at times of crisis, resulting in a nearly uninterrupted flow of information about events related to EU foreign policy and Member States' positions. In the earlier days of the COREU network, being an active participant in the system became an integral part of European diplomats' identity and shared practices.<sup>79</sup> Diplomats acted as very skilful bricoleurs in using this complex means to great effect. When new Member States joined the EU, they had to quickly learn how to 'bricoler' and master the new technological tool in order to follow the conversation and participate in it as competent

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76 Bicchì and Carta 2011, 2- 5.

77 General Secretariat of the Council 2016, 60-61.

78 Interview 14.

79 Bicchì 2011.



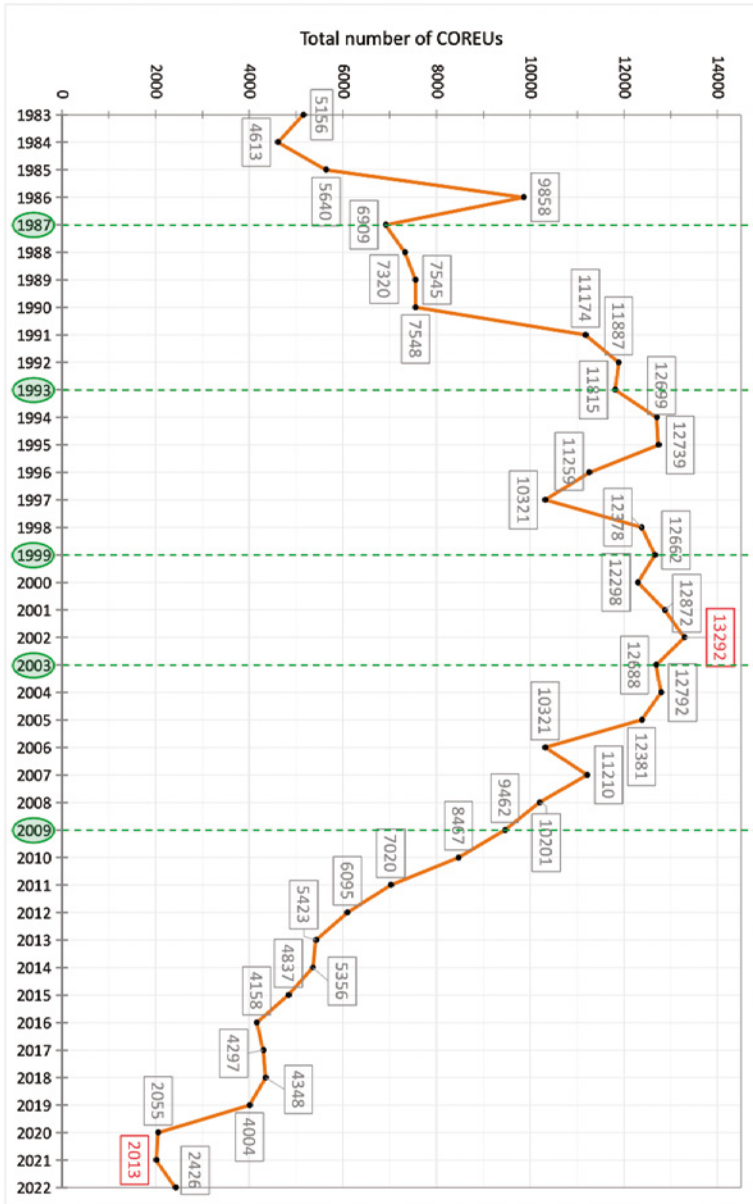


FIGURE 2 Total number of CORREUS  
SOURCE: AUTHORS

professionals. On the first day of Poland's full participation, for instance, diplomats experienced 'a shock' due to receiving around one hundred COREUS. As the distribution of documents was initially done 'physically by officials running around the ministerial building',<sup>80</sup> procedures were changed significantly, new technological means were introduced and, more generally, a new 'way of doing things' was established. Something similar occurred in other cases of enlargement, such as Spain and Sweden.<sup>81</sup> Therefore, for decades the COREU network represented Member States' 'coordination reflex',<sup>82</sup> and its written communication exchanges were one of the main ways in which diplomats made sense of European foreign affairs (see Fig. 2).

However, the COREU practice started to change in the wake of the 2004 enlargement, when the system began a dramatic decline. Pre-COVID-19, only 4,004 messages were exchanged in 2019, which amounts to an average of around sixteen messages per day. With the COVID-19-induced general decline in foreign policy activity, only 2,055 documents went through the network in 2020 and just 2,013 in 2021. The clear ascending trajectory of the 1990s was thus followed by an equally clear descending path, from the early 2010s to 2021, with a modest increase in 2022.

