



## Full Length Article

# Digital geographies of diplomacy: The uneven digital mediation of spaces and encounters at the UN Human Rights Council

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## ABSTRACT

In Spring 2020, as COVID-19 spread across the globe, diplomats embraced the digital as a means of continuing to practise statecraft. Drawing on online observations of the (resumed) 43rd, 44th and 45th sessions of the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) in 2020, and 23 interviews with representatives who participated in these sessions, this paper addresses two lacuna in the existing literature: the under-theorisation of the role of the spatial in studies of digital diplomacy; and the lack of attention paid to diplomacy in digital geographies scholarship. We explore how diplomacy, an inherently spatial practice, is being 'recast' by the digital via a shift both in the *form* of diplomatic interactions, and in the human and non-human *actors* involved in doing diplomacy. In doing so, we take as our starting point Leszczynski's theory of the mediation of socio-spatial-digital relations. We consider two features of digital diplomacy which scholarship on digital mediation opens up for examination. First, how digitalisation – specifically the use of 'real-time' online audio-visual communication devices – has altered the geographies of diplomatic inclusion and exclusion at the HRC, simultaneously fostering interactions between diverse diplomatic actors whilst also exacerbating pre-existing spatial exclusions. Second, the shifting geographies of diplomatic encounters, including how digital technologies have reconfigured opportunities for intimacy. The paper concludes by calling for dialogue between scholars of digital diplomacy and of digital geographies.

## 1. Introduction

I'm at home watching the 'Interactive Dialogue of the Working Group on Enforced Disappearances' live on UNWebTV. The Vice-President, presiding from Geneva, introduces the working group chair, who is participating remotely from a poorly lit, book-lined room in his native Argentina. The chair has ten minutes to present the group's reports, though he speaks so rapidly that the interpreter struggles to keep up, and garbled Spanish subtitles flash across the screen. For the next hour, the session continues with in-person statements from state representatives in the vast but mostly-empty Assembly Hall at the *Palais des Nations*. I'm struck by the contrast to the last time I was at the Human Rights Council (HRC) in 2017 when there was jostling for seats at the start of sessions. Then there's the disjuncture between wide-angle shots of the socially-distanced room and close ups of speakers' faces as we move to video submissions. These include a choreographed speech from the representative of Honduras, sitting at a large black desk behind a home-made name card, and a statement from the delegate from Peru, speaking from a bedroom lined with Peruvian flags. Civil society contributions follow – almost all via video. Memorable interventions include compelling statements from a group of Jewish lawyers, and the daughter of a human rights lawyer detained in China, though several

interventions are almost inaudible. Most NGO representatives speak against a white background with plants, sofas, and the corners of paintings occasionally visible in shot. I find myself glancing round my own living room. The session ends with a video response from the working group chair – now seated in a different room in his house. (Fiona's observation notes from 45th HRC Session, September 2020)

In Spring 2020, as COVID-19 spread globally, diplomats embraced digital technologies as a means of continuing to practise statecraft. Whilst Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) have institutionalised social media use to communicate with varied audiences (Duncombe, 2019; Hayden, 2012), the pandemic necessitated the digitalisation of nearly all diplomatic practices. Notably, diplomats engaged in so-called 'Zoomplomacy', involving online meetings, pre-recorded video interventions, and 'hybridised' participation at global summits (Shapiro & Rakov, 2020). In so doing, politicians, bureaucrats, and global institutions accelerated longer-term trends towards the digitalisation of diplomatic spaces and practices.

Scholars had considered how digital technologies are reshaping the speed and nature of diplomacy prior to the pandemic (e.g., Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Gilboa, 2016). Manor (2019:20), for instance, has proposed the term 'the digitalisation of public diplomacy' as a framework for understanding the 'long-term process in which digital technologies influence the norms, values, working routines and structures of

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2024.103147>

Received 31 October 2023; Received in revised form 28 March 2024; Accepted 29 May 2024

Available online 1 July 2024

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diplomatic institutions' and the 'metaphors and self-narratives that diplomats employ to conceptualise their craft'. While early scholarship examined diplomats' social media use for public diplomacy, scholars have begun to examine the impact of digitalisation on more quotidian aspects of diplomatic life, employing ethnographic methods to examine the role of digital technologies in establishing diplomatic hierarchies, subjectivities, and imaginaries (Adler-Nissen & Eggeling, 2022; Eggeling & Versloot, 2023).

Whilst this is a rich body of literature, it nonetheless remains aspatial (for exceptions see Naylor, 2020; Bramsen & Hagemann, 2021). Where space features, it is largely with reference to its annihilation (along with time) through the 'globaliz[ation]' of diplomatic practices (Manor, 2019:3). This is despite a body of geographical scholarship establishing how space shapes diplomatic performances, interactions, and subjectivities (e.g., Dittmer & McConnell, 2016; Jones & Clark, 2019; Kuus, 2015). This paper addresses this lacuna by exploring how diplomacy, an inherently spatial practice, is 'recast' by the digital. Here, we build on Cockayne et al.'s (2017) work to embrace the dual meaning of 'recast' to refer to how 'the digital' transforms both the *form* of diplomatic interactions, and the human and non-human *actors* involved in diplomacy. In doing so, we are cognizant both of diplomacy scholars' efforts to embrace a broad definition of 'digitalisation' to refer to diplomats' engagement with myriad digital technologies across heterogeneous socio-technical contexts (e.g. Adler-Nissen & Eggeling, 2022), and digital geographers' calls to 'qualif[y]' the term 'digital' in relation to 'specific objects, techniques, logics, processes, practices, and effects' (Ash et al., 2019:3). While recognising the pervasive influence of varied digital artefacts in shaping diplomacy, for space reasons, we focus our analysis of 'digitalisation' specifically on diplomats' use of 'real-time' online audio-visual communication devices. We seek to understand how these digital practices are reconfiguring the spatialities of the HRC and the geographies of inclusion and exclusion within diplomatic space, and reshaping opportunities for intimate diplomatic encounters.

We argue that digital geographies literature is well placed to address these dynamics. Geographers have demonstrated the digital's constitutive role – as 'ontics, aesthetics, logics' and 'discourses' (Ash et al., 2019:3) – in the (re)production of space, and in shaping embodied spatial practices, including work (Richardson, 2018), intimacy, encounter (Koch & Miles, 2021), sociability (Molnar, 2014), and social reproduction (Longhurst, 2013). To date, however, there have been no systematic attempts to bring these two bodies of scholarship together to understand how the digital has shaped the spaces and spatialities of diplomacy. In response, this paper addresses two lacuna in the existing literature: the under theorisation of the role of the spatial in studies of digital diplomacy; and the lack of attention paid to diplomacy in digital geographies scholarship.

Empirically, this article draws on online observations of the (resumed) 43rd, 44th and 45th sessions of the UN HRC held between March and October 2020, and 23 interviews with representatives participating in these sessions. As demonstrated by the vignette above, the HRC adapted to COVID-19 by introducing 'hybrid' meetings and pre-recorded video interventions. To understand these significant shifts in the HRC's functioning, we take as our starting point Leszczynski's (2019:18) theory of mediation, namely 'the multiple yet contingent comings-together of technology, people, and place and space that are productive of our quotidian lived realities'. We ask what such a perspective on the digitally mediated production of space reveals about the relational dynamics underpinning digital diplomatic practices.

