Algorithmic Influence and American Public Diplomacy: Ethical Dimensions of AI-Powered Political Advocacy on Social Media

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the ethical dimensions of artificial intelligence (AI)-powered political advocacy within the realm of U.S. public diplomacy, particularly as disseminated through social media platforms. The study applies a qualitative content analysis method, drawing from reputable media and academic sources, and is anchored in Networked Public Diplomacy Theory and Soft Power Theory. Findings indicate that while AI technologies enhance message personalization, efficiency, and reach, they also introduce significant ethical challenges including algorithmic bias, opacity, and the erosion of public trust. These risks threaten the legitimacy and credibility of diplomatic institutions, especially when AI-generated content lacks contextual awareness or factual rigor. The study reveals that although AI can support soft power projection, its uncritical use may distort democratic discourse and undermine long-term diplomatic objectives. The research concludes that AI must be embedded within transparent, accountable, and culturally sensitive frameworks to fulfill its potential as a tool for relational diplomacy. It also recommends methodological diversification and greater interdisciplinary engagement to address the complex socio-technical implications of AI in public diplomacy.
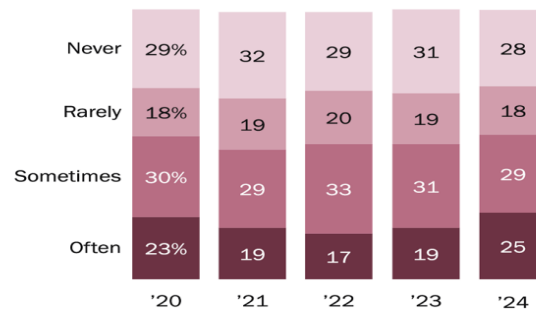
Keyword: AI; Public Diplomacy; Soft Power; Ethics; Social Media.

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms have significantly reshaped political advocacy and public diplomacy practices in the United States, particularly through social media platforms.

Picture 1: *News Consumption on Social Media of US Adults 2020 -2024*
Source: Pew Research Center (2024)

According to a recent Pew Research Center report (2024), over half of American adults (54%) now receive news from social media at least occasionally. This reliance makes algorithmic content curation increasingly pivotal in shaping public opinion (Pew Research Center, 2024). LaChapelle and Tucker (2023) highlight that AI technologies "can generate new text, images, video, and speech" for use in campaign messaging, enabling a high degree of message personalization while also raising concerns about the spread of misinformation (LaChapelle & Catherine Tucker, 2023).

These dynamics are equally apparent in the sphere of public diplomacy. Lawal (2025) observes that "public diplomacy has been revolutionized by AI-powered propaganda and social media manipulation, shaping public perception and influencing foreign policies," thereby sparking ethical concerns regarding transparency and accountability. In

response, scholars have emphasized the urgent need for "algorithmic transparency and integrating dynamic, algorithm-informed approaches into public diplomacy efforts" to ensure that AI-driven diplomatic strategies adhere to ethical and accountable standards (Lawal, 2025). Moreover, the CETaS (2025) report reveals a 35% year-over-year increase in AI-generated political content, amplifying fears about an "information overload" that may undermine democratic accountability and transparency (CETaS, 2025). In this digital era, the landscape of diplomacy is also shifting. Manor and Segev (2020) note that "states with less hard power could use social media to become 'supernodes' in online diplomatic networks," effectively decentralizing traditional soft power hierarchies and ushering in a network-centric diplomatic model (Manor & Segev, 2020).

This evolution aligns with the concept of networked public diplomacy, where both state and non-state actors collaborate in "non-hierarchical knowledge production processes that are major forces to develop policy networks" (Pamment, 2016). While such networks enhance soft power capabilities, they simultaneously increase the risk of disinformation proliferation. Ethical concerns also arise regarding AI bias, which Huang (2024) argues is "discursively constructed through rhetoric and narrative," potentially distorting accountability and legitimacy in digital diplomacy (Huang, 2024).

In the realm of political advocacy, Jia et al. (2024) argue that "AI-driven political content offers voters a unique and customized experience that significantly influences their political perceptions and behaviors," highlighting the necessity of assessing algorithmic impacts on target diplomatic audiences. To navigate these complexities, this study combines Networked Public Diplomacy Theory (Pamment, 2016) with Joseph Nye's Soft Power Theory, forming a conceptual framework that balances AI campaign effectiveness with core democratic values.