The COREU network is currently considered slow and cumbersome, inappropriate to the swift and dense flow of European diplomatic communications. Because it is a secure network, it must be located in safe venues and its use is strictly regulated. It can be accessed remotely only on encrypted laptops, which just a few Member States have been able to provide to their European Correspondents and, in some cases, a few other MFA officials (though even then access is at times restricted to specific locations to comply with security standards).<sup>83</sup> Even fewer European Correspondents have a dedicated laptop able to switch from a standard protection level to a crypted security level in a few minutes, enabling them to work on just one machine.<sup>84</sup> While all Member States tend to rely on a 24/7 monitoring system, with dedicated personnel monitoring incoming COREUS and warning diplomats of urgent messages,<sup>85</sup> in most cases the European Correspondent (sometimes together with an IT operator) needs to be physically inside the MFA building to access the dedicated device that is used to send and receive COREUS.<sup>86</sup> This severely constrains the

80 Pomorska 2007, 38.

81 Barbé 1995, 115-117; Hocking and Spence 2002.

82 Smith 2004a.

83 Interviews 14, 11, 21, 22, 23, 10.

84 Interview 14.

85 Interviews 19, 21, 22, 23.

86 Interviews 7, 21, 22, 23.

capacity of some Member States to access the system outside working hours, including during weekends — a significant limitation for diplomatic action (and for diplomats' private lives). Moreover, the COREU interface is far from intuitive and even minor operations such as formatting and redacting are time-consuming,<sup>87</sup> making the COREU a far cry from the 'track-change diplomacy' occurring elsewhere.<sup>88</sup> It takes time also for a COREU document to be circulated via the network. In most Member States, the process for sending out messages takes at least 30 minutes, just to press the button 'send' (not counting the time needed to reach the safe area and to input the document).<sup>89</sup> Considering that Member States often need to negotiate under tight deadlines, diplomats have come to consider this a major obstacle, rather than an additional security guarantee:

[The COREU network] is a good way of getting something agreed, but it does require a day or two. Therefore, the EU might look a bit slow in responding, especially if it is an urgent event or development. Everyone else in the world has said something about it and now 24-48 hours later the EU finally decides to say something. And in the meantime, the High Representative has probably issued a statement and the Foreign Ministers have each issued a statement.<sup>90</sup>

Moreover, the COREU's slow and cumbersome nature has not always been a security guarantee. Most famously, the system was hacked by an organisation tied to the Chinese government around 2015 and the security breach, which resulted from a phishing campaign targeting Cyprus, allowed the hackers to read thousands of messages circulating on the network at a lower level of confidentiality for three years before the EU was tipped off by a US agency.<sup>91</sup> This was a further incident in a long history of security breaches of EU foreign policy communications. Many diplomats reported working on the assumption that documents circulated through the network might be hacked, if not directly leaked to non-EU countries by Member States' representatives themselves before reaching the network.<sup>92</sup>

87 Interview 1; see also Interviews 21, 22, 23.

88 Adler-Nissen and Drieschova 2019.

89 Interview 17, Interview 18.

90 Interview 5.

91 Sanger and Erlanger 2018.

92 Interview 5; see also Kirk 2006.

As a consequence, European diplomats no longer consider that the COREU network helps in addressing uncertainty or equivocality in European foreign affairs, even though it remains crucial for certifying consensus and archiving the agreed document. The conversation among participants in-between meetings no longer develops through it. However, despite the failure of many reform proposals, the network has not disappeared. It has turned instead into a different 'genre' in the realm of diplomatic communications. Rather than embodying Member States' 'coordination reflex',<sup>93</sup> supporting negotiations and augmenting the reality of EU foreign policy co-operation, the network has become a living archive, formalising decisions taken at the official level of 27 Member States (plus the EEAS). COREUS express the official position of the sender, and in a world of oversupply of information, this is very valuable to clarify positions and reduce uncertainty and equivocality. While the preparatory work for the negotiation of joint declarations, statements or Council Conclusions is now done largely via e-mail, accompanied by WhatsApp/Signal messages, video and phone calls, the network is now key to formalising and retaining decisions by silence procedure.<sup>94</sup>

Therefore, despite being a relatively low richness medium (and a cumbersome one), the COREU network has played a crucial role since the 1970s in supporting co-operation practices and allowing EU foreign policy to flourish for decades. For a long time European diplomats used (and misused) it to provide, request and challenge information and interpretations, thus reducing uncertainty and equivocality. Through mechanisms such as the silence procedure, the network has significantly reduced the time needed to take decisions, even though confidentiality has always been an issue. In relation to space and centrality, the network maintained a strictly multilateral environment. But participants no longer consider it to be appropriate for quick communication, and the COREU has turned into a niche practice and a specific diplomatic 'genre', devoted to formalising and recording official positions, while new tools have come to the fore.