The following section reviews under-explored connections between digital geography and diplomacy studies and argues for using mediation as a framework for understanding the intersections between the digital, the diplomatic, and the spatial. Section 3 first elucidates the specificities of the HRC as a site of polyilateral diplomacy (Wiseman, 2010) (with state diplomats, UN staff and civil society representatives directly engaging with each other), before reflecting on conducting digitally mediated research into diplomatic spaces and practices. Drawing on our

online ethnography and interviews, Sections 4 and 5 discuss two features of digital diplomacy which geographical scholarship on mediation opens up for examination: first, the spatiality of diplomacy and how digitalisation has altered the geographies of inclusion and exclusion within diplomatic space; and second, the shifting geographies of diplomatic encounters, including how digital technologies have reconfigured opportunities for intimacy. We conclude by calling for dialogue between scholars of digital diplomacy and of digital geographies.

## 2. Conceptualising the digital geographies of diplomacy

Diplomacy studies and digital geography share a lexicon. The terms that describe the core functions of the former – communication, representation, and mediation – would not be out of place in a digital geographies primer. Despite their shared vocabulary, however, their connections have hitherto been overlooked. Whilst diplomacy scholars have considered how digital communications, particularly social media platforms, have catalyzed normative and procedural shifts in diplomatic practices (Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Duncombe, 2019; Hedling, 2023; Manor, 2019) little attention has been paid to the spatial dimensions of these transformations and specifically to three dynamics. First, scholars have overlooked how digitalisation has troubled understandings of diplomacy as premised on bounded territory by blurring distinctions between the foreign and the domestic and invoking overlapping scalar and spatial imaginaries. Second, and empirically, existing studies have focused on pre-existing loci of diplomatic activity, with little attention paid to how digital technologies reconfigure *where* diplomacy can take place and the role of alternative sites on the performance of diplomatic agency (Kuus, 2015:370). Finally, there has, until very recently, been limited theoretical work on how digital technologies have shaped the interpersonal dynamics between diplomatic actors (for exceptions see Eggeling & Adler-Nissen, 2021; Naylor, 2020; Aggestam & Hedling, 2023).

At first glance, the COVID-19 pandemic's impacts on diplomacy have necessitated a renewed consideration of issues of social distancing and virtual participation. Practitioners have noted how, on the one hand, the 'virtualization' of diplomacy (Bramsen & Hagemann, 2021:539) is associated with lower costs, reduced travel burdens, and opportunities for more equal diplomatic interactions. On the other hand, diplomats face ongoing technical challenges and cybersecurity concerns (McConnell & Manby, 2024). Crucially, practitioner observations point to how impacts of digital technologies on diplomacy during the pandemic varied significantly according to the type of diplomacy and actors involved (HRCNet, 2022; Labott, 2020; UNPO, 2020). Several academics, meanwhile, have framed this period of 'virtual diplomacy' as an exception, through which to understand the norms of diplomacy (e.g. Bramsen & Hagemann, 2021; Kuus, 2023; Naylor, 2020). Others have heralded the post-pandemic period as a 'new phase' of 'hybrid diplomacy', where 'physical and visual engagements ... integrate, complement and empower each other' and diplomats strategically adopt digital technologies to perform specific tasks (Bjola & Manor, 2022:471; Hocking, 2020; on longer-term impacts see Akilli & Gülen, 2023). Despite the utility of these insights, however, we concur with Eggeling and Adler-Nissen (2021:2) that, rather than a temporary aberration from pre-pandemic practices or the start of a broader transition in diplomatic behaviour, the shifts associated with COVID-19 reveal 'deeper transformations in diplomats' interactions that were already in place' but 'overlooked' by 'observers and scholars'.

In theorising the relationship between 'diplomacy and technological transformation', Adler-Nissen and Eggeling (2022:640-642) add valuable nuance to existing scholarship by rejecting 'understanding[s] of "digital diplomacy" as a separate or supplementary practice to "normal" [or] "traditional" ... diplomatic work'. Drawing on fieldwork at the European Union in Brussels, they suggest that the ubiquity of digital technologies makes it impossible to disentangle 'analogue' and 'digital' diplomatic practices. Instead, taking insights from practice theory and

the sociology of science, they propose the concept of ‘blended diplomacy’ – ‘the dual process of entanglement of the technical and social and the contestation over how this entanglement impacts professional diplomatic life’ (Adler-Nissen & Eggeling, 2022:660) – to capture the pervasive influence and also contradictory impacts of digital devices on diplomatic identities, norms, and social relations. We draw inspiration from this intervention, while extending the analysis in two ways: empirically, by considering the digitalisation of human rights diplomacy; and conceptually, by bringing this work into dialogue with digital geographies scholarship to theorise the interplay between the digital, the diplomatic, and *the spatial*.

In so doing, this paper proposes engaging with the notion of mediated spatiality to account for how diplomacy is ‘recast’ by the digital. Mediation, of course, is a central concept in the study of diplomacy. Key to this has been Der Derian’s (1987) definition of diplomacy as the ‘mediation of estrangement’ that theorises diplomacy as a multi-scalar phenomenon, characterised by mutually constitutive macro- and micro-level (e.g. face-to-face) interactions (see also Leira, 2017). Drawing from alienation theory, Der Derian (1987:93) demonstrates how diplomacy is a ‘connecting link ... between individuals and entities’, but in so doing reifies their pre-existing separations. While Der Derian’s (1987, 2000) reflections on ‘techno-diplomacy’ contain the seeds of contemporary digital diplomacy scholarship, Acuto (2017:93) highlights the need to fully account for ‘the exponential expansion of the mediations and the estrangements’ within diplomacy since Der Derian made his observations, namely the ‘material objects’ and the ‘non-state diplomats’ who increasingly populate the diplomatic field. With its focus on brokering connectivity between disparate human and non-human elements and the bridging of connectivity across space, geographical scholarship on mediation shares Der Derian’s interest in the management of social relations, while providing a productive framework for conceptualising diplomacy’s shifting material and social underpinnings (see also Eggeling & Adler-Nissen, 2021:2).

Whilst early digital geographies scholarship represented ‘virtual’ and ‘physical’ space as distinct, scholars increasingly recognise the complex entanglements of digital and analogue worlds. Notably, Leszczynski (2015:729) uses the framework of mediation to suggest that all spatiality must be understood as the *effects* ‘of the contingent, necessarily incomplete comings-together of technical presences, persons and space/place’. Crucially, in rejecting a binary between the ‘real’ and the ‘digital’ worlds, mediation refuses the notion that technology is simply a ‘broker or intermediary’ of ‘social relations across space’ and instead recognises how ‘technology, social relations, and space’ are all mutually generative of spatiality (Leszczynski, 2019:19). Such a ‘relational ontology’ captures how, far from pre-determined, engagement with digital technologies offers ‘possibilities for unanticipated forms of agency, subjectivity, or socio-spatial relations’ (Elwood, 2021:211; Rose, 2016). Indeed, mediation is commonly framed as generative and ambivalent in *both* digital geographies literature and critical scholarship on diplomacy.

Two bodies of work on the spatialities of digital mediation offer productive insights into the digitalisation of diplomacy. First, work on relationality has illustrated how digital technologies shape how space is ‘perceived, known, used, and experienced’ (Ash et al., 2019:6). Digital technologies reconfigure the socio-spatial designation of particular sites, transforming, *inter alia*, workplaces into sites of sexual contact (Cockayne et al., 2017), the home into an office (Richardson, 2018), and the bedroom into a community space (Jenzen, 2017). In turn, these sites shape engagement with the digital. Crucially, reflecting Massey’s (2005) contention that space is composed of open-ended and interconnected relations across multiple sites and scales, digital technologies also extend spatial relations across distance with contradictory implications for processes of socio-spatial inclusion and exclusion (Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018). In what follows, we bring these relational framings of digitally mediated space into dialogue with relational conceptions of diplomacy, to demonstrate how the former provides a useful lens to understand how digitalisation of diplomatic space has transformed

diplomatic practices, interpersonal relations, and the scalar dynamics of diplomatic sites.

