2 Love–Hating the Digital

In Brussels, there are two types of people: those with one smartphone and those with two.

Sabine, a seasoned diplomat, is coordinating her country's EU Presidency. She has two phones: one private and one for work. She is well into her tenth consecutive year in Brussels. She loves classical music and lives with Coco, her golden retriever, but in recent months, she has had much less time to devote to either.

The job of leading meetings between national ministers and officials on everything from agriculture to energy rotates every six months, and now it is Austria's turn at the head of the table. Like an orchestra conductor, Sabine tracks the progress of a large number of files. Presiding over the work of the EU Council of Ministers, she encourages the twenty-seven member states to reach a consensus on often complex and contentious issues. This involves texting, emailing, calling and meeting. She also ensures that Austria represents the Council in negotiations with the European Parliament and the European Commission and drives progress on EU legislation. To succeed in these tasks, the presidency needs to understand the various sides of the debate without ever losing sight of the ultimate goal: to act as 'an honest broker' when managing formal routines between the member states.[1] For decades, being an honest broker has been considered one of the highest goals of the presidency when negotiating and securing key deals. The more deals a country brokers – especially challenging ones – the more competent their presidency is later regarded.

[1] Puetter, U. (2024). Theorising the Presidency of the Council. In R. Coman, & V. Sierens (Eds.), *EU Council Presidencies in Times of Crises* (pp. 31–54). Springer Nature.

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The dual-phone approach is part of the official security policy of the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but it is also Sabine's way of drawing a line in the sand. With two phones, she can preserve the sanctity of her private conversations while managing the torrent of notifications and professional exchanges that pour in each day. Sabine needs the clear division not just as a matter of convenience but to get through her punishingly long hours of work. She spends most of them on her computer, on and off from eight in the morning until the end of the official working day – and then most evenings too.[2] Once in a while, Coco barks. Almost constantly, the phones beep.

A few buildings away from Sabine's office, Daan is at work. Daan is his member state's spokesperson for COREPER I, II and the Political and Security Committee (PSC) – some of the EU's most senior and strategically important forums for decision-making. Daan has only one phone, which he charges multiple times a day to keep in touch with all his contacts. His many years in Brussels have taught him that communication needs to be done in what he calls a 'Southern way'.[3] For him, it is not enough to write an email, click send and hope that things will work out in the formal meetings. 'You have to invest time,' Daan tells anyone who wants to understand the core of his job. 'You have to meet in person and talk. Sometimes, you have to pour in some liquor and order some nice food to convince others why your point is important.' Our conversation with Daan takes place in a glass-walled meeting room deep inside a PERMREP building between Rue Belliard and Rue de la Loi. When we sit down at the table, he puts his phone screen up on the table between us and says, 'I'll have to check that from time to time.' 'How does this all work,' we ask, 'the need to meet people in person, have a drink, and constantly be available amid the constant distraction?' Everyone here, Daan says, is addicted to their phones. Everyone is texting and app-ing all day. He meets his fellow spokespersons from the other PERMREPs in person multiple times a week, but their names pop up on his phone screen on a daily basis. A lot of work is done this way. Short texts are

[2] Fieldnotes, 19 October 2021. [3] Fieldnotes, 15 November 2019.

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sent or received: 'Can you support my Ambassador in Council tomorrow?' or 'Here's a version of the text how we would like it.' In this world, Daan finds himself a natural operator, spinning between face-to-face meetings, meals, drinks, emails, text messages and the intricate network of chat groups that serve as communication bloodlines. In the realm of instant messaging, WhatsApp reigns supreme. It is the most widely used system in the world, with over two billion users in 2025 – but in Brussels, it is more than just a tool. Its logo – a cheery icon featuring a white phone receiver in a green speech bubble – subtly signals the zing of excitement people feel when a small red number appears on the top right corner, indicating they have received a message. WhatsApp is also the primary digital thread that connects diplomats and officials in Brussels. When they chat on WhatsApp, their bodies and offices disappear. Over at another EU Representation, for example, one of Daan's colleagues is sitting in a small, stuffy office: a tennis bag in the corner is emitting a damp smell[4] – none of which is apparent during their online interactions. WhatsApp is both a virtual site of strategic diplomatic interaction and a social intermediary of the Brussels Bubble.[5]

EMOTIONAL AMBIVALENCE

The familiar myth is that digital tools in politics and diplomacy bring either efficiency or disaster. But when we observe Sabine and Daan, a different reality emerges, denoting neither efficiency nor disaster but something in between that is messier and more human. Phones and computers may be straightforward, practical tools, but the emotional ambivalence they provoke is nuanced and complex. This ambivalence captures the contradictory attitudes and emotions that diplomats and EU officials experience when navigating digital technologies in their professional lives. To understand how this works, in this chapter, we focus on five people – the leading diplomats Sabine and Daan, and the ambassadors Lukas, Jakub and Noah, all of whom we visited, interviewed and observed at work. They all have strikingly different

[4] Fieldnotes, 27 March 2019. [5] Ansari, A. (2017). *Modern Romance*. Hauteville.