#### 4 The 'New Normal' in European Diplomacy: E-mails, Texts and Portals

To communicate about EU foreign policy, national diplomats and EU officials have come to rely on other tools, considered more appropriate in both acquiring information and negotiating equivocality. From e-mails and instant

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93 Smith 2004a.

94 Interviews 18, 14, 13.

messaging apps (primarily WhatsApp and Signal) to various EU platforms (such as the Delegates' Portal or the newly established ZEUS), diplomats now choose from a wider range of ICTs. These technologies address uncertainty and equivocality issues, allowing diplomats to keep up with and contribute to the increasingly fast pace of contemporary international politics and the news cycle. Moreover, new forms of digitally mediated communications have acquired a recognisable form as 'genres' specific to the groups using them.

A relatively rich medium, e-mail has become by far the most important written communication tool for European diplomacy, echoing the view that it is the 'most successful' application in work environments in general and de facto incorporating the COREU system of communications.<sup>95</sup> There is a mailing list of 27+3<sup>96</sup> participants that, exactly like the COREU system, includes all European Correspondents and Deputy Correspondents and is moderated by the EEAS. This list hosts all the preparatory work for negotiations of joint EU statements, HR/VP declarations or Council Conclusions, as well as preparatory documents. The only exception is the silence procedure for decision-making, which is performed through the COREU network and not by e-mail. But even in the final approval stage, e-mails shadow COREUS to facilitate the work of those European Correspondents with more difficult access to the network.<sup>97</sup> It is thus customary to circulate an e-mail through the European Correspondents' mailing list forewarning colleagues that a country will 'break silence' through the COREU, or to have an e-mail from the EEAS to all the other participants communicating that a silence procedure is soon to be launched via COREU with a given deadline. It also happens that when material is vehiculated through the COREU network outside working hours, a participant might ask for copy via e-mail — and a friendly colleague from a different country will comply. In short, there is 'total duplication' between COREUS and e-mails,<sup>98</sup> with exceptions at the very high security end. COREUS retain an important advantage over e-mails, though, as by definition they express the official position of a country/institution. In e-mail traffic, an actor's precise commitment might get clouded in ways that the more structured COREU structure would not allow.

E-mail has comparative advantages also over face-to-face communications in European diplomacy, and it works well to support and augment them, by clearing the ground to make them more 'productive' and negotiations 'more dense and richer'.<sup>99</sup> To begin with, e-mails have a specific role to play as an

95 Whittaker, Bellotti and Moody 2005.

96 27 member states plus the EEAS, the Council General Secretariat and the European Commission.

97 Interview 11.

98 Interview 17.

99 Interview 16, quotations from written notes.

alternative to face-to-face communications. With e-mails there is less room for misunderstandings about content, as this is put down in writing, more detailed and carefully phrased.<sup>100</sup> Therefore, while in-person communication provides room for nuance, the written word can be more precise. Accordingly, diplomats, particularly European Correspondents, tend to use e-mails to exchange articulated positions on technical or delicate issues, as a way to address equivocality. Moreover, e-mail can provide a decisive contribution to overcome ambiguity *in the lead-up to* face-to-face interactions.<sup>101</sup> Ahead of in-person meetings such as Foreign Affairs Councils, European diplomats at all levels engage in a dense set of online exchanges with their counterparts, with the aim of justifying their national position, resolving outstanding issues or addressing concerns from other capitals.<sup>41</sup> Fast and informal digital technologies are crucial for gathering information about other actors' preferences and overcoming confusion and misunderstandings. Discussing a recent experience at a Foreign Affairs Council (FAC), a European Correspondent reported that the entire week ahead of the Council meeting was spent using all available means (e-mails, WhatsApp/Signal messages and phone calls) to reach out to other Member States at all levels (e.g., Minister's cabinet, desk officer, European Correspondent) to clarify the national position on a specific issue that would be on the FAC agenda. It took between five and six e-mails to colleagues on this one issue alone to explain their own country's position over and over. Formal channels — the COREU network and in-person working parties — are simply not enough for this type of work, whereas the flurry of digital communications from several informal channels proved instrumental in reducing equivocality.<sup>102</sup>

However, while e-mails are considered most appropriate to address diplomats' socio-cognitive needs, the quantity of e-mail diplomats receive every day is problematic. Several interviewees noted that, on any given day, they might receive between 80 and 100 e-mails pertaining to Common Foreign and Security Policy/Common Security and Defence Policy (CFSP/CSDP) alone, in addition to national traffic. The sheer volume of e-mails means that it is sometimes difficult for diplomats to follow rapid exchanges, especially during hectic periods, such as the week before a FAC. Between the statement of the High Representative's spokesperson, the High Representative's own declarations, their declarations on behalf of the EU-27 and local declarations that EU

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100 Interviews 18, 20.

