

طلب مشاركة في الملتقى الوطني عن بعد بعنوان: الدبلوماسية الرقمية

عنوان المداخلة: “Localization Strategies in Digital Diplomacy: Bridging Cultural Gaps for Effective International Communication”

المحور: الاستراتيجية الاتصالية للدبلوماسية الرقمية.

اسم ولقب المؤلف: شفيق حايك سي حايك / Chafik HAIF SI HAIF / طالب دكتوراه، تخصص ترجمة دبلوماسية.

جامعة الانتماء: جامعة الجزائر 2، معهد الترجمة

البريد الإلكتروني المهني: chafik.sihaiif@univ-alger2.dz

ملخص

في عالم اليوم المتمسم بالعولمة، برزت الدبلوماسية الرقمية كمنهج استراتيجي يتواصل من خلاله الفاعلون الدبلوماسيون والحكومات والمنظمات الدولية ويتفاعلون مع الجماهير العالمية من خلال المنصات الرقمية. ومع الانتقال المتزايد للأنشطة الدبلوماسية إلى العالم الرقمي، أصبح التوطين أمراً لا بد منه لتعزيز التعاون والحفاظ على علاقات دولية متينة بين البلدان التي لا تتشارك اللغة والثقافة نفسها. يستكشف هذا المقال استراتيجيات التوطين التي يمكن أن تستخدمها الكيانات الدبلوماسية لتعزيز جهودها الدبلوماسية الرقمية، مع التركيز على كيفية تكييف اتصالاتها كي تتناسب مع السياقات اللغوية والثقافية والسياسية المختلفة. وتحقيقاً لهذه الغاية، يتطرق هذا المقال إلى المفاهيم الخاصة بالدبلوماسية الرقمية والتوطين، ويوضح طرائق التنفيذ الناجح لاستراتيجيات التوطين من خلال دراسة حالة، فضلاً عن مناقشة فرصها وتحدياتها واتجاهاتها المستقبلية في مجال الدبلوماسية الرقمية. هذا ويوضح المقال أن التوطين ليس مجرد عملية ترجمة، وإنما هو أداة حاسمة للتواصل الدولي الفعال في عالم مترابط متعدد اللغات والثقافات.

كلمات مفتاحية: الدبلوماسية الرقمية، التوطين، الترجمة، السياق، منصات التواصل الاجتماعي.

Introduction

Throughout history, diplomacy has been the key mechanism for conducting international relations, promoting peace, and managing conflicts between countries. In recent years, and with the widespread use of the internet and digital communication technologies, traditional diplomacy has undergone a major transformation, shifting towards what is known today as ‘Digital Diplomacy’. This term generally refers to the use of social media and other digital platforms by diplomatic entities to interact in real-time with the global audience, rather than relying solely on conventional means of diplomatic communication such as letters, correspondences, and face-to-face meetings. This new approach to diplomacy has proven to be instrumental in shaping international relations nowadays in a highly interconnected global community¹.

However, in order for digital diplomacy to be effective, it should take into consideration the diverse linguistic and cultural contexts of the audiences it seeks to engage with. This is where localization becomes essential. Localization, as a strategic element, ensures that diplomatic content is not only accurately translated into local language(s), but also culturally appropriate and contextually relevant. Without proper localization practices and strategies, digital diplomacy campaigns would fail to engage the intended audience, potentially leading to miscommunications, misunderstandings, or even conflicts.

Based on the abovementioned facts, this study explores the intersection of digital diplomacy and localization. It examines how governments, diplomats, and international organizations can use adapted digital content to enhance their engagement efforts across the existing linguistic and cultural boundaries. The study will discuss the importance, strategies, and challenges related to localization. It will also shed light on its future directions in the realm of digital diplomacy. In line with these objectives, this study seeks to address the following questions: How does localization affect the success of digital diplomacy? What are the key strategies and practices to localize digital diplomacy content effectively? What challenges and limitations do diplomatic entities face when implementing localization to their digital content?

¹ Bjola, C., & Holmes, M. (2015). *Digital diplomacy: Theory and practice*. New York: Routledge.

By answering these questions, this exploratory study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the role of localization in enhancing digital diplomacy. The insights gained from this study will be valuable for diplomats, policymakers, and communication professionals working to improve the effectiveness of their global outreach efforts.