Second, we draw on scholarship on the shifting spatial distribution of digitally mediated intimate encounters. Intimacy is an inherently geographical phenomenon: at once a set of spatial relations, a mode of interaction, and a set of practices (Pain & Staeheli, 2014). In exploring the ambivalent and contradictory ways through which digital technologies unbundle notions of distance and closeness, geographers employ intimacy as an epistemological frame to examine the embodied experiences of digitally mediated connections stretching from the local/-proximate to the distant/global (Koch & Miles, 2021; Richardson, 2018). As Cockayne et al. (2017:1120) contend, there is a need to attend to the sensory elements of digitally mediated intimate encounters, including what these encounters ‘feel like’, and the spaces and geographies in/through which they occur. Scholars have also shown how the extension and intensification of intimacy occurs unevenly and is shaped by multiple factors, including bandwidth and the technical affordances of digital platforms, such that the digital can also exacerbate estrangement (Eggeling & Adler-Nissen, 2021). Taken together, this scholarship is instructive in understanding how digitalisation has reconfigured diplomatic interactions, challenging diplomacy’s historical reliance on physical proximity (Kuus, 2023).

### 3. The digitalisation of the UN Human Rights Council

To illustrate the analytical potential of digital geographies scholarship in understanding the digitalisation of diplomatic practice, we draw on research conducted at the UN HRC. Created in 2006 to replace the (by then discredited) UN Commission on Human Rights, the HRC is a political body composed of states that is mandated to ‘serve as a forum for dialogue on thematic issues on all human rights’.<sup>1</sup> Based in Geneva, the Council meets for at least ten weeks annually across three sessions. Whilst there has been detailed analysis of the evolution of human rights norms within the UN, and the impacts of the politicisation of UN human rights mechanisms (e.g. Risse et al., 1999), within diplomacy studies the UN’s human rights bodies have received little attention compared to the more politically powerful Security Council, or to the roles of Permanent Missions. Existing scholarship on the HRC has focused on the transition from the Commission on Human Rights (e.g. Alston, 2006), and the Council’s inherent politicisation wherein states with poor human rights records play leading roles (Freedman, 2014; Weiss, 2016).

Despite these political limitations, the HRC is one of the most accessible UN bodies for civil society actors. The Council’s provision for the active participation of NGOs – which includes observing and participating in Council proceedings, making oral interventions, submitting written statements, and organising side events that run parallel to sessions – enables NGOs to bring issues in front of Council members, engage directly with human rights experts during IDs, and interact with government delegates. Yet, despite this participation, and indeed NGOs having expertise that states rely upon to inform policymaking (Bob, 2005), civil society organisations face significant barriers engaging with the HRC. Not only are there limitations to NGO participation during sessions – only organisations that have consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (‘ECOSOC status’) are permitted to participate, and limited time is allocated to NGO oral submissions<sup>2</sup> – but NGOs have had their participation directly challenged by states through ‘filibustering tactics’ (Freedman & Gordon, 2022:141), and the use of points of order to interrupt NGO oral submission (Landolt, 2013).

As Freedman and Gordon (2022:135) note, there ‘remains a gap

<sup>1</sup> GA Res. 60/251, 15 March 2006, A/RES/60/251, para 5(b).

<sup>2</sup> Civil society actors have less time to speak than states at HRC regular sessions and are only permitted to deliver oral submissions when all states have spoken. As a result, if state submissions overrun civil society statements are removed from the agenda.



(some might even say gulf) in the literature about how civil society interacts with the UN human rights mechanisms, specifically the Human Rights Council'. This paper addresses this gap empirically, with a focus on how the shift to hybrid sessions and online participation impacted civil society participation. At the same time, we suggest that the HRC is a prime site to examine theories developed within the field of digital geographies. As noted above, the HRC is a quintessential site of polyilateral diplomacy (Wiseman, 2010), and it is a forum which came to prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic when human rights abuses proliferated (OHCHR, 2020). Whilst NGOs were able to submit video messages in lieu of in-person oral submissions prior to the pandemic, this practice became widely promoted after the 43rd session moved to a hybrid online/in-person mode to ensure social distancing in the *Palais des Nations* (the location of the UN Office at Geneva). While this paper focuses on the introduction of remote participation, facilitated by real-time and asynchronous audio-visual communications technologies, the changes to the HRC go beyond headline grabbing shifts to 'Zoomplomacy' and include more mundane practices such as the use of digital booking systems, algorithmic speaking slot allocation, and the use of instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp for diplomatic communication, and the 'HRC Extranet' for information sharing. When considering the impact of this digitalisation of the HRC on civil society actors, these practices need to be seen in the context of an ongoing UN liquidity crisis and the emboldening of states such as China and Russia, in addition to the comparative agility of non-state diplomats in adapting to change. Whilst many state governments have been slow to catch-up with diplomacy's digital turn, non-state actors are arguably more innovative and flexible in their use of digital technologies, for example by using digital tools to engage with diaspora, hosting online capacity-building events, and establishing social media transnational advocacy communities (McConnell & Manby, 2024).

For this research we conducted online observation of the resumed 43rd (rescheduled from March 2020 to directly precede the 44th session in June 2020), 44th, and 45th HRC sessions. Between us we watched over 60 hours of general debates and interactive dialogues (IDs) on UNWebTV across the three sessions (all of which are publicly available) and attended two online meetings which the HRC President held with civil society organisations. Our research design evolved in light of the unfolding events of 2020. Alex observed twelve IDs and panel discussions of the resumed 43rd session and 44th sessions. Based on Alex's observations of these sessions, we selected 25 meetings to observe from the agenda for the 45th session which represented a range of topic areas and formats. These included: opening speeches, general debates on various agenda items, IDs with Special Rapporteurs (on various human rights thematic issues), IDs with Working Groups, and High Commissioner oral updates. Each general debate and ID were scheduled for 90, 120 or 180 minutes.

Our observation of the 45th session was informed by a list of prompts, devised collaboratively by both authors, and drawn from preliminary analysis of emerging themes from the resumed 43rd and 44th sessions. These prompts included: shifts in tone and pacing during IDs, running order of speakers and how other technical issues occurred and were dealt with; embodied performances of speakers, pace, rhetoric, and aesthetics of submission deliveries; how statements were received, including points of order; and reflections on our own reactions to the interventions. These prompts informed (but did not restrict) what we considered when observing the sessions, and we refined our prompts as the session progressed. We watched the sessions live and took detailed notes but were also able to look back at the recordings (openly available on the UNWebTV repository, though not easily searchable) to confirm details where necessary. We coded our observation notes jointly and iteratively. The framing of mediation emerged out of this coding and analysis. Watching HRC sessions online meant we shared some of the experiences of participants, including technical challenges and the disjuncture between our own domestic realities and the gravity of the human rights situations being discussed. Fiona was also able to compare

the online sessions to her experience undertaking participant observation in person at the 36th session of the HRC. This enabled us to place the changes we observed in 2020 into perspective (for example, the changing technical protocols between the 44th and 45th sessions), thereby circumventing some of the challenges of analysing a situation in flux.

We also undertook 23 online interviews with 17 individuals from a range of international human rights NGOs who had extensive experience of UN advocacy and had participated at both pre-COVID-19 HRC sessions in-person and in online/hybrid sessions in 2020. Interviewees were identified and approached through gatekeeper NGOs known to the authors and via snowball sampling. The majority (13 out of 17) were individuals from communities directly affected by human rights abuses who were seeking redress from the HRC in respect of these violations. Follow-up interviews were conducted with 6 individuals to monitor how experiences of engaging with UN bodies altered during the study period. Interviews were conducted online, recorded (with permission) and transcribed, and in sections 4 and 5 we discuss how interviewee responses compared with our own observations of the HRC sessions. Finally, we collated and analysed announcements made by UN bodies during the pandemic, and NGO reports discussing UN civil society participation.