101 See Wheeler and Holmes 2021, who suggest that the internet speeds up face-to-face mobilisation.

102 Interview 16.

Delegations want to issue, European Correspondents are confronted with an ever-growing number of documents to be negotiated at a demanding pace.<sup>103</sup> This situation is not specific to European multilateral diplomacy, even though it is exasperated in this context. Former UK ambassador Tom Fletcher painted a vivid picture of what it is to be a diplomat in the digital age more generally:

The average UK diplomat now receives forty diplomatic telegrams a day, as opposed to five twenty years ago. Add to this an average of 200 internal e-mails and he or she is struggling to get away from the desk — even before going online where most of the rest of the world is.<sup>104</sup>

Therefore e-mails, which have been considered an efficient and appropriate tool for addressing uncertainty and equivocality, can also become overwhelming,<sup>105</sup> without necessarily addressing substantive content. The overexposure and exhaustion are felt particularly keenly by lower-level diplomats and by those with caring responsibilities at home (predominantly women), who, especially during lockdowns and smart working, struggle to keep a balance between professional and private life, a topic to which we will return.<sup>106</sup>

While e-mails are used for more articulated exchanges among European Correspondents, texting about substance is used more by higher-ranking diplomats and to add a sense of urgency. In relation to European foreign policy co-operation, diplomats rely on phone messages via WhatsApp/Signal, which are used for specific and/or time-sensitive issues. Particularly active is the Signal (previously WhatsApp)<sup>107</sup> group of Political Directors from all 27 Member States and the EEAS, which is used, among other things, to solve strictly political issues in a negotiation (e.g., specific word expressions), set the agenda for upcoming FAC meetings, allocate floor time during such meetings and co-ordinate the EU reaction to crisis events.<sup>108</sup> Whereas with e-mails there is some discretion as to how promptly to answer, a phone text

103 Interviews 18, 16, 21, 22, 23.

104 Fletcher 2017, 97.

105 Eggeling and Adler-Nissen 2021, 5.

106 Interview 24. On the effect of overexposure and screen fatigue, see also Eggeling and Adler-Nissen 2021.

107 The shift to Signal from WhatsApp occurred as a consequence of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

108 See, for example, Interviews 11, 18, 12, 20. The widespread use of WhatsApp to co-ordinate during international negotiations had already been remarked upon a few years back (see, e.g., Borger, Rankin and Lyons 2016).

indicates that a response is needed urgently.<sup>109</sup> Compared with their Political Directors, European Correspondents fulfil a more formal role when it comes to CFSP negotiations at 27, so they tend to rely on e-mails, which allow for more articulated exchanges. WhatsApp has been used by European Correspondents for exchanges among small groupings of like-minded countries (e.g., there are WhatsApp groups among the Big 5 and the Visegrad countries),<sup>110</sup> or to discuss specific issues (e.g., Libyan sanctions).<sup>111</sup> Recently, however, a Signal group mirroring the 'COREU format' of 27+3 was created also among European Correspondents. The purpose of this has been to alert of incoming traffic on email (or, more rarely, COREU) with the explicit understanding that negotiations are to be kept off the Signal group. Whether this aspect will withhold the pressure of daily negotiations, however, it remains to be seen.

Text messages are a relatively poor medium, but they still contribute to addressing issues of uncertainty and equivocality, not just in limited cognitive terms, but also in broader social meaning. Similar to other situations, Signal messages by Political Directors convey information, discuss substantive matters and co-ordinate actions,<sup>112</sup> which in turn helps reduce the need for information and the desire for clarifying existent interpretations. Texting also conveys intentions, commitments, political priorities and more generally the overall European foreign policy's direction of travel. Technological change has thus allowed European diplomats to skilfully convey, in a short text with near-immediate delivery, the same meaning that once required a COREU and hours of preparation, without the need to engage in a phone call.

Finally, further down on the 'media richness' scale, a few platforms contribute to the exchange of documents on foreign policy in an unaddressed manner but maintaining a role in creating knowledge about European foreign policy. One of them is the Delegates' Portal, which is a calendar and repository system showing when and where various working groups or committee meetings will take place and including all the (non-classified) documents needed for those meetings.<sup>113</sup> The EEAS in particular tends to rely on the Delegates' Portal as a useful repository to host and share information in a more structured way than via e-mails. The Portal stores non-confidential documents that are not to be shared with the public, such as agendas for working group or committee meetings, non-papers, concept notes, option papers as well as Council

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109 Interview 15. In some cases, e-mails might also be used for relatively pressing matters, but the sender will make it clear that a response is needed quickly (Interview 19).