1. Digital diplomacy: redefining diplomatic communication

Digital Diplomacy, also known as ‘e-diplomacy,’ ‘cyber diplomacy,’ or ‘public diplomacy 2.0’ refers to the strategic use of communication technologies, such as social media, websites, blogs, and other online communication tools to conduct diplomatic activities and engage with foreign publics². Since digital platforms have become more accessible and widely used by the general public, they provide an opportunity for diplomatic entities (e.g. governments, embassies, diplomats, international organizations, and NGOs) to disseminate information and communicate directly with foreign audiences, bypassing traditional gatekeepers such as mass media institutions.

First introduced in 2001 by Dizard, digital diplomacy has started to gain the attention of the international community as a tool for conducting and enriching public diplomacy endeavors³. Some scholars have defined digital diplomacy as “the growing use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and social media by a country in order to achieve its foreign policy goals and practice Public Diplomacy”⁴. Those who adopt this definition consider that the medium of communication has changed but not the content, which means that instead of communicating with foreign publics over the radio, countries now are able to communicate with them through Twitter or Facebook channels for example. Other scholars, on the other hand, have taken a different perspective on digital diplomacy, defining it as a brand-new instrument⁵.

The academic literature on digital diplomacy has examined its advantages in terms of global reach, real-time communication, and the ability to tailor messages to specific audiences. Bjola and Holmes argued that digital diplomacy enables countries to shape international narratives and

² Ibid.

³ Dizard, W. (2001) *Digital Diplomacy: U.S. Foreign Policy in the Information Age*. New York: Praeger.

⁴ Manor, I. (2014). *Exploring Digital Diplomacy*. Retrieved from <http://digdipblog.com/about/>

⁵ Cercel, M., & Saftescu, R. (2015). Digital diplomacy-perspectives and impact on traditional diplomatic practices-case study: Digitization Impact on Romanian and Belgian national diplomatic systems. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Education Research*, 1(2), 318-328.

engage with the global audience more effectively than ever before⁶. Moreover, the inherently interactive nature of social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) facilitates two-way communication between diplomats and citizens, allowing diplomats to manage international relations proactively by engaging with public inquiries in real-time. Additionally, Zaharna highlights the networked nature of communication in the digital age, emphasizing that digital diplomacy requires effective cultural sensitivity and adaptability to local audiences⁷. This is where localization comes into play.

2. Localization: adapting to local contexts

Localization, often abbreviated as ‘L10n’ is traditionally associated with the business, marketing, and media sectors. The term itself originates from the notion of ‘locale’, which represents a set of parameters that defines a particular audience’s language(s), region, and other preferences.

As for its definition, the Globalization and Localization Association (GALA) defines Localization as “the process of adapting a product or content to a specific locale”⁸. Jiménez-Crespo gives a more detailed definition of localization who views it as a “complex set of processes that make interactive digital texts available for users who do not share the linguistic and sociocultural context of those for whom the original digital product was intended”⁹. These two definitions highlight the fact that localization involves more than a mere translation task, it is rather a multifaceted process that involves adapting digital content of various types (e.g. texts, graphics, multimedia, and interactive formats) to fit the linguistic, cultural, and societal preferences of a specific local audience, ensuring that messages resonate on a deeper and culturally relevant level.

Various studies have demonstrated that localized digital content is far more effective at engaging international audiences than standardized content¹⁰. For instance, in the global marketing sector, companies that localize their websites and advertisements to fit local contexts are more likely to connect with consumers in different regions around the world, thereby building their brand identity

⁶ Bjola, C., & Holmes, M. (2015). *Digital diplomacy: Theory and practice*. New York: Routledge.

⁷ Zaharna, R. S. (2010). *Battles to Bridges: U.S. Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy After 9/11*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁸ Globalization and Localization Association (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.gala-global.org/knowledge-center/about-the-industry/language-services>

⁹ Jiménez-Crespo, M. A. (2019) ‘Localization’, in M. Baker and G. Saldanha (eds.) *The Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, New York-London: Routledge, pp. 299–304.

¹⁰ Ibid.

effectively. It could be argued that this concept applies equally to diplomacy, where localized digital content would reach a broader and targeted audience, which, in turn, would promote the nation's image in a favorable light.