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emotional relationships to the digital, but what they share is an ambivalence: a love–hate relationship not particular to them but embedded in the daily life of the whole EU. Officials, spokespersons, diplomats and national and institutional representatives in Brussels simultaneously depend on and resent their tablets, emails, phones and social media. Digital technologies open new modes of forging relationships and accessing information, but at the same time, they threaten to overwhelm EU staff by bombarding them with too much information and forcing them into too many interactions.

In 2017, MIT psychologist and sociology professor Sherry Turkle published the remarkable book *Alone Together*.[6] Turkle, who observed and interviewed hundreds of high school and college students, teachers and parents in order to study their emotional relationship to digital devices, notes how digital technologies, in partly replacing the physical encounter, shaped how the students related to each other, including their sense of belonging, love and care. 'Insecure in our relationship and anxious about intimacy,' she concludes, 'we look to technology for ways to be in relationships and to protect us from them at the same time.'[7] Our research and writing have been haunted by a similar observation of ambivalence, apparent from meetings with the inhabitants of the Brussels Bubble.[8]

To get a deeper sense of this love–hate relationship, we asked Daan to explain how he uses his phone. European cooperation and diplomacy, for him, is about communication, he says: a diplomat, indeed, is 'a communicator'.[9] What has shifted with the adoption of digital technologies is the arena in which this communication happens. The leading platform used to be Place Schuman, the central roundabout of the European Quarter. Now it is still Place Schuman,

[6] Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone Together: Why we Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. Basic Books.

[7] Ibid., p. xii.

[8] For a further application of Turkle's work to the digitalisation of diplomacy see also Eggeling, K. A. (2025). Evocative Screens: Ethnographic Insights into the Digitalization of Diplomacy. *International Political Sociology*, *19*(1), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1093/IPS/OLAE046.

[9] Fieldnotes, 13 October 2021.

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but it is also the chatrooms, email interfaces and website windows open on his smartphone. Dan feels that this plethora of platforms makes the diplomatic work of communication simpler because there is seemingly more information to gather and draw on – but it has also become more difficult, as this information is more fragmented and diffuse. Being constantly contactable can also stall the negotiation: too many cooks spoil the broth. Daan is worried about the risk of a file getting stuck in the pipeline because suddenly everyone is weighing in at every turn. Over time, another element of reflexivity has set in among Daan and his colleagues about how they use platforms like WhatsApp and Signal, and what this means for other forms of diplomatic communication, such as the diplomatic cable, that are challenged in their wake. For centuries, cable messages were the main way diplomats communicated, but now, says Daan, cables have almost 'disappeared' from his working life. Meanwhile, formally planned phone calls between higher political representatives like ambassadors, ministers or even heads of state are becoming much less common: now, many have one another's private numbers, and they simply make the call from their personal phone. This presents a problem for how diplomacy can be studied twenty years from now, Daan says with a nod and smile. It also presents a problem of internal transparency and of ensuring that the right person or group gets the messages they need. In light of the tools that are replacing formal diplomatic communication, Daan has two worries about chat groups. Firstly, an outside player can access the information – even if the app claims it is encrypted. And secondly, there's the concern that you make an easy mistake. Here, he mentions accidentally sending a piece of information to the wrong group chat or upsetting someone by forgetting to include them. Technical and social anxieties, it seems, become entangled in the diplomatic smartphone.

INFORMATION OVERLOAD

'There is also a further drawback,' says Daan. With more actors involved, there is the danger that things will stop moving due to an information traffic jam and lead to what the social science literature

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calls information overload. Daan knows the feeling well – and he is not alone. Indeed, as long as there has been recorded information, there has been the perceived risk that humanity will be swamped by it. The increase in information overload as a social phenomenon and a topic of public discourse has followed the rollout of digital technologies across society over the last decades. Across psychology, data science and the social sciences, there is no single generally accepted definition of the phenomenon, though 'it can best be understood as that situation which arises when there is so much relevant and potentially useful information available that it becomes a hindrance rather than a help'.[10] Information overload has a particular, sometimes devastating, meaning for diplomats and political officials. In both diplomatic theory and diplomatic self-understanding, a diplomat is not just a communicator and a messenger, but a master of collecting, validating, curating and evaluating information. Gathering information on the local scene and reporting it home is still seen as one of the most important functions of the diplomatic envoy.[11] In multilateral diplomacy too, 'influencing the flow of information is', as Michael Manulak puts it, 'the currency of diplomacy'.[12] It is therefore no surprise that scholars of international negotiations and diplomacy are fascinated by the information revolution as a transformative force that speeds up diplomacy and its signalling functions in the meeting of states.[13] The ideal diplomat is a master of handling information without being overwhelmed by it. This mastery requires social network skills and a cognitive and practical ability to handle vast, rolling

[10] Bawden, D., & Robinson, L. (2020). Information Overload: An Overview. In David P. Redlawsk (Ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedias, Politics* (pp. 1–29). Oxford University Press.