110 Interviews 18, 21, 22, 23.

111 Interview 16.

112 Cornut, Manor and Blumenthal 2022, 13-14.

113 Interview 1, Interview 4.



Conclusions (all documents that used to be shared via COREU). While the COREU network has become a living archive of agreed decisions and positions (including EU statements), the Delegates' Portal is a repository of working documents.<sup>114</sup> Lastly, ZEUS, which is replacing Agora, is increasingly used for communications between EU Delegations and Brussels, as well as between EU Delegations and Member States' representations in non-EU countries.<sup>115</sup>

Therefore, technological advancement in written communications has made EU foreign policy communications more frequent, dense and potentially more informative, making it possible to comment on the substance of a document in greater detail and in less time than was ever possible through the COREU network.<sup>116</sup> Even in a thick co-operative environment such as the EU, diplomats need to continuously justify their national position by engaging in frequent and dense exchanges at all levels, from desk officers to Political Directors, so as to solve outstanding issues or address concerns from other capitals.<sup>41</sup>

Although European diplomats recognise the merits of digital technologies and appreciate the ability to conduct negotiations remotely, face-to-face meetings remain important.<sup>117</sup> Other than the well-known advantages mentioned by MRT (i.e., instant feedback, multiple cues, language variety and personalised focus), face-to-face interactions present further benefits that are specific to diplomatic exchanges. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, European Correspondents would see each other at least once a month during FAC meetings and at every Political Directors' meeting.<sup>118</sup> These in-person interactions allow for ideas and initiatives to arise more organically, whereas virtual interactions are more transactional and less open to brainstorming.<sup>119</sup> Face-to-face meetings easily break out into small groups to work on issues.<sup>120</sup> Moreover, face-to-face meetings remain the only way to discuss sensitive topics, such as cybersecurity or delicate issues regarding third countries, which, for security reasons, cannot be discussed online.<sup>121</sup> In fact, as MRT suggests, not only face-to-face but also phone negotiations have an edge over written communications, as they allow diplomats to respond immediately, as well as to pick up

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114 Interviews 21, 22, 23.

115 Interviews 8 and 9.

116 Interviews 16, 18, 21, 22, 23.

117 Interview 10.

118 There was a Political Directors' in-person meeting during the German Presidency in September 2020 and another one at the very end of the Portuguese Presidency, but European Correspondents did not meet between the end of 2020 and early 2021 (Interview 18).

119 Interview 18, Interview 17.

120 Interview 11.

121 Interview 18.

on pauses and nuances in one another's tone, which can sometime indicate whether there might be room for negotiation.<sup>122</sup> In-person communication provides room for nuance, while the written word is more precise.<sup>123</sup> Both contribute to sensemaking in foreign affairs.

The 'new normal' that has taken hold in the EU foreign policy system suggests a complex and multi-layered communication environment, where diplomats navigate, co-ordinate and keep track of negotiations between capitals, as well as between capitals and the EU. What once was a correspondence of e.g., 15 COREU messages, has now become a few Signal messages to alert of incoming traffic, several emails with draft statement and proposed changes, one COREU with the final draft and silence procedure, and one last COREU to confirm that the silence procedure was not broken and thus a document was adopted. While more complex, the system is also much richer and much faster. The challenge comes from the fact that e-mail is reaching saturation point. A useful and thoughtful e-mail (as opposed to a useless, self-referential one) is becoming a literary and professional 'genre' in an inbox often too full to be of use. Texting is the most recently adopted tool and it is going to expand further (the 'next new normal'), whereas platforms, despite relatively poor media, ensure continuity of information and might be brought more to the centre of communication flows, according to reform proposals.

## 5 The Effects of Digitalisation in the EU Foreign Policy Communication System

The 'new normal' described in the previous section comes with consequences, especially in terms of time, space and confidentiality. While time and confidentiality seem to be locked in an inverse relationship whereby more speed occurs at the expense of confidentiality in the EU foreign policy system, the effect of digital technologies on space is more ambivalent, with the geographical divide being reshaped in the form of gender and wealth divides.

Firstly, this article's analysis confirms that faster communications are considered better for diplomacy.<sup>124</sup> This emerges clearly from 50 years of European co-operation in foreign affairs, as the COREU network came to be largely substituted by a mix of e-mail, texting and use of portals in the name of speed. The bottom line is that the time span that European diplomats consider appropriate

<sup>122</sup> Birnbaum 2020.

<sup>123</sup> Interviews 16, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23.