Responding to Ash et al's (2019:3) call for digital geographers to 'focus on the empirical specificities of the [digital] phenomena of study', in what follows we first consider how the specific technological affordances of online digital audio-visual communication technologies have shaped the spatialities of multilateral diplomacy, before discussing how these same technologies have remediated embodied micro-spatial diplomatic practices.

#### 4. Digitally mediated diplomatic spaces: geographies of inclusion/exclusion

Digitalisation has transformed the spatialities of the HRC through the incorporation of new sites within the UN's diplomatic assemblage. As McConnell and Woon (2021:3) argue, all diplomacy is relational insofar as it involves the 'establishment and maintenance of cross-border and/or cross-community relations' both at proximity and distance. Remote participation has extended these relations beyond the conference halls and corridors of the *Palais des Nations*, to include the offices, kitchens, and bedrooms of diplomats participating remotely. These hitherto domestic spaces have thus been transduced to become diplomatic sites (Kitchin & Dodge, 2011). Crucially, rather than understand the material/real spaces of the UN as ontologically distinct from the virtual/immaterial spaces of communication, or screen-based technologies as 'intermediaries' to 'spaces augmented by digital content', mediation foregrounds how the technologies that facilitate remote UN participation are themselves generative of the HRC's spatiality (Leszczynski, 2019:19). In analysing the effects of these digitally mediated spatialities on human rights diplomacy, we suggest that the geographies of inclusion and exclusion at the HRC have been reconfigured in three ways. First, by opening up the spaces of the HRC, thereby diversifying the actors involved in diplomacy. Second, by exacerbating socio-spatial exclusions for some non-state actors. Finally, by altering the nature of spatio-temporal political dynamics, with implications for diplomatic relationality. We consider these transformations in turn and outline how digital geographies scholarship can help conceptualise these shifts.

First, in opening and extending the spaces of the HRC, digitalisation has pluralised and diversified the actors engaged in human rights diplomacy. The discussion of human rights at the UN has historically been characterised by a spatial disconnect 'between the "big issues" of human rights in places physically far from Geneva, and the "little practices" that pervade the UN' (McConnell, 2019:55). Remote participation has enabled those directly impacted by human rights violations, who are often unable to attend the HRC in person, to present their case, thereby collapsing the boundaries between the HRC and spaces 'back home'. A

representative from the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) described how:

A virtual statement ... allowed us to have ... another Uyghur voice from somewhere else that usually couldn't make it to Geneva ... a Uyghur American based in D.C. whose father has been detained in a camp ... We used that opportunity to give him that platform and to voice out his concerns to the UN because it's always essential that the affected people are able to ... present their voice. (Interview, 16 October 2020).

In highlighting the need for 'affected people' to 'present their voice', these comments reflect Gregory's (2016:23) contention that the diplomatic authority of non-state actors is derived from their expertise and experience rather than their official legal standing. Whilst the HRC has long included voices of those directly affected by human rights abuses, most of our interviewees describe how they perceived that there was a greater number and diversity of witness testimonies during the 'hybrid' 44th and 45th HRC sessions compared to earlier sessions. These included Tibetan political prisoners, Amazonian Indigenous youth, and the wife of a Chinese dissident all speaking to the HRC via video. This is significant in the case of minority or Indigenous actors who, due to the 'co-constitutive' nature of 'modernity and coloniality, diplomacy and colonialism' (Opondo, 2016:41), are rarely recognised as part of the formal diplomatic milieu. In contrast, digitalisation allowed hitherto excluded minority and indigenous diplomatic actors to speak without third-party advocates. Moreover, in facilitating direct interactions between actors of different diplomatic status within the HRC, remote participation has enhanced opportunities for more polyilateral forms of diplomacy (Wiseman, 2010). For example, the representative from a Brazilian Indigenous advocacy organisation described how a video intervention from an Indigenous youth at the 44th session led to direct engagement between the organisation and Brazilian parliamentarians after the latter watched the speech via UNWebTV. By foregrounding 'how what is catalyzed by digital systems always exceeds the digital systems themselves' (Elwood, 2021:211; Leszczynski, 2015) ontogenetic theories of mediation thus account for how digitalisation of diplomatic space offers new opportunities for the realisation of such alternative diplomatic subjectivities.

However, while digitisation has opened up spaces for participation for a wider range of diplomatic actors, it has also led to the socio-spatial exclusion of some representatives. Spatial practices have long been used to establish belonging within diplomatic space (McConnell, 2020; Pouliot, 2016). Contrary to early software studies scholarship which lauded the digital's emancipatory potential, a theory of mediation which recognises the 'non-differentiated' (Woods, 2021 after Leszczynski, 2015) nature of online/offline space elucidates how these disciplinary norms have transferred to digitally mediated diplomatic space and how hitherto pre-existing diplomatic practices shape digitalisation strategies. Indeed, just as geographers have interrogated how the digital '(re)produces power and extant sociospatial inequalities along lines of gender, race, class, sexuality, age, [and] ability' (Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018:630), HRC remote participation was associated with new forms of spatial regulation which effectively curtailed engagement by some non-state actors.

Interviewees frequently complained of struggles using the UN's video upload platform. Interventions were repeatedly rejected for failing to adhere to the UN's opaque file size and video quality requirements, such that representatives spent hours submitting each video. Importantly, whilst state representatives were supported by the OHCHR secretariat to upload their speeches, the absence of dedicated IT support left less well-resourced NGOs effectively unable to submit interventions. Elsewhere, echoing scholarship on the uneven reproduction of societal inequalities through software-sorted geographies, representatives speculated that algorithms embedded with the UN's digital platforms were used to exclude them from UN space (Graham, 2005). A representative from Southern Mongolia, for instance, noted how their data continually went missing from the UN's ECOSOC status accreditation system

'without any trace' (Interview, 25 September 2020), whilst multiple interlocutors expressed their frustration at the HRC's 'priority' upload system, which appeared to favour video interventions by larger NGOs.

More than simply 'ontics', however, digitality is also an 'aesthetic' (Ash et al., 2019:3). This was evident within the HRC, where non-state actors were also subject to strict norms regarding the aesthetics of their video interventions. The aestheticization of remote diplomatic performances at the HRC offers new opportunities for what Constantinou (2018:388) terms 'visual diplomacy', whereby diplomats use images to 'transmit ideas' and shape 'relations between actors and across publics' (see also Danielson & Hedling, 2022; Neumann, 2020). Such audio-visual spectacles have become central to the 'constitution of diplomatic subjectivity and performativity of particular identities' (Constantinou, 2018:401) within the digitally mediated HRC. Interviewees described (and we observed) how the messaging, language choice, and lexical structure of both state and non-state video interventions mirrored those made 'in person' – in both instances, speakers read from a pre-prepared statement which had been submitted to the OHCHR secretariat before the meeting. In a context where the linguistic register of interventions is so consistent, these changes in their aesthetic quality are thus especially significant. Notably, whilst states were permitted to use 'diplomatic decor' (Eggeling & Adler-Nissen, 2021:9) including curated displays of flags, national dress, and landscape photography to convey diplomatic authority, civil society actors were instructed to speak against a neutral background. A representative from the Tibetan Advocacy Coalition (TAC) noted:

My colleague wasn't really thinking when he recorded his [video intervention] and he had a nice big picture of the Dalai Lama on a little shrine behind him. So, we soon enough got told that that was not allowed ... on the upload system, it says they have to have ideally a neutral background ... and you can't have any political symbols or flags or anything else (Interview, 16 September 2020).

These requirements, along with the lower production quality of NGO interventions – videos were often recorded with a phone front (or 'selfie') camera, were thus shaky, dimly lit, and with poor sound quality – meant that non-state actor's video interventions were markedly less visually arresting than those of state diplomats.