[11] Jönsson, C., & Hall, M. (2003). Communication: An Essential Aspect of Diplomacy. *International Studies Perspectives*, 4(2), 197.

[12] Manulak, M. W. (2019). Why and How to Succeed at Network Diplomacy. *The Washington Quarterly*, *42*(1), 174.

[13] Jönsson, C. (2016). Diplomacy, Communication and Signaling. In C. M. Constantinou, P. Kerr, & P. Sharp (Eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Diplomacy* (pp. 79–91). Sage.

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waves of fresh and often complex information. In Brussels, we have observed different ways of coping with information overload. While Sabine takes phone-free walks with Coco, immerses herself in classical music and attempts to differentiate between her professional and personal information streams, Daan seems to have accepted that his own and his colleagues' addiction to their phones has become an indelible feature of diplomatic life. Sabine protects herself through her Ministry's two-phone system. For Daan, it is his offline engagement that helps him navigate the increasingly digitised Brussels information-sharing environment. 'You have to know the surroundings you are acting in,' he explains. When you are on WhatsApp or reading emails or using Twitter being online is an important part of diplomatic communication work, but you also 'have to have a situational awareness of what is going on around you'.[14] Keeping this overview, what the diplomatic studies literature describes as 'information spanning'[15] is one of the most demanding parts of the diplomat's job in a rising sea of complex information.

But sometimes, the job of information management gets so demanding that even the most senior diplomats succumb. On another day in another office between Place Schuman and the Parc du Cinquantenaire, we meet Lukas, who has been his member state's deputy ambassador for several years. If he had to pick a word to describe his usual working day, he would say 'treadmill'.[16] He describes his everyday work as a job without a beginning or an end that bears no resemblance to the classic nine-to-five day. And thanks to computers and smartphones, it often runs late into the night. It was similar in his other diplomatic postings, but in Brussels, whose media and communication environment he calls the 'Brussels-overdose', it feels particularly

[14] Fieldnotes, 5 November 2019.

[15] Hocking, B. (2005). Introduction: Gatekeepers and Boundary-Spanners: Thinking about Foreign Ministries in the European Union. In B. Hocking, & D. Spence (Eds.), *Foreign Ministries in the European Union: Integrating Diplomats* (pp. 1–17). Palgrave Macmillan.

[16] Fieldnotes, 19 March 2019.

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daunting. Hundreds of emails arrive in his inbox every day, and he assumes it is the same for all his Brussels colleagues. The sheer quantity of messages leaves him feeling almost paralysed, and he tells us he is constantly buried under an overwhelming mountain of information. When he opens his email inbox during the day, all he does is click, delete, click, delete, click, delete.

With so much information coming in all the time and people constantly staring into their smartphones and screens just to manage the inflow, Lukas is worried that thinking and analysis are falling short. Trying to bring some semblance of order to the chaos, he tried keeping and updating an Excel sheet that included the names and social media accounts of all the important voices in Brussels, but after a few weeks, he gave up. 'There is so much potential in how we and the EU more generally could use digital communication,' he says, but it is simply too much for one person to stay on top of. When he speaks of 'the EU more generally', he is thinking about ways in which the institutions could better communicate the work of the Union to its citizens. When it comes to his office and his own work in it, it's all about internal communication, he tells us, proudly sharing that he has introduced an extra information-sorting mechanism among the PSC ambassadors. When he started in Brussels, there was a single WhatsApp group, which 'gave me a massive headache', he tells us. After raising his concerns with his colleagues, the group was split into two: the official group in which work-related matters take centre stage and a second, more informal group that leans more towards leisure and offers a respite from the formalities of official discourse. While the official group is dedicated to debating Council positions and sharing pre-meeting assessments of negotiation texts, the unofficial one is more likely to feature a discussion of the current Champions League battles. Both groups are important, says Lukas: one for preserving professional face during their meetings and one for nourishing social bonding and personal trust outside them. We ask him if he uses two different phones for these two groups. No, he says, but of course he is using a secure email system. The return to the topic of email reminds Lukas what a massive

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headache this is, too. 'The thing with the emails was worst when we held the Presidency,' he says. One morning, he had almost 4,000 unread messages in his inbox. Not knowing how many of them required careful reading and possibly further analysis, he decided to assume that most of them were not personally directed at him and were probably sent to other colleagues who would contact him if they were really important. 'And so, do you want to know what I did with all of them?' he asks with a smile. 'I deleted them all.'