<sup>124</sup> Adler-Nissen and Drieschova 2019; Cornut and Dale 2019.

for sending and receiving written communications has dramatically shrunk, from days/hours to minutes/seconds. COREU messages have taken a matter of hours or even days to send/receive. European Correspondents would need to physically reach and access secure locations to compose messages. The location could be in a different building. The interface is notoriously complex to operate. The technical time of cyphering could be up to 30 minutes. All this would also apply in reverse, at delivery point, for most Member States. The overall time from sender to receiver has thus amounted to hours and if the process occurs outside working hours, it could reach into days. Thanks to technological advancements, some participants to the network now have mobile devices that reduce this time to minutes at their end, but most Member States do not have these facilities and for them sending/delivery time remains the same. Therefore, if the EEAS circulates documents in view of official meetings with one to two days' advance notice (as it often does) via COREU only, it would put some Member States under impossible deadlines, but 'they know we [i.e., national diplomats] need to work'.<sup>125</sup> E-mail is revolutionary in this respect, as it slashes the 'appropriate time' to minutes or hours, as diplomats 'have a mental state to reply immediately' to e-mail.<sup>126</sup> Thanks to handheld devices, European Correspondents are constantly connected and are used to checking their e-mail also outside working hours. Similarly, texting further pushes the boundary of 'appropriate time' due to the sense of urgency it conveys.

As the news cycle also continues to shrink, faster ways to communicate and take decisions allow Brussels to respond quickly to crises and events, but they also contribute to the ever-faster cycle. As one European Correspondent put it to us, 'in order to be relevant, you need to be heard, in order to be heard, you need to say something and, with such a quick news cycle, you need to say something all the time'.<sup>127</sup> However, while the EU needs to adapt to the rapidly evolving news cycle and thus issue frequent statements and joint Declarations,<sup>128</sup> there is scepticism as to whether this is ultimately beneficial to the substance of CFSP/CSDP and conducive to 'better' diplomacy.<sup>129</sup> The fact that the EU is able to issue a statement does not automatically make such a statement substantive or impactful.<sup>130</sup> At the same time, the political cost for the EU of *not* issuing a statement is higher than doing it, thus maintaining the cycle.

125 Interview 17, quotation from written notes.

126 Interview 24, quotation from written notes.

127 Interview 20, quotation from written notes.

128 Interviews 14, 20.

129 Interview 20.

130 Interviews 20, 21, 22, 23.

Secondly, while the absolute protection of free and safe diplomatic communications has never been guaranteed, the increasingly fast-paced rhythm of world affairs is leading to an erosion of appropriate security standards concerning EU foreign policy communications. The pressure on the EU to act swiftly and appear as a proactive foreign policy actor means that, in the name of speed, communications are more informal and under-classified.<sup>131</sup> As diplomats need (want) to contact one another more and more rapidly, they might forgo secure channels of communications such as the COREU in favour of e-mails and WhatsApp/Signal, as well as phone calls. Even though confidentiality is certainly one of the elements that diplomats consider when choosing their medium, the desire to communicate rapidly, to get 'their word in' ahead of their counterparts when negotiating a draft text and to acquire information as swiftly as possible can all result in less stringent security standards.

The lack of proper procedures and structures to negotiate sensitive dossiers remotely (as well as in person) has been an issue in EU foreign policy for a long time.<sup>132</sup> The more fundamental problem seems to be that the EU seemingly lacks proper protocols for a relatively rapid exchange of sensitive information online, short of using the COREU network or meeting in person in secure rooms within EU institutional buildings. Even face-to-face meetings can fall short since the EU lacks sufficient secure communication channels or translators with the necessary security clearance. Diplomats who are familiar with NATO's security protocols are especially critical of this particular failing: to underscore the lax or insufficient security standards, one interviewee colourfully compared the EU to a colander.<sup>133</sup> And when there are secure protocols in place, they are in such disuse and so cumbersome that even Member States with the longest institutional memory struggle to remember how to send classified COREU documents (marked SECRET or TOP SECRET).<sup>134</sup> In short, the EU seems to have settled for swift communications at the expense of security, even though this makes diplomatic communications more vulnerable to hacks and leaks.

Lastly, the increasing reliance on digitally mediated written communications and its effect on speed and confidentiality have also affected space, defined in both geographical and social terms. From a geographical perspective, the relationship between 'centre' and 'periphery' in the EU foreign policy

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131 Interview 17.

132 Tuomioja 2006; Bicchi and Carta 2011.

133 Interview 25.

134 Interview 16.

system is being partially reshaped. While the consensus has long been that ‘Brusselisation’ made Brussels the real centre for all forms of European foreign policy making,<sup>135</sup> digitalisation and the COVID-19 pandemic have facilitated the involvement of the capitals in CFSP/CSDP negotiations and opened the way for more direct communications among higher-level officials within national MFAs.<sup>136</sup> Especially outside traditional working hours, ICTs allow for the direct involvement of capitals in CFSP/CSDP negotiations when necessary,<sup>137</sup> without the need to go through Brussels-based face-to-face working parties. Usually, capitals get directly involved only when the EEAS needs Member States to come to an agreement fast (faster than delegates in Brussels would be able to negotiate in person) or if it is a highly political dossier. When this is the case, Political Directors in capitals or the EEAS Political Director might initially float an idea, signal the need to issue a declaration or try to address a red-line issue through the Signal group. Following this first exchange at the level of Political Directors, the European Correspondents will then start circulating articulated proposals via e-mail to find an agreement.<sup>138</sup> This does not amount to a total change of direction, as most dossiers are discussed and agreed in Brussels,<sup>139</sup> but when it comes to Declarations and out of office hours, capitals have a new role to play. This finding reflects the views of European Correspondents based in capitals, which is by definition biased, but it is interesting and revealing exactly of what the view from capitals is, that is, how they perceive a ‘come-back’ in relation to the previous predominance of Brussels.