3. Why localization matters in digital diplomacy

The relationship between localization and digital diplomacy has not yet been extensively studied. However, existing research suggests that the two areas could complement each other. Diplomatic entities that invest in localized content for their digital diplomacy campaigns are more likely to build stronger relationships with international audiences¹¹. Additionally, localization can contribute to the achievement of diplomatic goals and foreign policy objectives by harnessing the interactive properties of social media and digital platforms. The dynamic nature of these elements has brought about several opportunities for diplomatic entities:

- **Building trust and credibility:** One of the primary reasons localization is essential in digital diplomacy is to build trust and credibility with foreign audiences. When diplomatic actors demonstrate an understanding of local language(s) and cultural nuances, it signals respect for the host country's cultures and social values. This, in turn, would help diplomats to strengthen their presence and to build trust and credibility with the local population, making them more receptive to diplomatic initiatives.
- **Enhancing soft power:** Soft power, as defined by Nye is the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce¹². Countries that invest in localized and multilingual digital diplomacy campaigns can influence other nations more effectively through non-coercive means, such as culture, values, and policies¹³. States that are perceived as culturally aware and respectful of local values are more likely to be viewed favorably by the target foreign public, which would significantly amplify the states' soft power.
- **Effective crisis communication:** Localization is particularly important during crises and emergencies, such as natural disasters, pandemics, and conflicts. In these situations, timely, accurate, and culturally adapted communication is paramount. For instance, during the

¹¹ Manor, I. (2019). *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹² Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs.

¹³ Muhammad, I. (2016). Localization of Digital Public Diplomacy Messaging: An Effective Practice, Amplifying the Impact of Soft Power (Examples from the Middle East).

COVID-19 pandemic, embassies and international organizations, such as the United Nations (UN) and World Health Organization (WHO), localized health messages to align with local beliefs and behaviors regarding public health, helping to ensure compliance with safety measures.

4. Key strategies and practices of localization in digital diplomacy

As already stated previously, adapting digital content to resonate with different audiences is essential for governments and international organizations in pursuing their diplomatic endeavors in today's interconnected world. Successfully bridging linguistic and cultural gaps through digital platforms can lead to increased diplomatic engagement. In order to achieve this, diplomatic entities need to employ thoughtful localization strategies that consider linguistic, cultural, legal, and other relevant elements of the targeted audience. The most crucial strategies are presented in the figure below:

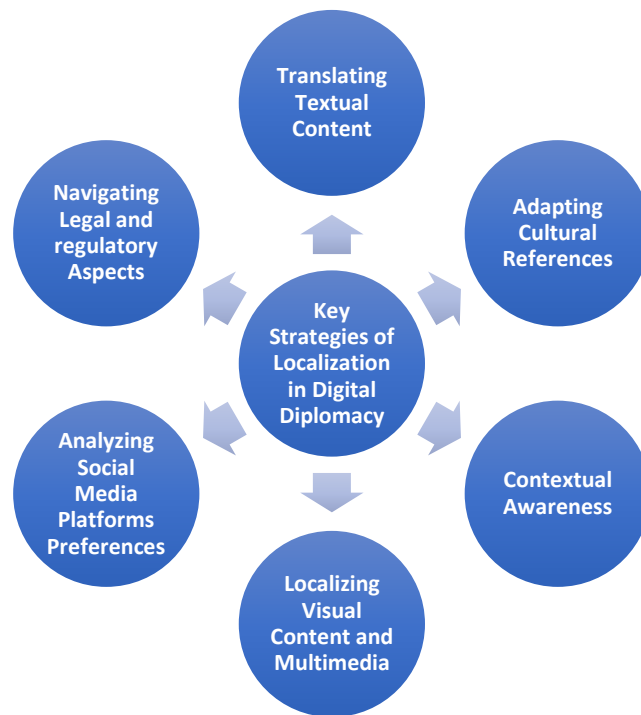


Figure (1): Key strategies of Localization in Digital Diplomacy.