FALSE TRANSPARENCY

Daan's strategy for assessing which messages to read and reply to, and Lukas' strategy of trying to keep an overview, failing, deleting everything and implicitly hoping that colleagues will fall back on alternative channels, both illustrate how Brussels Bubble members approach and deal with endless information streams and permanently looming information overload. The experiences considered so far have been mainly concerned with what diplomatic staff do when performing their work. But another dimension of engagement with the constant presence of smartphones, computers, email and social media becomes apparent when our participants reflect on what happens when digital devices enter a group setting – in particular meetings inside the confidential diplomatic negotiation room. On this matter, Daan and Lukas both feel the same ambivalence: while both see the danger of leaks from within the room, both are also convinced that they need access to their smartphone while the meeting is in formal session. Daan explains: 'When you sit in COREPER for ten hours, you can't *not* have your phone for those ten hours' because the ambassador may need something, the capital may call or you may have to supply or ask for extra information. Lukas, who is higher up in the diplomatic hierarchy and more the receiver than the supplier of information, reaches the same conclusion via a different logic. 'I know I'm sounding very negative and that's because I'm deeply sceptical about what these devices [smartphones] are doing to the diplomatic profession . . . I don't have any problem with the rule that there are meetings

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where the phones need to be off and outside of the room', he tells us. 'The only problem I may have with it is more personal in that without my smartphone I couldn't distract myself.' He laughs diplomatically and restates that in principle, meetings without phones may be a good idea in Brussels.

This opinion is shared by another national representative sitting a few blocks away on Avenue de Cortenbergh. Jakub is the COREPER II ambassador of a central European member state and is deeply frustrated by smartphones in the meeting room. His main frustration lies less with text messages or emails than social media. While some of his colleagues claim to belong to 'a bit of an older generation' with an 'aversion' to digital technologies,[17] Jakub's sentiments run deeper. He describes how digital devices that are supposed to make diplomatic work easier actually end up being overwhelming and disruptive, and a distraction from his 'real job'. His digital ambivalence does not just reflect that he feels challenged in his role as the controller of information. It also makes him feel, like Lukas, that his ability to withdraw, filter or even secure information is undermined. For Jakub, central to this undermining process are the ways in which digital devices make leaking more prevalent. Choosing a metaphor from medicine, Jakub explains why the use of social media is such a problem during COREPER meetings:

> Would you see a lot of use of social media for the operators in the operating room in a hospital? No. They operate. They need peace, they need quiet, they operate . . . And at the end of the process, they can inform the public that [the] operation was successful and [that] the patient is on a good way to recovery. But you don't need social media from the point of the surgeon entering the operating room [until] the point of leaving it. That is what diplomacy is. We are like surgeons. And if we don't do our work in peace and quiet, we could blow it, and the patient would . . . well, die. If I knew one of my

[17] Fieldnotes, 11 November 2018.

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> COREPER colleagues was tweeting what was going on in our room before we finished our operation, I wouldn't feel comfortable speaking anymore.[18]

The transparency that social media promises, Jakub argues, becomes a 'false transparency'. His remarks remind us of the enduring debate around the relationship between confidential diplomacy and the public which harks back to the aftermath of World War I when the world was grappling with the devastating consequences of secret alliances. President Woodrow Wilson, in his Fourteen Points, called for 'open covenants of peace, openly arrived at' and urged the global community to abandon clandestine diplomacy.[19] This vision called for the conclusions and results of international negotiations to emerge from behind closed doors and be exposed to the scrutiny of the public eye. Almost a century later, as digitalisation unfolded, figures like Bill Gates would echo these sentiments, advocating for technology to build an 'information highway' in international affairs.[20] However, while the advent of the internet and digital communication might seem to promise a new age of openness in which citizens can directly access diplomatic processes, it turns out that such transparency is often illusory. 'If one would make such preparative work public, it would no longer be preparative work', says Jakub.

> People would state their official public positions, and nothing would happen, and the true work would move elsewhere behind some closed door in perhaps a more limited setting, not necessarily including all the member states. So member states like Denmark would be the first to fall out and be excluded, only the big guys would . . . so one has to be careful about that. Greater transparency may, if it's applied a wrong, at a wrong stage, may result, may

[18] Fieldnotes, 26 March 2019.
[19] Reisser, W. J. (2012). *The Black Book: Woodrow Wilson's Secret Plan for Peace*. Lexington Books, p. 4.
[20] Gates, B. with Myhrvold, N., & Rinearson, P. (1995). *The Road Ahead*. Viking, New York.