At first glance, the obvious differences between state and non-state videos provides a striking visual demonstration of the nascent digital divides, forms of spatial partitioning, and indeed 'pecking orders' (Pouliot, 2016) which characterise digitally mediated diplomatic space. Yet, to understand non-state actors' remote interventions only in terms of their deficiencies is to bely the fact that they were often the most visually arresting and rhetorically compelling HRC submissions. Their lower production value helped unintentionally to cultivate the appearance of authenticity, in contrast to the stage-managed contributions from states. Here again, reflecting Leszczynski's (2019:19) assertion that 'space is as much of an active participant in comprising and shaping "the digital" as digital technologies are themselves productive and generative of spatiality', the *where* of digital diplomacy is crucial. In some cases, by speaking remotely *from* places where human rights abuses are ongoing, non-state actors cultivate a sense of legitimacy, derived from place-based knowledge as witnesses of atrocities. Moreover, when streamed onto the large screens in the *Palais* or the phones and laptops of those watching via UNWebTV, close-up videos enable viewers to read the speaker's facial expressions. In the context of human rights diplomacy, where non-state actors use impassioned appeals for action and heightened emotional registers to evoke an embodied (and hopefully political) response from the viewer, opportunities to scrutinise the speaker's emotions only served to heighten the intervention's potency. This was particularly evident in the socially distanced context of the *Palais* where the atmosphere was particularly sedate.

Whilst there is a growing body of work considering the instrumentalisation of emotions in diplomacy, this scholarship has tended toward a narrow view of the relationship between diplomatic intentionality and

audience response (e.g., Hall, 2015; for an exception see Jones & Clark, 2019). This work is thus ill equipped for grappling with how, alongside the deliberative scripting and performance of particular emotional registers within the digitally mediated HRC, the affects induced by a given video often did not fully align with those invoked by the speaker. A theory of mediation which recognises how the affects induced by digital artefacts are contingent on the unstable relationship between bodies, hardware, and software (Rose, 2016) can better account for the shifting constellations of human and nonhuman agency in shaping digital diplomatic performances. In this case, mediation points to how the affects invoked by a non-state video intervention were as much the result of the speaker's phone camera quality and the UN's technical requirements, as they were the intervention's content and diplomats' scripting practices.

Moreover, a theory of mediation can help us to move beyond the 'pre-figured emotional pathways of anger, sadness, and detachment' (Lisle, 2016:424) which are often associated with human rights diplomacy, to consider how, despite diplomats' efforts, digitally mediated human rights diplomacy is also associated with the ludic, and, at times, the absurd. During a debate on human rights in Nicaragua, for instance, the Nicaraguan representative's video was of such poor audio-visual quality that interpretation was initially impossible. When they were finally handed a copy of the representative's written statement, the interpreter was forced to speak so quickly they were almost intelligible, transforming a serious debate into near farce. A day earlier, in a debate about human rights and COVID-19, the Namibian delegate's video intervention was so well-produced – involving multiple camera angles, the emblem of Namibia, and even a short jingle – it distracted from the speech's substantive content. Moreover, whilst some videos were abruptly cut short for being too long, technical issues left other speakers 'frozen' on screen, disrupting the debate's flow, and introducing moments of comedy amidst otherwise staid proceedings. These examples speak to how the agency of digital platforms (in addition to the agency of those using them), offers new opportunities for disruption and transgression, challenging the otherwise choreographed nature of diplomacy.

Finally, digital mediation has arguably altered the nature of political dynamics within the HRC. The lack of spatial co-presence has transformed the temporality and rhythms of meetings, with implications for diplomatic relationality. Despite being named as such, the 'debates' and 'interactive dialogues' which make up the HRC sessions were not characterised by collective discussion when conducted in 'hybrid' mode. Instead, these sessions largely took the form of pre-submitted video monologues from remote participants. As the WUC representative noted, the opportunity to 'perfect' video submissions meant that these had become 'rehearsed', giving meetings an 'unnatural quality'. She continued:

I really hated ... the virtual version. I had to film myself for over an hour, for ... a two-minute statement I had to film myself at least twenty times. Because every time I was messing it up ... so I wasted a lot of time ... When it's in person you've got one shot and you know you can't mess it up, so you do it. But when it's online you have a little bit of control, so it's just a very frustrating process (Interview 16 October 2020).

Whilst these comments speak to the additional labour induced by remote participation, other interviewees noted that the requirement to submit videos 24 hours in advance made it impossible to raise human rights concerns in real time. Moreover, in removing opportunities for improvisation and spontaneity, pre-submission left delegates unable to monitor the emotional responses induced by their speeches, and thus to gauge the micro-shifts in power dynamics that underpin diplomatic interactions. A representative of the Society for Threatened People described how:

It has a different impact on people when you do it in person, I think. When you do it online ... you only have 90 seconds. You see a person

reading a statement ... you also read a statement ... at the UN ... but you can look toward towards the people ... you are addressing ... there is a difference on an emotional level (13, October 2020).

Though digital geographers have argued that technological devices can generate 'spatio-temporal atmospheres' in the places in which they are used (Ash, 2013), here interviewees described how the loss of co-presence made it difficult to generate a shared 'ambience' in the digitally mediated HRC. Scholars have explored the significance of affective atmospheres, provided via the entanglements of bodies, places, objects, and emotions, in shaping diplomatic interactions (McConnell, 2020; Nair, 2020; Adler-Nissen & Eggeling, 2022), including at the UN (Jones, 2020). In the absence of these affective atmospheres, non-state diplomats noted that they were unable to generate a 'buzz' and a sense of momentum around specific rights violations, making it harder to obtain support from state diplomats and to foster solidarity. As a Khmer Krom representative noted, without full immersion in UN spaces, it was also impossible to become socialised in diplomatic norms:

Face to face is more important ... [to] learn an atmosphere, the world, the way that people do to work at the UN. Because online you just can see virtually you can't picture how to actually do the work at the UN (Interview 20 July 2020).

These shifts have implications for the nature of political activity within the HRC. Although the organisation is represented as one of the few sites of collaboration within an otherwise fractured international political landscape (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2011), such a designation effaces how interstate tensions, rivalries, and national self-interest haunt even the most supposedly depoliticised UN spaces (Cowan, 2013). As Featherstone and Korf (2012:665) argue, in theorising the political, the associative/dissociative binary risks producing a 'limited sense of "actually-existing" forms of contestation'. In response, McConnell (2020:5) has called upon geographers to instead take seriously the 'lively' and 'messy' character of political activity within UN space.

For non-state actors, however, digitalisation has shifted the nature of politics in a different direction. Remote participation meant that our interlocutors' engagement with the UN's multilateral forums was very far from 'lively' and 'messy'. Instead, digitalisation was associated with the increased atomisation of diplomatic activity, whereby representatives from marginalised communities have fewer opportunities to interact directly with other state and non-state representatives in real-time. These experiences align with geographers' observations that, by facilitating continuous connectivity, digital technologies have supplanted non-digital interactions and thus created new opportunities for isolation (Cockayne & Richardson, 2017:1646). Indeed, civil society representatives increasingly saw the HRC less as a means to develop relations with other diplomats, and more a forum to produce content to be circulated on social media for audiences outside of formal diplomatic networks.

Taken together, these shifts in spatial and temporal ordering offer a nuanced picture of HRC digitalisation. Indeed, digitalisation has been characterised by a sense of ambivalence for non-state diplomats. Whilst remote participation has opened up and expanded the spaces and actors that constitute the HRC, this space is highly differentiated, such that non-state actors participating remotely are not only physically and visually segregated, but are also subject to disciplinary norms which 'code' their diplomatic conduct (Cockayne & Richardson, 2017). Beyond these shifts in inclusion/exclusion at the HRC, attending to the spatial transformations wrought by the digital also draws attention to how digitalisation has led to changes in *micro*-spatial practices within the UN. If diplomacy involves the mediation of estrangement while retaining separateness (Der Derian, 1987), then the spatial (re)configurations described above have significant implications for diplomatic distance, proximity, and connection. It is to these shifts, and how they can be understood through scholarship on digitally mediated intimacies and encounter, that we now turn.