4.1 Translating textual content

Translation is undoubtedly the most fundamental component of localization. In the context of digital diplomacy, diplomatic content needs to be translated clearly and accurately into the target audience's language(s) to ensure its accessibility. However, translation in this context should not be understood as a mere word-for-word substitution from one language to another, but more importantly, an adaptation that reflects the local communicative style preferences, including, dialects, colloquialisms, and idiomatic expressions, which ensures that the content feels authentic to the local audience¹⁴. For instance, some people may prefer formal language, while others may respond better to direct and friendly communication. Thus, overlooking these nuances when translating textual content can lead to a failure to connect with specific target audiences, potentially causing unintended miscommunication, or even worse, misinterpretation. Therefore, it is essential for diplomats to seek the assistance of professional translators or local language experts who are familiar with the linguistic nuances of the target audience's language(s).

4.2 Adapting cultural references

Culture is central to how messages are received and interpreted. It extends beyond surface-level language to include societal values, norms, and expectations. Different cultures have varying interpretations of symbols, colors, and imagery. For instance, a message that is well received in one country could be deemed inappropriate or offensive in another due to cultural nuances. Thus, before engaging in localizing digital content, diplomats should consider the following: Which cultural references are deemed appropriate or relevant to the target audience? Which cultural taboos or sensitivities should be avoided? In this way, localization ensures that diplomatic messages are culturally appropriate, in a way that reflects the target culture's values, traditions, and customs¹⁵. Adjusting diplomatic communications with the target audience's unique cultural requirements and interests is necessary for pursuing successful diplomatic campaigns. Failure to do so could potentially confuse, offend, or alienate the target audience.

¹⁴ Cull, N. J. (2019) *Public Diplomacy: Foundations for Global Engagement in the Digital Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

¹⁵ Okonkwo, I. & Mujinga, J. & Namkoisse, E. & Francisco, A. (2023). Localization and Global Marketing: Adapting Digital Strategies for Diverse Audiences. *Journal of Digital Marketing and Communication*. 3. 66-80.

4.3 Contextual awareness

Contextual awareness involves understanding the local historical, political, economic, and social landscapes. In this regard, diplomatic entities aiming to localize digital content need to be aware of historical tensions, current political climates, and socio-economic conditions in the target region to avoid controversial or offensive statements. Thus, content that demonstrates empathy and understanding of local issues and realities will more likely resonate with the target audience and foster positive diplomatic relations¹⁶. Conversely, a failure to recognize these contextual factors can result in diplomatic disputes or exacerbate existing tensions.

4.4 Localizing visual content and multimedia

In digital diplomacy, the visual aspect plays a significant role since it can sometimes communicate messages more than what texts do¹⁷. Consequently, diplomatic entities should pay close attention to the following elements when localizing visual content on their digital platforms:

- **Images and graphics:** Diplomatic entities need to choose visuals that are culturally appropriate and relatable to the target audience. In this case, they should replace or modify images or symbols that may contain cultural references that could be misunderstood or perceived as offensive in the target culture.
- **Colors and design:** Another important visual element that diplomatic entities need to consider when localizing visual content is the cultural associations and preferences regarding colors and design aesthetics. Colors can carry different meanings and emotions in different cultures, so adapting visual elements accordingly is crucial to align with local sensibilities.
- **Multimedia content:** Diplomatic entities should adapt audio and video content by providing translated subtitles, voice-overs, or dubbed versions. Besides this, they also need to pay attention to language nuances, voice tone, and cultural references to ensure the localized content feels natural and engaging to the target audience.
- **User Interface and User Experience:** In addition to the previous visual elements, diplomatic entities need also to localize the User interface (UI) and the User experience (UX) aspects,

¹⁶ Chadwick, A. (2017). *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*. Oxford University Press.

¹⁷ Gavrilović, A. (2019) *Visual digital diplomacy: Opportunities for diplomatic practice*. Retrieved from: <https://www.diplomacy.edu/blog/webdebate-summary-visual-digital-diplomacy-opportunities-diplomatic-practice/>

such as buttons, icons, labels, layout, and navigation menus on their websites and mobile applications to suit the language(s) and cultural preferences of the target audience, ensuring a seamless and intuitive user experience that aligns with local norms and expectations of the target audience¹⁸.

4.5 Analyzing social media platforms preferences

The social media platforms used by the general public vary widely from one country or region to another. While social media like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are prevalent in North America, Europe, and Africa, other countries may favor local alternative platforms such as WeChat in China, VKontakte in Russia, or LINE in Japan. Therefore, effective localization in digital diplomacy requires diplomatic actors to analyze the target audience's preferences for social media platforms in each region and tailor their content accordingly. This strategy ensures that diplomatic actors reach audiences on platforms where they are most active, which would significantly enhance their outreach and engagement.