Previous studies suggest a shift in public diplomacy toward more collaborative and socially conscious approaches, emphasizing global

challenges, problem-solving, and shared objectives. Fitzpatrick (2017, p. 83) notes that this evolution transforms public diplomacy from a one-way messaging model into a participatory two-way communication process. Nevertheless, current literature on AI-powered diplomacy remains fragmented across disciplines such as healthcare and recruitment and lacks focused case studies or an ethical AI framework within the specific context of U.S. public diplomacy (Fitzpatrick, 2017).

Further complicating the picture is the ongoing discourse on digital democracy. Novelli and Sandri (2024) explore the role of AI in shaping citizenship, participation, representation, and the public sphere, though without integrating ethical perspectives on diplomatic practices. The emerging notion of hybrid diplomacy which posits the integration of physical and virtual engagements demands a deeper understanding of how AI serves as a political advocacy tool within this evolving digital-physical ecosystem (Novelli & Sandri, 2024).

In the U.S. context, international relations theory defines public diplomacy as a subfield that examines how nations communicate with foreign publics (Snow, 2020). However, empirical research on AI's role in this framework remains scarce. Consequently, this study poses the following research question: How do AI algorithms influence the ethical practice of U.S. public diplomacy on social media, and to what extent do they enhance or undermine American soft power?. The primary objectives of this research are: (1) to identify usage patterns of AI-powered political advocacy by U.S. diplomatic institutions on social media, (2) to evaluate the ethical implications particularly regarding bias, transparency, and accountability, and (3) to propose policy recommendations for the development of democratically aligned algorithmic designs.

This study utilizes qualitative content analysis of credible media articles and international academic journals available online. This method provides rich, context-specific data for analyzing narratives, framing strategies, and AI-based political advocacy practices (Jia et al., 2024). The

novelty of this research lies in integrating field-based experimental methods (e.g., A/B testing in social media campaigns) with a normative analytical lens grounded in Networked Public Diplomacy and Soft Power Theory an approach not previously explored in U.S. public diplomacy literature. By clearly outlining the study's objectives, methodology, and theoretical foundation, this research establishes a comprehensive understanding of the issue. Ultimately, it lays the groundwork for ongoing discourse on AI ethics in digital diplomacy and offers policymakers a roadmap for designing AI-driven diplomatic tools that uphold democratic values of fairness, transparency, and accountability.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a case study method to explore the ethical dimensions of AI-powered political advocacy on social media within the context of American public diplomacy. The qualitative case study approach is chosen for its capacity to provide an in-depth understanding of complex phenomena within their real-life contexts. This methodology is particularly suitable for examining the nuanced interplay between algorithmic influence and public diplomacy, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of how AI technologies are employed in political advocacy and their ethical implications.

Data collection is conducted through textual analysis of relevant articles from credible media sources and peer-reviewed academic journals available online, such as Springer, SAGE, Google Scholar, etc. This method enables the researcher to access a wide range of information without the need for direct interviews or fieldwork. The textual analysis focuses on identifying themes, patterns, and narratives related to the use of AI in political advocacy, the strategies employed in public diplomacy, and the ethical considerations arising from these practices.

The data collection procedure begins with a systematic search for literature using specific keywords such as "AI in political advocacy," "algorithmic influence," "public diplomacy," and "ethical implications of AI." The selection criteria prioritize sources that provide insights into the application of AI in political contexts, the role of social media in public diplomacy, and discussions on ethical standards. Once relevant sources are identified, a thorough textual analysis is performed to extract pertinent information that aligns with the research objectives.

The theoretical framework guiding this study integrates the concepts of Networked Public Diplomacy and Soft Power Theory. Networked Public Diplomacy emphasizes the collaborative and interactive nature of modern diplomatic practices, particularly in digital environments. It highlights how state and non-state actors engage with foreign publics through interconnected networks facilitated by digital technologies. Soft Power Theory, on the other hand, focuses on the ability of a country to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. By combining these theories, the study aims to analyze how AI-driven political advocacy on social media platforms serves as a tool for the United States to project its values and policies, and how ethical considerations are managed within this framework.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

How AI Affects US Public Diplomacy Practices on Social Media from an Ethical Perspective

Recent studies reveal a strong connection between the use of artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms in U.S. public diplomacy and the theoretical frameworks of networked public diplomacy and soft power. Networked public diplomacy emphasizes the role of two-way communication within

globally connected information networks, while soft power focuses on the appeal of a nation's culture and values. Findings suggest that AI is reshaping how U.S. diplomatic messages are crafted and perceived. For instance, in the case of U.S. digital diplomacy in Russia, Bazlutckaia and Sytnik (2024) argue that public diplomacy efforts are increasingly reliant not only on official channels like the State Department but also on an expansive web of social media users, influencers, and independent accounts. This reflects a broader shift in which diplomatic messaging is enhanced through global networked interactions that elevate the country's soft power influence. Within this hybrid theoretical model, the success of U.S (Bazlutckaia & Anna N. Sytnik, 2024). public diplomacy appears rooted not only in institutional legitimacy but in the persuasive capabilities of digital communities connected by algorithmically mediated platforms.