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> actually lead to much less transparency, much less transparency. There would be suspicion and reluctance rather than more trust in the process. And this is something we cannot afford at this level. Then COREPER would break up, and we would no longer be able to run the show.[21]

One example of how leaks from confidential negotiation rooms can impact European politics is the drama that unfolded around the negotiations of Operation Sophia in January 2020. Operation Sophia, launched by the EU in 2015, was a mission to address the growing migrant crisis in the Mediterranean. Its primary focus was to disrupt people-smuggling networks operating off the coast of Libya, a key sea route for migrants trying to reach Europe. The operation not only intercepted smuggler boats but also trained the Libyan Coast Guard and enforced the UN arms embargo on Libya. While it saved some lives at sea, Operation Sophia also sparked heated debate over its lack of effectiveness and the way it forced smugglers to use rubber dinghies, putting migrants at even greater risk.[22] Operation Sophia was a key attempt to address one of the major political struggles in Europe: how to manage migration.

It is the end of March 2019, and preparations for the negotiations of Operation Sophia are being made across the European capitals and different sites in Brussels. All formal negotiations about the mission take place in the meeting rooms of the Council building, where the PSC Ambassadors assemble weekly to discuss files related to European security. Among those in the room is Noah, a deputy ambassador of a northern European member state. The group is negotiating whether – and if yes, how – to extend the deployment of European Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) Med, the European naval force in the Mediterranean.[23] On 31 March, the ambassadors will reach a

[21] Fieldnotes, 26 March 2019.

[22] www.Politico.eu/article/europe-deadly-migration-strategy-leaked-documents/, last accessed 21 October 2025.

[23] www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-towards-a-new-policy-on-migration/file-eunavfor-med-operation-sophia, last accessed 22 October 2025.

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decision to extend the mission by six months, for which the committee will publish a six-page-long 'PSC Conclusions' document. The road to this decision in the meetings, leading up to it, has been far from smooth. The day before we meet Noah, there was 'a very serious leak in relation to Operation Sofia', he remembers. This memory is prompted by us asking about his own and his colleagues' use of Twitter (now X) in the negotiation room. 'We had a very serious leak yesterday and the day before,' Noah says. 'Yesterday [details were] reported very quickly both in Reuters and *Politico* about the contents of our discussion on Sophia.' He hesitates. 'This is very, very worrying and very, very damaging, and it's prompted a long debate in our PSC WhatsApp group what it is that we can do to avoid this.' Luckily, Noah tells us, the 'serious leak' came right at the end of the negotiation, so the day's work was almost done, which meant that the tension that spread through the room when some participants saw the Reuters newsflash on their phones did not ruin the talks from the outset. On Reuters, we can read:

> BRUSSELS, March 26 (Reuters) – The European Union is considering a six-month extension to its Mediterranean mission, which is aimed at cracking down on smugglers and migration from Africa, but only for air patrols and training Libya's coast guard, according to a draft statement. The current mandate of the so-called Sophia mission expires this week and Italy wants to change it so that its ships are no longer patrolling and picking up people in the sea. Other states such as Germany want to prolong Sophia.[24]

According to Noah and many of his colleagues, the danger here is that non-final negotiation positions are shared, showing not only the 'cards' of individual member states, but also the internal disagreements of the Union as a whole. Since the risk of leaks has increased with the proliferation of personal digital devices in the past two decades, the PSC has begun to move some of its meetings into closed

[24] www.reuters.com/article/idUSL8N21C44W/, last accessed 22 October 2025.

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rooms from which phones are banned, but this is more for meetings in which sensitive, often military, information is presented to the ambassadors. This was not the case for the meeting in question, but Noah sees the bigger issue of lack of control lying not so much in the technical set-up of the meeting but in its social composition.

> These meetings are made up of big groups of people. Yesterday, for example, it was the Ambassadors plus two or three [support staff, i.e. lower ranked diplomats like Daan] from each member state. Then you have representatives of the EEAS, people from the mission itself, then the legal secretariat, the Commission, someone from the General Secretariat of the Council, and so on. All in all, there are around 200 people in the room during the discussion.

And of course, each has their own computer and phone: 200 people looking at 400 screens.