Additionally, it is worth noting that the type of content varies significantly between platforms. For instance, content on Instagram may require more visual storytelling. Twitter, on the other hand, is more suited for concise messaging and real-time updates. Thus, diplomatic entities that tailor their digital content based on the specific platform usage and content type in a particular region can create more engaging, accessible, and impactful communication.

4.6 Navigating legal and regulatory aspects

Digital diplomacy, by nature, involves operating in diverse legal and regulatory environments across different regions. Each country or region has its own set of laws that regulate data exploitation. For instance, the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) imposes strict rules on data privacy, requiring diplomatic entities to obtain explicit consent from users before collecting their personal information and providing them with the right to access, modify, and delete their data¹⁹. Failure to consider these elements can result in legal actions and reputational

¹⁸ Singh, N. (2012) *Localization Strategies for Global E-Business*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁹ Bessadi, N. (2023) *How can we balance security and privacy in the digital world?* Retrieved from <https://www.diplomacy.edu/blog/how-can-we-balance-security-and-privacy-in-the-digital-world/>

consequences, making it imperative for diplomatic entities to be well-informed as well as compliant with local laws and regulations when localizing digital content for the target audience.

Through the successful implementation of the abovementioned localization strategies and practices, diplomatic entities can bridge cultural gaps effectively and foster positive relationships with international audiences through thoughtful and adapted engagement.

5. Case study: Localization of Sweden's social media profiles in the Arab World

Many countries have created special social media profiles to speak to the Arab world and interact with their citizens. Sweden is among these countries that successfully used localization strategies; it applied it to different social media platforms, including Twitter²⁰, Facebook²¹, and Instagram²², which are the preferred and most frequently used social media platforms in the Arab world.

The official Facebook account of Sweden in Arabic is one of the most popular Foreign States Facebook accounts in the Arab world. With over 1.1 million followers, it mainly provides information about life in Sweden. It is worth mentioning that Sweden's social media platforms are managed by the Swedish Institute, which is a governmental agency charged with the responsibility of disseminating information about Sweden abroad. The social media posts on their Facebook are cleverly tailored to deliver information about the life and history of Sweden in the Arabic language in a way that is culturally acceptable and emotionally appealing. It also provides information in an explanatory and simplified way, which matches the preferences of the Arabic target audience's communicative style. Additionally, it interacts with and answers direct questions and comments received from its public followers.

By this thoughtful approach to localization, Sweden can achieve their digital diplomacy goals by bringing more audience to their accounts and hence foster trust and credibility, as well as increase their soft power impact in the Arab world countries.

²⁰ https://twitter.com/sweden_ar

²¹ <https://ar-ar.facebook.com/arswedense/>

²² <https://www.instagram.com/arswedense/>

6. Challenges facing localization in digital diplomacy

While localization offers numerous opportunities, several challenges would complicate its implementation in digital diplomacy. One major issue is the resource constraints. Localization requires a significant investment in resources, including human capital (e.g. translators, cultural consultants, IT specialists, and graphic designers), technological tools (e.g. Content Management Systems (CMS), Translation Management Systems) time, and financial backing²³. For small countries or diplomatic institutions with limited budgets, it can be challenging to allocate sufficient resources to fully localize their content across multiple languages and platforms.

Another challenging aspect of localization in digital diplomacy is maintaining a consistent global diplomatic message while tailoring it to fit local contexts. Digital diplomacy often involves engaging with sensitive political issues, which can be risky. Messages that resonate in one country or region may spark controversy in another, and diplomats are required to strike a careful balance to avoid misinterpretations that could be perceived as offensive to local governments or populations.

Furthermore, the speed of digital diplomatic communication positioned itself as an important challenge facing localization. In the fast-paced world of digital diplomacy, events can unfold quickly, requiring immediate responses, especially during crises or rapidly evolving situations. Localizing content in real-time can be difficult, particularly when dealing with sensitive or politically charged issues that need careful consideration.