The renewed involvement of capitals in communication flows has had the further effect of personalising EU foreign policy decision-making. As Foreign Ministers and Political Directors can easily reach one another via established Signal groups or communications, they also tend to personally get involved in reaching an agreement.<sup>140</sup> Political Directors in particular appreciate the fact that WhatsApp/Signal allows them to work out specific details of a negotiation among themselves, despite at times having to do so outside regular working hours. A text in the Political Directors’ Signal chat is fast becoming a ‘genre’ appreciated beyond its substantive content, crafted with creativity in order to impress. Direct communications among higher-level officials also facilitate the

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135 Allen 1998; Müller-Brandeck-Bocquet 2002.

136 Interview 17.

137 Interviews 21, 22, 23.

138 Interviews 16, 18.

139 Interview 19.

140 Interviews 5, 20.

European Correspondents' work, as they can get clearance for changes in positions directly from the national political centre.<sup>141</sup>

There is a further 'spatial' aspect that has been affected by the increasing reliance on digital technologies. Whereas digitalisation is reshaping the centre — periphery divide, it also affects traditional divides, namely in terms of wealth and gender. ICT tools are expensive — overly expensive for several Member States' budgets. Wealthier Member States are thus better able to acquire means that guarantee speed and confidentiality, as well as ease of use. This is particularly important for smaller, wealthier Member States that use technology to compensate their limited diplomatic corps.<sup>142</sup> But it puts other Member States at a relative disadvantage, as they do not have the hardware/software to carry applications on the go or home, creating differentiation within the EU. Gender is another 'spatial' aspect that digital technologies and diplomacy's faster tempo exacerbate. As diplomats are increasingly expected (and to a point, willing) to be 'logged in' most of the time, female diplomats with care responsibilities at home are under more pressure than their male colleagues, who also suffer.<sup>143</sup> A diplomat recounted being at the park with their children, pushing them on swings and then having to hide behind trees to respond to e-mail. Eventually the diplomat had to explain to their children the need to work on Saturday morning,<sup>144</sup> an episode recounted with regret. Often the two divides intersect. A female diplomat from a less wealthy Member State spoke with a tinge of envy of the European Correspondent in a big, wealthy Member State who was able to put their children to bed and then clear some work from a secure laptop in the comfort of their home.

Therefore, digital technologies have shifted the expectations of what is appropriate in European diplomacy. Communications occur in a faster-paced cycle, which mirrors the news cycle, even when speed trumps security and confidentiality. The need (or desire) to appear at the cutting edge of negotiations has brought a reshaping of digital divides. While capitals are acquiring a new role, boosted by the COVID-19 pandemic, wealth and gender are (re)confirmed as two key aspects in the jostle for power in European foreign policy making.

141 Interview 20.

142 Interview 10.

143 Aggestam and Towns 2018; Eggeing and Adler-Nissen 2021, 5. See also the special issue of *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 17 (3) (2022) on Understanding the Gender of Ministries of Foreign Affairs, edited by Niklasson and Towns, in particular Standfield 2022.

144 Interview 24.

## 6 Conclusion

This article has aimed to contribute to a better understanding of how bundles of online/offline practices constitute diplomacy in the digital age. It has argued that diplomats tend to act as skilful bricoleurs: moving across the offline/online border and engaging with the gamut of digital tools, they are able to extract a wealth of socio-cognitive content in their attempts at making sense and weaving together diplomatic narratives across borders, as in the case of the EU foreign policy system. Responding to calls for 'a nuanced approach',<sup>145</sup> 'more fine-grained empirical investigations'<sup>146</sup> and a micro-sociology of IR,<sup>147</sup> this article has supplemented a 'muddling through' perspective by suggesting that diplomats act as bricoleurs who interact creatively with the digital instruments now available in their toolbox.<sup>148</sup> Building on media richness theory<sup>149</sup> and sensemaking,<sup>150</sup> the article has argued that in their peer-to-peer written communications diplomats embrace the specific medium they consider most appropriate for the task at hand, in relation to the type of situation they believe they face and in relation to their socio-cognitive needs. This has led to an intensive use of the COREU network for all stages of the policy cycle, beginning already in 1973 and peaking in the 1990s. Since then, e-mail has become the main tool for written peer-to-peer multilateral communications in the EU foreign policy system, recently supported by the use of WhatsApp then Signal texting among Political Directors and European Correspondents, as well as by portals for posting documents. Further research will need to investigate how contextual aspects (such as track record of co-operation/conflict, location, institutional culture, etc.) affect how diplomats work their way through different digital tools of written communications.