'We need those', Noah explains, 'because we also need to send the drafts of the conclusions home to the capital for approval while the negotiation is going on. So that increases the pool of possible people who could leak part of the information to the press.' Noah says the reason why leaking is so damaging is that it hinders or even decreases the chance of reaching an agreement. Here, he is not only thinking about an accord with the twenty-seven representatives in the room but also with all of their capitals back home. The capitals will be furious if they read about the content of the negotiation in the media rather than via their communication lines with their seconded diplomats. 'I certainly feel this way and understand this,' Noah says. 'You have to understand that I have two parties in my coalition at home, and one party feels this way, and the other party feels that way, and we're trying to bring their opinions together.' If something he says in the room is leaked to the press, the leak may only be a momentary glimpse of the negotiation but could still be enough to upset not just the confidence among PSC members in Brussels, but either of the parties at home, and thereby make any agreement less likely. Leaks, therefore, can have severe repercussions on the reaching of a joint

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European agreement and the safeguarding of the PSC's esprit de corps and mutual trust, and they can also damage the personal career of the diplomat in question.[25]

While Noah's example concerns internal European politics and decision-making, a colleague holding the same job as Daan but for another member state recalls another example of the serious geopolitical consequences of leaking. The incident happened a few months earlier, in the context of hardening relations between the EU and Russia, when the sanctioning of Russian individuals residing in the EU was on the agenda of a COREPER meeting. 'Journalists', this colleague tells us, 'are getting super-aggressive and trying to get their hands on the Council conclusions before the meeting's over.' They start to contact him, the spokesperson and many of his colleagues, while the meetings were still going on. If someone buckles and tells them something, this can have very direct impacts on political scenarios. 'A few months back, the journalists were aggressively asking about who's on the EU watchlist for Russian citizens for sanctions.' When twenty or thirty of them called him, he eventually picked up the phone to one and told them that for good reasons he was unable to name names. But then those very names were 'somehow leaked – and then the people who were on the list actually had the time to remove their money out of the banks, which was going to be frozen by the EU'.[26]

As digital devices move into the meeting rooms, offices and overlapping spaces of diplomats' private and professional communication, the web of connections expands – and with it, the opacity of European multilateralism. What superficially appears to be a democratisation of information can quickly transform into an unmanageable flood of information that provokes feelings of disorientation, lack of control, overload and threatened confidence and trust. In a

[25] Michalski, A., & Danielson, A. (2020). Overcoming Dissent: Socialization in the EU's Political and Security Committee in a Context of Crises. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *58*(2), 328–344.

[26] Fieldnotes, 27 March 2019.

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contemplative moment, Daan considers, 'if diplomacy is a process whereby you try to get interests to collide, convene and match up, then [constant digital communication] doesn't always make it easier'.[27] Lukas agrees and adds another, more collective dimension to how screens and digital devices change what he considers to be the core of his job. With Twitter (now, X) in the negotiation room, there is a risk that the negotiators forget that they are there to reach an agreement with, and among, each other. The danger of this, he observes, is that 'they begin negotiating for the gallery' – the imagined audiences of the hundreds and thousands of people outside the room who are following them on social media platforms.[28] If this happens, then places like the EU Council meeting rooms or the General Assembly of the United Nations or the command rooms at North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), says Lukas, will lose their purpose. As long as negotiations are ongoing, confidentiality, and the trust that no one will break that confidentiality, are paramount. If we understand diplomatic communication in this sense, then the unreflexive use of digital technologies may, indeed, herald the 'end of diplomacy'.[29]

REACHING CITIZENS

But this understanding is only half the story. The other half is how practitioners in Brussels think about using digital communication to talk not to their colleagues or their capitals, but more generally to European citizens and observers of the life of the Bubble far away from Brussels. Thinking about tools like social media in what the academic literature calls 'public diplomacy', Daan is reminded of a scene from the James Bond movie *Skyfall*.[30] In *Skyfall*, Bond's unit in the British Secret Service, MI6, is hacked, and Bond is catapulted into a cyber-espionage drama, which – alongside tropical islands and beautiful

[27] Fieldnotes, 13 October 2021. [28] Fieldnotes, 19 March 2019.
[29] Dizard (2001) cited on p. 97 in Adler-Nissen, R. (2016). Diplomatic Agency. In C. M. Constantinou, S. Kerr, & P. Sharp (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Diplomacy*. (pp. 92–103). Sage Publications.
[30] Fieldnotes, 13 October 2021.