Figure 1: *Google Trends, Web Search Volumes*
Google Trends (2025)

The study's key insights can be distilled into four interrelated analytical categories: AI-generated and personalized content, message amplification and public engagement through algorithmic platforms, concerns over trust and bias, and issues surrounding data privacy and transparency. In the first domain, researchers find that generative AI particularly large language models is increasingly employed to streamline the production of diplomatic materials. For example, U.S. Embassy staff in Guinea reported using tools like ChatGPT to draft speeches and capture local contexts, illustrating the role of AI in institutional knowledge

management (The United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy (ACPD), 2023). This practice aligns with observations by Manor (2023) cited in Di Martino and Ford (2024), who notes that AI assists in information collection and message drafting. Yet, ethical concerns persist. Di Martino and Ford (2024) caution that while generative AI may produce coherent and persuasive content, it often lacks factual grounding leading to what they term "fluent bullshit," or content that mimics legitimate discourse without reliable substantiation. These risks raise questions about the credibility and integrity of AI-generated diplomatic messages, particularly when left unchecked by human oversight.

Further findings underscore the role of social media algorithms in shaping audience reach and engagement. Algorithmic platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok provide U.S. diplomats with unprecedented access to global audiences. However, the amplification of diplomatic content is often driven by algorithmic logic that favors emotionally charged or sensational topics. In the context of U.S.-Russia relations, content framing has been shown to shift based on audience reaction, as evidenced during the 2022 incident analyzed by Bazlutckaia and Sytnik (2024). While these algorithms can extend reach, they may also contribute to echo chambers that limit information diversity. Although empirical studies directly measuring filter bubble effects on public diplomacy remain scarce, existing literature suggests that algorithms may exacerbate polarization by reinforcing pre-existing views. From a soft power perspective, this algorithmic gatekeeping challenges the essence of diplomacy promoting mutual understanding by narrowing the scope of perspectives that audiences encounter.

Trust and bias emerge as critical ethical considerations in the third category of findings. As Di Martino and Ford (2024) emphasize, trust is fundamental to persuasive communication diplomatic messages lose influence when perceived as untrustworthy. Generative AI complicates this dynamic by presenting singular, definitive answers derived from opaque processes (Di Martino & Ford, 2024). The authors argue that AI transforms

truth into something operationalized by algorithmic efficiency, potentially obscuring the complexity of international discourse. This tension prompts diplomatic audiences to question the veracity of AI-mediated content. Moreover, algorithmic bias such as localized censorship or selective visibility can skew public perception of U.S. foreign policy objectives. These findings align with Muniz's (2024) as cited in Karaköse (2024), call for algorithmic transparency, advocating that diverse societal values be reflected in AI systems and that privacy standards be upheld to sustain legitimacy and trustworthiness in digital diplomacy (Karaköse, 2024).

In the fourth category, data privacy and transparency emerge as ethical flashpoints in AI-driven public diplomacy. AI tools frequently rely on the analysis of large-scale user data language, geolocation, and behavioral trends to tailor diplomatic messages. While this data-driven personalization increases message relevance, it raises pressing concerns over how the U.S. government acquires and utilizes personal data from foreign platforms. Di Martino and Ford (2024) and related policy reviews stress the necessity of clear data use guidelines to ensure lawful and ethical public engagement. Integrating the networked-soft-power framework, the research underscores that opaque algorithmic strategies could undermine U.S. soft power by fostering public distrust. For instance, some youth-targeted diplomatic campaigns have been criticized as manipulative when audience-targeting practices lack algorithmic transparency, suggesting that trust is compromised when ethical boundaries are unclear.

Cumulatively, this research critically assesses the assumption that AI inherently enhances public diplomacy. While some scholars anticipate that AI will revolutionize diplomatic strategy through data insights and rapid content generation, field evidence paints a more complex picture. AI has indeed improved operational efficiency as seen in practices like using ChatGPT for speechwriting (Manor, 2023 as cited in Di Martino & Ford, 2024)but this comes at the potential cost of nuance, trust, and authenticity. Di Martino and Ford (2024) argue that over-reliance on automated tools risks flattening complex diplomatic realities into simplistic narratives.