## 5. Digitally mediated diplomatic encounters: shifting geographies of intimacy

The relationship between the micro-practices of individuals at the UN in Geneva and the production of international diplomacy is underpinned by the fact that individuals with differing diplomatic subjectivities are in close proximity, participating in the same sessions or encountering one another in the back rooms, corridors, and cafes of the *Palais* (McConnell, 2020). In asking what it means for these encounters to be digitally mediated, we argue that digitalisation has reconfigured the geographies of intimacy at the HRC, with uneven implications for the 'pecking order' of the UN at Geneva (Pouliot, 2016). Drawing from practice theory, diplomacy scholars use intimacy to conceptualise how diplomats build relationality (e.g., Gould-Davies, 2013). While intimacy is characterised by definitional multiplicity, we concur with Standfield (2020:155) that – understood as 'warm informality' – intimacy constitutes 'a core diplomatic practice'. Standfield argues that 'effective diplomats leverage their social skills to create useful contacts, represent their positions persuasively and gather information' (Standfield 2020:155). We suggest that intimacy offers a productive tool for conceptualising the human rights diplomacy of minority and non-state actors as, typically excluded from state-led diplomatic spaces and networks, their advocacy relies heavily on informal encounters and the cultivation of personal relationships. Indeed, many of our interviewees explicitly used the language of intimacy to describe their diplomacy.

To date, diplomacy scholarship has implicitly assumed that diplomatic intimacy occurs in certain (private) spaces – including homes, coffee houses, or bars (Standfield, 2020) – and that social bonding relies on face-to-face interactions, whereby individuals use body language and facial cues to build empathy and trust (Holmes, 2018). However, as Eggeling and Adler-Nissen (2021) argue with reference to EU multilateral diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic, the fact that 'doings' of diplomacy in this context continued in the absence of physical interaction unsettles these assumptions. Digital geographers have also challenged claims that intimacy relies on co-location, demonstrating how 'digital technology can not only extend possibilities for ... intimacy beyond the immediately proximate, it can also intensify these encounters by transmitting audio, images or video that make them *feel* more proximate' (Koch & Miles, 2021:1390 after Cockayne et al., 2017:1120). Crucially, however, these authors point to the digital's ambivalent potential for spatially 'enfolding ... closeness and distance', in addition to how the experiential fidelity of digitally mediated intimate interactions (their experiential 'sense of proximity') is shaped by non-human materialities (e.g., bandwidth) and is negotiated according to pre-existing (and shifting) 'offline' social norms and conventions (Cockayne et al., 2017:1124). Here, we draw on digital geographies scholarship to discuss how digitalisation has led to changes in opportunities for intimate diplomatic encounters, and, when they do occur, a shift in the nature of such interactions.

The forms of digitalisation described in the previous section have made chance diplomatic encounters less likely, whilst making premeditated diplomatic interactions the norm, with implications for the ability of non-state actors to practise 'warm informality' (Standfield, 2020:155). Here, we find resonance with Koch and Miles' (2021:1379) contention that 'new practices mediated by digital technology are making many stranger encounters a matter of choice rather than chance, and they are often private as much as they are public'. Discussing sharing economy platforms and dating apps, Koch and Miles illustrate how digital platforms unsettle the spontaneous nature of in-person encounters between strangers through providing a means to 'scope, filter, and screen potential [contacts] with remarkable specificity', whilst operating through 'mobile devices means that encounters can be untethered from fixed spaces or times' (Koch & Miles, 2021:1386). This formulation can also help to explain the contradictory spatial implications of digitalisation for non-state actors at the HRC, where digital 'logics' increasingly come to 'enact progressively routine orderings of

quotidian rhythms, interactions, opportunities, spatial configurations, and flows' within diplomatic space (Ash et al., 2019:3 after Franklin, 2015).

On the one hand, the loss of physical co-presence has curtailed opportunities for 'hallway diplomacy' at the HRC (Leguey-Feilleux, 2009) – those purportedly chance encounters in diplomacy's backstage. Given their frequent exclusion from formal diplomatic space, this mode of informal interaction has long been prioritised by non-state representatives. As a representative from Guam noted when describing his colleagues' pre-pandemic experiences at the HRC:

They ... had to ... find creative ways ... to amplify their voice, to be heard, to have a conversation ... we would wait in the hallway. We'd just, like, rush them right when they came out. Introduce myself. This is who I am, where I'm from. I need to talk to you ... this is important (Interview, 8 October 2020).

Diplomats also described how side events – thematic sessions organised by NGOs during HRC meeting breaks – provided an important means for facilitating serendipitous encounters with state representatives. Such informal encounters have both instrumental value – allowing non-state representatives to directly petition state and UN officials – and intrinsic benefits. This was articulated by the WUC representative, who believed the relaxed environment of the *Palais*' Serpentine Bar was conducive to building intimate relationships:

This is where everyone ... lets loose a little bit and there is just this closeness with other people. Like we usually have a lot of meetings with states just in the cafe and knowing a very grounded environment and everyone can let their guard down and be more ... open to discussion ... than in like these like really official rooms (Interview, 16 October 2020).

These reflections point to the importance of sociability in underpinning diplomatic relationality as a means through which non-state actors establish and practice intimacy. As Nair (2020:196) argues, diplomatic sociability 'contributes to identity formation and community maintenance, enables learning, produces social capital, and generates a "backstage" where actors can manage disagreement'. Applying this analytical frame to hallway diplomacy, Kuus (2023:190) illustrates how such exchanges are neither formal negotiations, nor opportunities for 'transnational bargaining', but instead facilitate the building of relationships which may later be leveraged in formal advocacy. In the digitally mediated HRC, however, the lack of co-presence limited these opportunities for chance encounter. Where NGOs organised their own virtual side events, they lamented that these were rarely attended by state representatives and had become a means for raising public awareness, rather than formal advocacy. Crucially, an understanding of spatiality as 'always-already [digitally] mediated' (Leszczynski, 2015:729) points to the knock-on effect of 'virtual' HRC participation for interactions in 'physical' diplomatic space: even as restrictions on in-person participation in the *Palais* were lifted, interviewees noted how other diplomats' decisions to continue participating remotely forestalled chance in-person encounters in Geneva.

On the other hand, whilst remote participation meant that spontaneous meetings between diplomats of different status at the HRC were less common, digital technologies nevertheless enabled interviewees to reach out directly to state missions in ways which would be impossible in the segregated space of the *Palais*. The TAC representative, for example, noted how remote participation enabled them to expand the scope of their advocacy by arranging meetings with permanent mission staff in Geneva:

When we were in Geneva in March, it was like three days ... you're in the mission, you're in the Human Rights Council ... There's only so many people we can meet within a few days ... you know, if Norway's not available between the second and the fifth, then you're not

meeting Norway ... so now that now that it's all online, it seems to be a lot easier to get hold of people (Interview, 16 September 2020).

This ability to broker meetings which would simply not be possible in person was echoed by a diplomat from Guam:

The internet platform is building the bridge. And it makes things a little bit easier for us ... little bit more accessible. And so that part of it I'm excited about, in the sense that I'm going to be able to talk to more people ... have more conversations. (Interview, 8 October 2020).