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women – features lengthy discussions of cyberspace and hard drives. In the first scene, old-school Bond dismisses the young, tech-savvy Q, saying he lacks experience. Daan knows Q's one-liner comeback by heart: the one where Q triumphantly turns to Bond and tells him, 'I can do more damage on my laptop sitting in my pajamas before my first cup of Earl Grey than you can do in a year in the field.'[31]

In *Skyfall*, the laptop symbolises both empowerment and vulnerability: a tool that can shape heroic destinies or dismantle global orders. While many of Daan's reflections circle around the darker aspects of cyberspace, he also recognises the undeniable promise that digitalisation brings to his work. A few days ago, he put out a video on 'strategic autonomy' (an EU buzzword of the time) online: it quickly got 70,000 views. Where once he might address a room of a 150 or 200 people, now he can communicate to a virtual audience of tens of thousands. The rules of engagement have shifted. 'Suddenly you can reach everyone,' Daan reflects.[32] His Ministry of Foreign Affairs has its own production company, and his PERMREP has its own production studio. Videos and other digital content can be created efficiently and in-house. The need for traditional media as an intermediary to reach voters at home and citizens across the Union is diminishing.

But not everyone working in Brussels at Daan's level shares his conviction that this is positive. His colleague Pierre, a French diplomat who we meet for a coffee at Café Pulp, complains that the entire spectacle of EU social media content is produced 'for the Bubble, by the Bubble'.[33] In his experience, it is 'the educated, the elite, [who] are interested in Europe. They already believe that it's important that they're not the average farmer in the French countryside, because that person has local concerns and is going to be reading the local newspaper and is not going to follow Donald Tusk on YouTube or Twitter.'[34] Pierre cites a number of short videos produced by the European

[31] Fieldnotes, 27 March 2019. www.imdb.com/title/tt1074638/characters/nm0185819, last accessed 22 October 2025.
[32] Fieldnotes, 28 March 2019. [33] Fieldnotes, 16 November 2018. [34] Ibid.

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Council's press media team in 2018 that feature Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council at the time. The videos are blockbuster-style trailers published on the Council's Twitter and Facebook page that, according to Pierre, make him look like a character out of Hollywood, almost a Bond figure. In one of the videos, backed by a mounting drumbeat, images of Tusk appear in rapid succession: Tusk alongside Emmanuel Macron, Tusk with Donald Trump, Tusk and Theresa May. The trailer shows glimpses of forthcoming spectacles, including the tantalising prospects of an 'informal meeting EU leaders in Salzburg'.[35] As the clip plays, not only are the dates inked into Tusk's diary unveiled, but a promise reverberates throughout the digital tapestry: the Pole at the helm of European affairs vows to solve myriad issues, from the ever-pressing concerns of security and trade to the labyrinthine challenges of managing Brexit. The only problem, according to Pierre, is that the dramatic video depicting a heroic Tusk is an embarrassment. It just shows, he says, that 'Tusk is just a sixty-five-year-old European politician on social media, and that there's nothing cool about him.' Pierre feels strongly about this. 'It is not reaching the people beyond Brussels, where it may be more important to convince them that Tusk . . . is an important person and that he does something that's relevant to their lives.'[36]

NETWORKED INTIMACY

All the people we met in Brussels still remember their professional lives before widespread digitalisation: the time before the explosion of email and the proliferation of social media and FaceTime and video calls; the time before they became hooked on their smartphones. For some, the memories of that era are reactivated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic that paralysed much of the Bubble's working life in 2020 and the two years that followed.[37] With a bit of hindsight, some see the normalisation of 'meeting online' that followed the

[35] www.euronews.com/2018/09/06/watch-donald-tusk-just-came-out-with-an-action-movie-style-trailer, last accessed 23 October 2025.
[36] Fieldnotes, 25 March 2019. [37] Covered in detail in Chapter 6.

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pandemic as a relief. Daan, for example, compares the time it takes to conduct a preparatory meeting online versus one in person. With a face-to-face meeting, he explains in 2019, 'you have to go to the Council [at least] half an hour before the meeting starts. Then you go there for an hour, half an hour and then you have to come back.'[38] In other words, it takes two hours to have one short meeting. Fast-forward to COVID-19, and the narrative transforms. 'Today, I have a meeting, I connect, and the meeting's done in half an hour, and I can continue to do something else,' Daan says in 2021. Time has been compressed, allowing diplomats to navigate a web of meetings and engagements more efficiently than ever before.

Sabine, lest we forget her, is not a fan of this development. Digital communication, she thinks, has made everything happen 'too fast'. The expectation that you are reachable at any given moment, will respond promptly and will always be on call creates an unrelenting pressure that infiltrates and needlessly blurs the personal and the professional spheres. 'Not everyone is able to make clear distinctions,' Sabine says about how her colleagues use their digital devices. This is why Sabine has two phones. Yet at the same time, she actively contributes to the blurring process. An example of this is her Twitter (now, X) account. On a Sunday afternoon, she tweets a photo of a glass of Westvleteren, shares that the strong, dark Belgian beer is her 'Sunday treat' and posts it on her official Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) account even though she is sitting at the dining table in her home. Some of her other tweets show images of a trip she took to the Albertina Museum in Vienna, and photos of Coco: Coco in a park, Coco on a train, Coco asleep at home. On Europe Day, she posts a simple blue and yellow photo of the European flag with the caption a 'Happy #EuropeDay today to all my European friends!'[39]

Social science calls the interaction between the members of the Brussels Bubble 'networked intimacy'. It is the intimacy afforded by

[38] Fieldnotes, 19 October 2021.