7. Future directions in localization and digital diplomacy

The future of localization and digital diplomacy is evolving rapidly thanks to technological advancements and the increasing importance of cross-cultural communication. Here are some emerging trends that could play a role in reshaping the practices of localization within digital diplomacy:

- **AI-powered localization:** The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) is likely to play a vital role in the future of localization in digital diplomacy. AI-powered Neural Machine Translation programs (NMT) can assist diplomatic actors and

²³ Esselink, B. (2000) *A Practical Guide to Localization*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Pub. Co.

international organizations with fast and automated translation and digital content adaptation in real-time. On the other hand, machine learning algorithms have proven valuable in analyzing local preferences, recognizing patterns, analyzing sentiments, and forecasting trends, which would help diplomats refine their strategies dynamically, making their messages more appealing to the target audience. However, human oversight remains essential while using AI to ensure that localized content is accurate, culturally appropriate, and aligns with the diplomatic entities' objectives.

- **Hyper-localization:** As digital platforms enable more targeted communication nowadays, diplomatic actors and international organizations may increasingly engage in hyper-localization. It is an approach that involves adapting digital content, using big data and research analytics, to audiences in specific regions, cities, or even demographic segments within a country (e.g. youth, professionals, or minority communities), allowing for a more nuanced and highly adapted approach to diplomatic engagement.

8. Conclusion

The role of localization in digital diplomacy in the 21st century cannot be overstated. As global communication becomes instantaneous and widespread, diplomatic actors and international institutions should continuously adapt their messages to different linguistic, cultural, and political contexts by means of localization. In this study, it was demonstrated that successful digital diplomacy campaigns depend heavily on the implementation of effective localization strategies. By carefully refining digital content to reflect local language(s), cultures, concerns, and platform preferences, diplomatic entities can build trust, foster cooperation, enhance soft power, and promote their foreign policy goals more effectively in the target regions. However, challenges such as resource constraints, maintaining global and local consistency, and the pace of localization remain ongoing issues.

In conclusion, it could be argued that the future of digital diplomacy will increasingly rely on localization strategies, supported by advanced technologies such as AI-powered tools to ensure that diplomatic messages resonate across cultural and linguistic divides. Therefore, to remain relevant and impactful in the digital age, governments, diplomats, and international organizations should continue to invest in multilingual and localized communication strategies to engage more

deeply with diverse audiences. Future research should further explore the synergies between these two fields, as they represent a powerful combination of global engagement and effective international communication.

9. References

- Bessadi, N. (2023) *How can we balance security and privacy in the digital world?* Retrieved from <https://www.diplomacy.edu/blog/how-can-we-balance-security-and-privacy-in-the-digital-world/>
- Bjola, C., & Holmes, M. (2015). *Digital diplomacy: Theory and practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Cercel, M., & Saftescu, R. (2015). Digital diplomacy-perspectives and impact on traditional diplomatic practices -case study: Digitization Impact on Romanian and Belgian national diplomatic systems. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Education Research*, 1(2), 318-328. <https://doi.org/10.24289/ijsser.106416>
- Chadwick, A. (2017). *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*. UK: Oxford University Press.
- Dizard, W. (2001) *Digital Diplomacy: U.S. Foreign Policy in the Information Age*. New York: Praeger.
- Esselink, B. (2000) *A Practical Guide to Localization*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Pub. Co.
- Globalization and Localization Association (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.gala-global.org/knowledge-center/about-the-industry/language-services>
- Gavrilović, A. (2019) *Visual digital diplomacy: Opportunities for diplomatic practice*. Retrieved from: <https://www.diplomacy.edu/blog/webdebate-summary-visual-digital-diplomacy-opportunities-diplomatic-practice/>
- Jiménez-Crespo, M. A. (2019) 'Localization', in M. Baker and G. Saldanha (eds.) *The Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, New York-London: Routledge, pp. 299–304.
- Manor, I. (2014). *Exploring Digital Diplomacy*. Retrieved from DigDip Blog: <http://digdipblog.com/>
- Manor, I. (2019). *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Muhammad, I. (2016). Localization of Digital Public Diplomacy Messaging: An Effective Practice, Amplifying the Impact of Soft Power (Examples from the Middle East).

- Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Singh, N. (2012) *Localization Strategies for Global E-Business*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zaharna, R. S. (2010). *Battles to Bridges: U.S. Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy After 9/11*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.