In addition to overcoming 'logistical barriers to meeting face-to-face', representatives described how the anonymity of digital platforms enabled them to arrange remote meetings with state missions who, due to political sensitivities, would usually refuse to meet them in public. Here again, we find resonances with Koch and Miles' (2021:1385) engagement with Goffman's (1959) theory of 'impression management', which posits that 'the intensity of impression management is potentially reworked digitally as the time of the encounter is stretched temporally and can take place shielded from public embarrassment of rejection or ... consequences that can come with transgressing social norms and taboos'. Whilst the fear of public 'embarrassment' has hitherto forced states to occasionally organise diplomatic meetings in absurd locations – including an infamous 2012 meeting between the Dalai Lama and the British Prime Minister David Cameron held in the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral – digital mediation of diplomatic encounters offers opportunities to transgress diplomatic hierarchies between state and non-state actors.

In approaching 'digital objects, praxes, logics, and representations as constitutive of sociospatial relations, but not in deterministic ways' scholarship on mediated spatialities accounts for how screen-based communication technologies bring new spaces of diplomatic encounter into being, while offering opportunities for 'unanticipated forms of [diplomatic] agency, subjectivity, or socio-spatial relations' (Elwood, 2021:211 after Leszczynski, 2019). Nevertheless, what is also clear is how diplomats' decisions to engage these platforms is conditioned both by a platform's specific technological affordances – for instance how they enable discretion – but also by pre-existing spatial norms in so-called 'offline' space.

Turning to the nature of digitally mediated diplomatic encounters at the HRC, existing studies of virtual diplomacy document how the enforced formality of online diplomatic interactions has enhanced the experience. For instance, for the EU diplomats interviewed by Eggeling and Adler-Nissen (2021), the re-assertion of diplomatic decorum and décor in screen-based environments led to the establishment of relations of mutual trust. Similarly, Bramsen and Hagemann (2021:550) note how internet connection delays in virtual meetings alter the natural rhythms of conversation, necessitating 'maintenance of formal order' which can equalise diplomatic interactions, 'particularly for women', by reducing opportunities for interruptions and off-topic discussions. However, our findings diverge from these trends in two ways. First, for our respondents, the assertion of diplomatic norms in digitally mediated space *exacerbated* the perceived political and social distance between actors of different status. Interviewees reflected on how the switch to online interactions denied them the ability to use hitherto valuable creative means to assert diplomatic agency, including storytelling and humour. The representative from Guam noted how in videoconferences opportunities for such digressions were stymied:

[Remote diplomacy] is a different thing ... it's cutting us off at the knees. In person is what Pacific Islanders do best, man. We're charismatic ... we're very charming and friendly people ... That is our diplomacy ... it's love and friendship ... when we remove this element ... it really does have an impact (Interview 8 October 2020).

These reflections speak to the importance of charisma in sustaining diplomatic relationality and in establishing relations of 'warm

informality' (Standfield, 2020) for marginalised diplomatic actors. Indeed, respondents described how mediating estrangement depends on maintaining a degree of informality, such that state and non-state actors can connect on a personal and emotional level. This relied on a shared physicality and the ability to scrutinise body language and facial expressions, such that a sense of disconnection was thus evident when the face was visible. As a representative from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) described:

When you meet in person ... you interact with each other or the people that you can see. And then you know that their facial expressions and how they are really telling the truth or lying ... [in] virtual meetings, we are not intimate in person (Interview, 21 July 2020).

Unease with online interactions was compounded by the fact that participants were unable to identify who was present behind the camera and were thus fearful of disclosing sensitive information. As the CHT representative noted:

In virtual meetings, we are not seeing ... what's going on there ... because minorities and indigenous people are activists [and] are really concerned about their safety and security ... sometimes even they know the truth, they cannot tell the virtual meeting because ... there could be ... people listening. You don't ... know who is monitoring this meeting, you don't see them (Interview, 21 July 2020).

The second divergence from existing studies on diplomatic intimacy online is that, for some interviewees online meetings led to a productive *slackening* of diplomatic protocol. Several interlocutors noted how videoconferencing enabled them to meet outside of the scheduled HRC session window. As the TAC representative noted, this enabled them to conduct longer, more informal meetings:

Personally, I found [online meetings] really good ... They've been quite generous with their time ... we had a meeting with [REDACTED state representative] and the meeting was like an hour and a half ... it was a gradual pace ... and they weren't trying to escape. I've found with some, if the conversations go well, they let it develop. Whereas, you know, in the sessions they most likely have another meeting booked back-to-back ... being able to be more flexible ... has proved really good (Interview, 16 September 2020).

These comments reaffirm how space and time matter in shaping diplomatic interactions and diplomats' engagement with 'the digital' (see Leszczynski, 2019:19). Here, meeting away from the *Palais* with its associated time constraints enabled a free-flowing conversation. In reflecting on why these meetings had not been marked by a strict re-assertion of diplomatic norms, the representative speculated on the importance of pre-existing relationships, or a sense of closeness, in building a 'trustworthy environment' whereby both parties could practice warm informality. This was echoed by the WUC representative, who described her positive experience meeting online:

What really helps is that we had this existing relationship before the pandemic. If ... we had started engaging with them when the pandemic started then I think it would have been different, but because we have met with these people many times before ... there was some sort of proximity which was useful, so it wasn't too different when it was done virtually ... we could sort of pick up where we left off (Interview, 25 May 2021).

Our findings thus resonate with Eggeling and Versloot's (2023) study of information sharing at The Council of the EU. The authors contend that, while pre-existing relations of 'diplomatic trust' can be 'taken online' it is 'difficult to build trust via digital tools only' (Eggeling & Versloot's, 2023:644, 651). We extend these findings by showing how trust – defined as the 'temporal "suspension" of uncertainty and vulnerability' (Eggeling & Versloot's, 2023:639) – can also be fundamentally



undermined online in human rights diplomacy, where diplomats (like the CHT representative above) have concerns regarding their 'safety and security'. Indeed, several interviewees were reluctant to attend or disclose information in online meetings hosted using certain digital platforms, while others expressed fears that state-ordered internet shutdowns would limit their ability to attend virtual meetings. Returning to Ash et al.'s (2019:3) four-pronged definition of 'the digital', we see how diplomats' engagement with particular digital technologies is also dependent on certain 'digital discourses' – in this case concerning security – which simultaneously 'promote, enable, secure, and materially sustain the increasing reach of digital technologies' within diplomatic practice, while also limiting engagement for some actors.

The implication of these trends in digitally mediated encounters for human rights diplomacy is the reification of the pre-existing 'pecking order' amongst non-state actors. For Pouliot (2016:84) the 'pecking order' within multilateral organisations sees diplomatic influence tied less to a state's material capabilities, and more to how diplomats can turn a 'country's externally defined attributes into diplomatic capital'. Diplomats reproduce their status through negotiating the everyday norms, decorum, rules, and practices which condition diplomatic space. At the digitally mediated HRC, better resourced organisations and those with pre-existing relationships with states were more likely to be positively received when requesting online meetings, whilst the presence of a pre-existing 'sense of proximity' between the two parties better enabled the establishment of diplomatic relationality (Cockayne et al., 2017). In contrast, those further down the 'pecking order' – for example volunteer organisations, or those working on geopolitically sensitive issues – found their meeting requests frequently denied without cause. When they were able to get 'screen time' with state or UN officials, gaping power differentials served to disempower these representatives, whilst the concomitant assertion of diplomatic norms only acted to deepen the gulf between actors of different status (see also Adler-Nissen & Eggeling, 2022).