[39] https://x.com/MSchubertMFA/status/1655869846687473664/photo/1, last accessed 23 October 2025.

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laptops, tablets and smartphones – devices which, as the experiences above demonstrate, are increasingly central to the diplomatic task of sharing information, strategising, negotiating and communicating European politics. More than simply speeding up the processes by which Daan, Jakub, Lukas and Sabine do their jobs, digital devices also create emotional ambivalence, information overload, anxiety, satisfaction, frustration and stress. They unsettle distinctions between the superfluous and the essential, the personal and the professional, the office and the home.

If we look at what is happening in Brussels through the work of Sherry Turkle, we are left with a cautionary tale about the social and personal consequences of the increasing reliance of EU diplomats and staff on digital technologies. While these tools provide convenience and connection, they also risk diminishing the quality of relationships and the ability to engage in meaningful self-reflection.[40] Turkle describes how smartphones and social media create a constant, low-effort connection, allowing people to stay in touch through text messages, social media posts and 'likes'. This, she argues, leads to a shift whereby many (especially younger) people, now prefer the distance and control offered by digital communication over the unpredictability of face-to-face conversations. Yet unlike the students in Sherry Turkle's work, and with the partial exception of using a smartphone for brief moments of downtime and diversion in long and dragging meetings, members of the Brussels Bubble are less convinced that digital communication gives them control. For them, there is no clear strategy for handling the devices that bring them both pleasure and pain. The use of digital technologies is ambiguous, uneven and contested, revealing a profession deeply split about the usefulness and legitimacy not just of social media use, but of digital technologies in general. Taking such disagreements seriously, we can begin to understand that digital technologies are divisive because the disagreements

[40] Turkle, S. (2016). *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in the Digital Age*. Penguin.

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surrounding them reflect deeper questions about the very nature of diplomacy and how European cooperation can be promoted and preserved.

Being connected is now non-negotiable. On the one hand, the convenience and constant buzz of online interaction and validation can feel meaningful and even (arguably) typically diplomatic. On the other hand, if diplomacy is built on face-to-face interaction[41] and the ability to understand and share the feelings or interests of others,[42] then digital tools appear deeply *un*-diplomatic. Not only can they entail a diminished quality of interaction, as Turkle also warned, but they can also lead to loss of control when, for example, information overload prevents meaningful analysis, or confidential information is leaked from closed meeting rooms. Not all leaks are destructive, of course: they can also function as what our participants call 'trial balloons', promoting a country's messaging to journalists before negotiations. Such leaks are often the result of authorised instructions to spread an idea and to assess the reaction of an intended audience, usually the public.[43] But when the room itself begins to leak, trust and confidence in the diplomatic institutions erode.

In Brussels, diplomats and officials make most of their decisions about digital devices on their own. Noah mentions half-way through our conversation about Operation Sophia that he knows that rules exist about the use of laptops and phones in formal meetings, but that he does not know them by heart.[44] How then are Noah, Daan, Sabine, Lukas and Jakub to respond when the very technologies that connect Brussels both jeopardise their personal and professional lives and endanger the European Union they are building?

[41] Nair, D. (2019). Saving Face in Diplomacy: A Political Sociology of Face-to-Face Interactions in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. *European Journal of International Relations*, *25*(3), 672–697.

[42] Holmes, M. (2013). The Force of Face-to-Face Diplomacy: Mirror Neurons and the Problem of Intentions. *International Organization*, *67*(4), 829–861.

[43] Terrill, G. (2000). *Secrecy and Openness: The Federal Government from Menzies to Whitlam and Beyond*. Melbourne University Press.

[44] Fieldnotes, 27 March 2019.

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Disagreements about how to use new technologies are common in the early years – and often decades – in which they find their niche within existing social structures and procedures. In the autumn of 2025, one of our research participants told us that up until 2022, IT research and development in key European institutions was focused on a range of technological ventures. Most of these projects, however, "froze" when OpenAI published ChatGPT.[45] What this chapter has shown is that given the fact that even the 'simpler' technologies like text messages, emails and social media have led to ambiguous and multi-dimensional assessments of what digitalisation means for (European) diplomacy and policy-making, it is only fair to suggest that ambivalence will increase further in the context of more complex technologies such as quantum computing and generative artificial intelligence.

[45] Fieldnotes, 2 October 2025.

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