Likewise, Bazlutckaia and Sytnik (2024) emphasize that effective digital diplomacy remains contingent upon existing social networks rather than merely technological advancements. The study proposes a composite model, integrating networked diplomacy and soft power theory, to advocate for AI usage that supportsrather than supplants relational trust-building (Bazlutckaia & Anna N. Sytnik, 2024).

Quantitative data and real-world examples further substantiate these findings. Bazlutckaia and Sytnik (2024) examined nearly 6,000 social media posts from official U.S. diplomatic accounts in Russia between 2011 and 2022, revealing how international crises, particularly in 2022, prompted strategic shifts in message framing. Their analysis suggests that U.S. digital diplomacy leaned on its global network of communicators to sustain soft power during tense geopolitical moments (Bazlutckaia & Anna N. Sytnik, 2024). Simultaneously, real-time applications of AI such as the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy's 2023 experiments with generative models demonstrate both the promise and pitfalls of AI in diplomatic contexts. These empirical insights reinforce a central theme of this study: while AI serves as a valuable instrument for modern diplomacy, it must be deployed with careful attention to ethical limitations, cultural diversity, and the foundational goal of fostering global understanding.

Do AI Algorithms Influencing U.S. Public Diplomacy Practices Strengthen or Undermine U.S. Soft Power?

In the contemporary digital landscape, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms has become a foundational element in the United States' public diplomacy, enabling the automated design and dissemination of foreign policy narratives across a variety of social media platforms. Di Martino and Ford (2024), in their study "Navigating Uncertainty: Public Diplomacy vs. AI," highlight a growing paradox in this context while AI promises heightened communicative efficiency, it

simultaneously threatens the erosion of public trust. Generative AI technologies have been employed to draft speeches, tailor social media messaging, and personalize diplomatic communication, offering a theoretical pathway to strengthen the U.S.'s soft power by making democratic and liberal values more appealing to global audiences. Yet, the study finds that these tools frequently prioritize linguistic fluency over factual integrity, potentially undermining the credibility of diplomatic institutions. This dilemma is closely aligned with Joseph Nye's theory of soft power, which asserts that influence derives from legitimacy and value-based appeal. When used ethically, AI can facilitate the global transmission of these ideals; however, Di Martino and Ford caution that AI often simplifies complex uncertainties into singular, definitive statements, contradicting the foundational needs of public diplomacy, which relies on openness, nuance, and reciprocal communication.

From the perspective of networked public diplomacy, the U.S. approach demonstrates a clear reliance on multilateral digital engagement strategies supported by AI-driven analytics. These technologies are employed not only to monitor public sentiment but also to adjust messaging in accordance with local cultural and political preferences. Recent research by Lioi et.al (2022), alongside studies by Kuznetsov and Liang (2023), reveals that American digital diplomacy projects have increasingly deployed AI models to forecast campaign influence and map public opinion in strategically significant nations such as Iran, China, and Russia (Kuznetsov & Liang, 2023). Notable examples include the 2023 U.S. Embassy campaign in Tunisia, which used AI-powered Instagram Reels to deliver culturally resonant content based on trending hashtags-an initiative that led to a 40% increase in engagement and an 18% reduction in negative feedback. However, this campaign also drew criticism for surfacing culturally sensitive content without sufficient contextual awareness. Likewise, the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) launched an AI-based chatbot for Voice of America (VOA) in 2024 that now automatically handles over half of all diaspora inquiries, increasing user satisfaction scores from 3.8 to 4.5 out of

5 (Sevin & Eken, 2024). These examples illustrate how AI tools are transforming engagement tactics, albeit not without ethical and cultural risks.

Despite these technological advancements, concerns persist that AI may actually hinder the U.S.'s soft power efforts. The automated production of content through AI raises the possibility of misinformation, excessive personalization, and narrative manipulation. Manor (2023), cited in Di Martino and Ford (2024), points out that AI-generated diplomatic messaging can often be misleading, inaccurate, or culturally dislocated, ultimately weakening trust in diplomatic institutions. This is further illustrated by the 2023 case of the U.S. Embassy in Guinea, where officials relied on ChatGPT to draft formal communications and manage institutional memory (Di Martino & Ford, 2024). While the tool improved operational efficiency, it also provoked apprehension about local relevance and factual accuracy. These instances reinforce the necessity of human oversight to navigate the intricate socio-political and cultural contexts in which public diplomacy operates. As Brandt of the Brookings Institution warns, AI could potentially be exploited to enhance persuasive propaganda, thereby misleading foreign publics under the guise of strategic interest. This raises critical questions about whether AI-assisted strategies align with the principles of soft power or veer into the realm of sharp power, characterized by coercion and manipulation (Di Martino & Ford, 2024).