Applied to digitally mediated diplomatic encounters, a theory of mediation thus sheds light on how the role of screen-based technologies in producing diplomatic space depends on the complex entanglements between 'the individual [diplomat], the nature of the technology, and the time/spaces of its deployment' (Leszczynski, 2019:18). Non-state actors' abilities to establish and practise intimacy 'online' are shaped by their location within existing webs of diplomatic relationality which extend well beyond 'virtual' HRC meeting spaces. Moreover, the specific affordances of digital technologies underpin diplomatic communication, expressions of diplomatic subjectivity, and embodied relations between diplomats 'online' – as revealed by interviewees' difficulties reading facial expressions in virtual meetings and reticence to use particular digital platforms. Nevertheless, in rejecting determinism, a theory of mediation also points to how digital diplomatic intimacies are contingent and shaped by the 'physical' spatial and temporal contexts within which virtual meetings are embedded: for some interviewees, the intensification of online diplomatic encounters was enhanced when held outside of the HRC and the *Palais*, for others, concerns about who might be behind the camera and fears over regional internet shutdowns limited engagement. It is to the implication of these entanglements between 'real/offline' and 'virtual/online' diplomatic space for conceptualising digital diplomacy to which we now turn.

## 6. Conclusion

In October 2023, diplomats gathered again in Geneva for the 54th session of the HRC. Three years after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and, from the vantage point of UNWebTV, the meeting rooms of the *Palais* appeared to be around three-quarters full. The heated debates, however, continued to be punctuated by both live and pre-recorded video interventions from state and non-state actors. Though fewer in number than in 2020 (and of a noticeably improved audio-visual quality), these videos continue to form an integral element of

HRC proceedings. Far from a temporary aberration in diplomatic practice, remote participation within this forum is now so widespread as to be almost banal. Against this backdrop of the growing digitalisation of diplomatic spaces and practices, this paper has used the case of the HRC to address the under-theorisation of the spatial in studies of digital diplomacy, and the lack of attention paid to the diplomatic in digital geographies scholarship.

As to the former, we have argued that geographical scholarship on mediation offers conceptual leverage for understanding the spatial transformations wrought by the digitalisation of diplomatic practices. Specifically, the lens of mediated spatiality can enrich diplomacy scholarship in two ways. First, mediation speaks to a nascent body of diplomacy studies scholarship concerned with transcending understandings of "digital diplomacy" as a separate or supplementary practice to "normal" ... diplomatic work' (Adler-Nissen & Eggeling, 2022:660). By eschewing a binary between the real/offline, and the virtual/online, mediation extends theories of 'blended' diplomacy which recognise the widespread 'engagement of the technical and [the] social' in shaping 'diplomatic imaginaries and relations' (Adler-Nissen & Eggeling, 2022:640) by also acknowledging the interplay of the digital, the diplomatic, and the *spatial*. A theory of mediation sheds light both on how the specific affordances of digital technologies shape the production of diplomatic space with implications for diplomatic practice, and the role of space in undergirding diplomatic actors' engagement with particular technologies. We have seen, for instance, how remote participation extends the spaces of the HRC with contradictory implications for *who* can engage in human rights diplomacy, but also how the *where* of diplomacy underpins expressions of digitally mediated diplomatic agency. Moreover, whilst this research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic when 'online' interactions were, by necessity, the principal mode of diplomacy, Leszczynski's (2015:729) framing of reality as 'always-already [digitally] mediated' provides a useful starting point for understanding the effect of ongoing 'virtual' HRC participation for interactions in 'physical' diplomatic space.

Nonetheless, while recognising how nearly all diplomatic practices are increasingly digitally mediated, we caution against decontextualized approaches which describe all diplomacy as 'digital diplomacy'. As Ash et al. (2019) argue with reference to digital geographies scholarship, 'if everything becomes "digital" then "digital" becomes an empty signifier ... it is more meaningful to think about how the digital reshapes many geographies ... and itself has many geographies' (see also Leszczynski, 2021). Instead, there is a need for closer empirical engagement with the grounded (and increasingly diverse) sites through which differently positioned diplomatic actors engage with particular digital technologies. We thus call for further research both into how particular modes and practices of in-person diplomatic communication have been remediated by the technological affordances of specific digital communications technology, and the uneven spatial effects and affects of these mediations (Cockayne et al., 2017:1115). Indeed, while this study foregrounds how screen-based technologies reshape multilateral diplomacy and micro-spatial diplomatic practice, geographical theories of mediation – particularly those concerning 'digitally-mediated cultural production, circulation and interpretation' (Rose, 2016:334) – might be productively applied to understand the spatial implications of digital technologies for public diplomacies, including diplomats' growing use of social media.

Second, as with Der Derian's (1987) understanding of diplomatic mediation there is a productive ambivalence at the heart of theories of mediation. The impact of remote participation at the HRC has been messy and uneven, characterised by the 'contingent comings-together of technology, people, and place and space' (Leszczynski, 2019:18) that are productive of diplomatic realities. In contrast to much existing digital diplomacy scholarship which foregrounds the strategic 'adaption' and 'adoption' of digital technologies – particularly social media – by MFAs (Akili & Gülen, 2023; Bjola & Manor, 2022:471), theories of mediated spatiality direct us toward how, particularly for non-state

actors, the digitalisation of diplomacy is far from pre-determined. As we have shown, digitalisation is associated with a plural range of often unexpected outcomes, derived from the shifting constellation of human and non-human agency, and the varied relationship between bodies, hardware, and software across time and space. Alongside research into the contestations inherent to diplomats' adoption of digital technologies (Adler-Nissen & Eggeling, 2022:660), mediation speaks both to how digital technologies are involved in reproducing pre-existing diplomatic power dynamics and spatial exclusions, and provide creative means for marginalised groups to assert diplomatic actorness (see also Pinkerton & Benwell, 2014). In exploring how diplomacy has been recast by the digital, there is thus a need to attend simultaneously to how digital tools reconfigure the form of diplomatic interactions, and the human and non-human actors who constitute the doings of diplomacy.

In addition to bringing the spatial to the fore within digital diplomacy debates, this paper has also demonstrated how engagement with the diplomatic can inform digital geographies scholarship. Leszczynski (2021:112) argues that digital geographies constitute 'an intellectual boundary object', a 'shared enterprise with multiple entry points for engagement'. Nevertheless, despite claims to 'intersectionality' and 'intradisciplinary engagement' Leszczynski (2021:112), scholarship under this banner coheres around a comparatively narrow range of cases, including sex and dating apps, smart cities, platform urbanism, and drone geographies. We extend digital geographies' empirical and conceptual gaze in two ways. First, by responding to calls for a digital geopolitics which goes 'beyond the geotag' (Crampton et al., 2013) and the spectacular to account for how digital technologies shape quotidian expressions of geopolitical agency, our case highlights how digital platforms shape the processes which produce political actors' subjectivities and the spatialities of political belonging. Second, we extend scholarship on the digital geographies of encounter by foregrounding the remediation of diplomatic practices located somewhere between existing scholarship on sex and dating (e.g., Cockayne et al., 2017), and work and labour (e.g., Richardson, 2018). We show the importance of professional norms and institutional protocol in conditioning the establishment of digitally mediated diplomatic intimacies. These findings have implications for scholars researching the forms of 'emotional labour and emotion work' required to sustain digital sociality (Ho, 2023), and for scholars of feminist and queer digital geographies concerned with how digital technologies sustain and resist material inequalities (Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018). This paper is thus a provocation for greater theoretical and empirical dialogue between scholars of digital diplomacy and digital geographies.

#### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Alex Manby:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Fiona McConnell:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no declarations of interest for this research.

Research and writing time for this article was funded by Fiona McConnell's Philip Leverhulme Prize for Geography (2019).

#### Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Gillian Rose for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper, three anonymous reviewers for their constructive criticism, and Charis Enns for her editorial support. The authors would also like to express their sincere gratitude to Merce Monjè Cano, General Secretariat of the Unrepresented Nations and

Peoples Organisation, for her support in organising the interviews which underpin this paper, as well to the many interviewees who generously shared their time and thoughts with us.

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