The digitalisation of written communication in European foreign policy co-operation has had consequences. The most relevant one has been in terms of embracing (considerable) advances in terms of speed over (limited) losses in terms of security. While written communications could all be objectively set at high levels of security, standards of appropriate diplomatic practices have come to increasingly privilege speed over security. If there ever was a 'fundamental incompatibility between speed and diplomacy' due to the impossibility

145 Cornut and Dale 2019, 833.

146 Adler-Nissen and Eggeling 2022, 22; Lequesne 2015.

147 Holmes and Wheeler 2020.

148 Carstensen 2011; Mérand 2012; Cornut 2018.

149 Daft, Lengel and Trevino 1987; Ishii, Lyons and Carr 2019.

150 Weick 1995.

of 'responding quickly and responding wisely',<sup>151</sup> the current generation of diplomats is trying hard to overcome it. This raises two questions. Firstly, further research will be needed to address how precisely this process unfolds. Interviewees for this article have displayed a mix of aspiration and dislike for the hastening tempo of diplomacy, a process they perceive to be entirely outside their hands, but which they contribute to creating with every click of the day. Secondly, simplistic trade-offs between speed and content richness will need to be explored and exposed. Based on MRT, a fast medium does not necessarily mean an empty medium. Rather, social practices define the appropriate time span and content for communications. But contestation of 'excessive' speed and lack of meaningful content is mounting. Finally, digitalisation is also reshaping space and digital divides. The long-term trend of 'Brusselisation' seems to be morphing into a different type of balance between participants in the EU foreign policy system, with reliance on 24/7/365 technology enabling a new role for capitals. Well-established divides, namely wealth and gender, are being re-proposed and repurposed, as poorer countries are unable to acquire the most advanced technology, an issue that further impacts on women. The relationship between centre and periphery in diplomatic narratives will require further research to explore configurations in other landscapes.

The main contribution here is a sense that diplomacy in the digital age continues to rely on the creativity of practitioners to innovate on communication practices as they encounter new technological tools, rather than being driven by technological determinism or by institutional conservatism. Diplomats might be optimists, pessimists or undecided.<sup>152</sup> They might offer an appearance of deference and consent while disguising their real attitudes,<sup>153</sup> leading to symbolic implementation of technologically complex reforms. But they all engage with technological (now overwhelmingly digital) means of written communication in the performance of their daily jobs. In fact, given the breadth of technological means used every day by diplomats, it might no longer be justified to assume that face to face is the only or even the main way in which diplomacy is conducted. But this does not spell the end of diplomatic imagination. The next stage in the digitalisation of technology, characterised by big data, artificial intelligence, ChatGPT and its competitors, will undoubtedly influence diplomatic practices, but it will not spell the end of written diplomacy.

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151 Seib 2012, 2, 7.

152 Bjola and Manor 2022.

153 Scott 1990, 3.



## Appendix: Interview Methods

Interview ID	Participant	Date	Mode	Audio recorded?
1	EU official	02/07/2020	Videoconferencing platform	Yes
2	EU official	05/11/2020	Phone	Yes
3	National diplomat	16/03/2020	Phone	Yes
4	EU official	12/11/2020	Phone	Yes
5	National diplomat	13/01/2021	Videoconferencing platform	Yes
6	National diplomat	20/01/2021	Videoconferencing platform	Yes
7	National diplomat	04/06/2021	Videoconferencing platform	No
8	National diplomat	07/06/2021	Videoconferencing platform	No
9	National diplomat	07/06/2021	Videoconferencing platform	No
10	National diplomat	07/06/2021	Videoconferencing platform	No
11	National diplomat	10/06/2021	Videoconferencing platform	No
12	National diplomat	11/06/2021	Videoconferencing platform	No
13	National diplomat	15/06/2021	Videoconferencing platform	No
14	National diplomat	02/07/2021	Videoconferencing platform	No
15	National diplomat	13/07/2021	Videoconferencing platform	No
16	National diplomat	15/07/2021	Phone	No
17	National diplomat	26/07/2021	Videoconferencing platform	No
18	National diplomat	30/07/2021	Videoconferencing platform	No
19	National diplomat	18/08/2021	Phone	No
20	National diplomat	07/09/2021	Phone	No
21	National diplomat	20/09/2021	Videoconferencing platform	No
22	National diplomat	20/09/2021	Videoconferencing platform	No
23	National diplomat	20/09/2021	Videoconferencing platform	No
24	National diplomat	18/10/2021	Phone	No
25	National diplomat	22/12/2021	Phone	No

SOURCE: AUTHORS

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