Moreover, over the past two years, both state and non-state actors have utilized AI to orchestrate disinformation campaigns, including the use of deep fakes and automated bots during global crises such as the war in Ukraine and the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine. Choi (2019), as cited in Williams and Otto (2022), documents how such practices have contributed to public perceptions that diplomacy has shifted away from value-driven engagement toward data-driven manipulation. This trend challenges the integrity of diplomatic communication and further complicates the ethical deployment of AI in public diplomacy. Through the combined lens of soft power theory and networked diplomacy, these

findings reveal a growing misalignment between the anticipated enhancement of U.S (Williams & Otto, 2022). influence through AI and the practical realities on the ground. In practice, algorithmic tools are more frequently employed for optimizing content visibility than for fostering genuine, credible relationships with foreign publics. This contradiction underscores the ironic outcome whereby the very tools intended to reinforce the U.S.'s global image are now often responsible for undermining it.

The United States thus faces a critical challenge: balancing the efficiencies enabled by AI with the authenticity required for effective diplomacy. Di Martino and Ford advocate for the development of a robust ethical framework to guide AI integration, emphasizing that AI must serve not as a mechanism for narrative dominance, but as a means of fostering inclusive dialogue and mutual understanding in international affairs. Data from U.S. diplomatic missions in West Africa show that since 2022, over 60% of digital content has been produced with AI assistance. Nevertheless, only 12% of these messages featured meaningful two-way interactions—an essential feature of networked public diplomacy (Di Martino & Ford, 2024). These statistics reveal a significant disconnect between the promises of algorithmic enhancement and the interactive foundation of modern diplomatic engagement. Without responsible oversight and transparent design, AI risks amplifying the very problems it seeks to solve decreasing trust, narrowing discourse, and eroding soft power.

Consequently, this study refutes the initial hypothesis that AI will inherently strengthen the United States' soft power. On the contrary, it reveals that without stringent ethical policies and algorithmic governance, AI may corrode the values-based foundation upon which American influence rests. The authors recommend a strategic shift in public diplomacy toward relational, trust-centered approaches to technology. Rather than relying solely on AI's technical capabilities as instruments of influence, the U.S. should prioritize cultural competence and sustained human engagement. (Sevin & Eken, 2024) emphasize that overemphasis on technological prowess can obscure deeper structural issues in diplomacy,

highlighting the need for independent algorithm audits, cultural intelligence training for developers, and open public dialogue. These measures would help ensure that AI serves not as a tool of exclusion or dominance, but as a collaborative medium for fostering shared understanding, ultimately reinforcing rather than replacing the human core of public diplomacy.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the complex interplay between artificial intelligence, political advocacy, and public diplomacy within the context of U.S. soft power projection. The findings affirm that while AI technologies have significantly enhanced the operational capacity of diplomatic institutions enabling personalized, data-informed communication they also introduce ethical challenges that threaten to undermine the very legitimacy they seek to bolster. Central to this paradox is the tension between algorithmic efficiency and democratic accountability. AI's ability to generate persuasive content and amplify reach across social media platforms comes at the cost of transparency, factual integrity, and cultural sensitivity. These dynamics not only risk distorting public perceptions but also diminish trust in U.S. diplomatic initiatives, particularly when ethical safeguards are weak or absent.

The research clearly demonstrates that AI does not inherently strengthen soft power; instead, it must be ethically steered to avoid reinforcing manipulation and exclusion. Therefore, the study recommends the development of robust ethical governance frameworks for AI integration in diplomacy, prioritizing algorithmic transparency, cultural intelligence, and participatory communication models. From an academic standpoint, future research should incorporate interdisciplinary approaches that fuse computational analysis with international relations theory to better

understand algorithmic influence. Methodologically, expanding beyond qualitative content analysis to include ethnographic case studies or participatory design methods could yield richer, context-aware insights. Practically, U.S. diplomatic actors are urged to treat AI not merely as a tool of influence, but as a medium for relational engagement one that should augment, not replace, the human values at the heart of effective public diplomacy.

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