

Digital Diplomacy and COVID-19: An Exploratory Approximation towards Interaction and Consular Assistance on Twitter

*La diplomacia digital frente a
la COVID-19: una aproximación
exploratoria a la interactividad y
asistencia consular en Twitter*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2021.7960>

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This study seeks to gauge the level of engagement and interaction of seven Ministries of Foreign Affairs from the Americas with citizens who requested assistance through Twitter during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the results obtained, significant differences are identified, notably an increase in dialogic communication with respect to previous studies, explained by the state of emergency. In addition, countries that achieved high levels of engagement are those that focused their communication towards the user. Thus, different approaches to digital diplomacy are detected in its consular activities.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, digital diplomacy, interactivity, Twitter, engagement.

Este estudio busca dimensionar el nivel de engagement e interacción de siete Cancillerías de América con los ciudadanos que solicitaban ayuda a través de Twitter durante los primeros meses de la pandemia de COVID-19. Entre los resultados obtenidos se encontraron diferencias significativas, un aumento de la comunicación dialógica con respecto a estudios previos, explicado por la situación de emergencia. Además, los países que logran altos niveles de engagement son los que orientan su comunicación al usuario. Así, se detectan distintas aproximaciones hacia la diplomacia digital en su abordaje consular.

PALABRAS CLAVE: COVID-19, diplomacia digital, interactividad, Twitter, engagement.

How to cite:

Romero Vara, L., Alfaro Muirhead, A. C., Hudson Frías, E. & Aguirre Azócar, D. (2021). Digital Diplomacy and COVID-19: An Exploratory Approximation towards Interaction and Consular Assistance on Twitter. *Comunicación y Sociedad*, e7960. <https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2021.7960>

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Submitted: 02/09/20. Accepted: 29/01/21. Published: 23/06/21.

INTRODUCTION

Three months after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a pandemic, the number of contagions worldwide was more than eight million and 465 000 deaths were estimated until June, 2020. When closing this article (May, 2021) more than 3.5 million people had died. More than a year since the pandemic was known and spread, the movement of people around the world still presents considerable restrictions. Several countries maintain closed borders and, because of this, for many citizens the return to their country continues to be a problem.

During the first months of 2020, with the purpose of stopping the spread of COVID-19, several governments reacted by stopping all non-essential economic activities. Many borders were closed, preventing the movement of people that were outside their places of residence. As a consequence of this situation, consular emergency units activated their protocols to face the numerous requests from citizens stranded abroad.

One of the main responsibilities of consular affairs consists in providing services and assistance to its citizens located overseas, especially during critical circumstances. The consular instrument of repatriation is used during crisis situations, such as natural disasters, armed conflicts or, as it is the focus of this study, pandemics. Okano-Heijmans (2010, p. 24) describes that, in perilous circumstances, consular affairs become the main priorities of diplomats, so they must be prepared to communicate with media and individuals. Understanding repatriation under this parameter enables gauging how communication and diplomacy acted in the face of the global pandemic, especially in the digital dimension of consular affairs.

This paper first refers to the transformations that consular affairs have experienced, specifically in the framework of what is known as digitalization of public diplomacy in the continent (Aguirre, 2020; Aguirre et al., 2018). In second place, the objective and research questions of this study are provided. Then, the methodological aspects of the research are presented, this being approximation, approach and data used from Twitter. And, lastly, the discussion and conclusions put

the results in context with specific matters related to the Ministries of Foreign Affairs that were studied, inasmuch providing future possibilities of research on the matter.

CONSULAR SERVICE, DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE COVID-19 MOMENTUM

Consular affairs have experienced relevant transformations in recent decades from service expectations generated by communication-technological channels in what is known as digital society. Hence, the array of functions and scope of consulates is in constant state of updating and expansion. As emphasized by Constantinou et al. (2016), the key aspects of consular affairs encompass the timely and efficient response of citizen queries through multiple channels and focused towards user service. Therefore, new practices of consular management have been implemented; among which are consular cooperation, delegated representation to other countries, service automation and outsourcing of less sensible functions stand out (pp. xii-xiii).

Fernández-Pasarín (2016, p. 161) explains that the transformation of consular function shifted towards a consular diplomacy with more of an emphasis on the strategic implementation of foreign policy, having as a result a consular service integrated to diplomatic functions. This new development and integration of consular teams leads to rethink the contribution of consuls and staffs as now increasingly involved in the influence mechanism known as public diplomacy. This concept, in a concise definition, is focused on image and international public opinion management, and its actions are centered on dialogue and engagement with foreign audiences, despite the fact that recently the lines between these audiences and nationals have been blurred (Huijgh, 2011; Pisarska, 2016). More concretely, the appreciation and actions aimed to nationals or communities known as *diasporas* have been incorporated to the work agenda and thought regarding diplomacy, intersecting with consular affairs. This is summarized by Fernández-Pasarín (2016) as follows:

Contemporary consuls have lost their past prominence as commercial and jurisdictional agents, but they have gained importance as interfaces for communication with the diaspora and, more generally, as agents of securitization. This recent shift has been particularly noticeable in the field of border control and the prevention and management of overseas crisis situations (p. 163).

In the context of the pandemic, consular work as it has been described gains more relevance in a couple of aspects to consider. First, the responsibility of consular assistance of granting help to diplomats and diasporas, anticipating and proposing answers to critical situations. Second, web technology, especially ones with interactive functions such as social media, facilitates dialogue and responses to the assistance requests towards embassies and consulates.

Also, social media has served as an information channel for citizens, becoming spaces to communicate useful information for nationals and, at the same time, for citizens and governments of other countries that observe how to handle the pandemic. This last aspect pertains to public diplomacy, as global public opinion can evaluate how societies are dealing with crises.

The study of the digitalization of services, and more precisely consular assistance during the first months of the pandemic in the Americas, presents shifts in patterns worthy of exploration and problematization of aspects of government communication and public diplomacy. Consular action in this context, focused on repatriations, border closures and international image, seems to be predominant over functions different from the primary aims of Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs). Therefore, examining possible changes expressed in seven Twitter accounts of the MFAs in the Americas is relevant from a practical point of view (public administration faced with a crisis situation) and from an academic point of view, by analyzing the communication and technological aspects of the digitalization of consular functions in regard to public diplomacy.

Melissen and Caesar-Gordon (2016), and Melissen (2020) put the focus on the *duty of care*, with a special attention in the centralization of requests and respective citizen expectations, and in the use of

innovative, consular-diplomatic tools related to the assistance provided by the state, through its official representatives overseas. Melissen and Caesar-Gordon (2016) describe it in the following manner:

Consular services have to learn how to reach a growing part of their customer base through active online messaging. Such messaging can either be of a preventive nature, such as anticipating mega-events like the Olympic Games or regular mass travel to foreign destinations, or to react to specific crisis situations (p. 4).

Another relevant point considered by Melissen and Caesar-Gordon (2016) is the crisis management which can occur in coordination with citizens in real time through social media. The authors refer to the Nepal earthquake in 2015 as a turning point for the interactive approach when facing an emergency situation, because many MFAs used networks to inform, locate citizens and gather comments of users that were fundamental in the subsequent consular assistance undertaking.

The potential of social media in consular activities in situations of crisis is evident, due to the fact that the first challenge of consular workers coalesces in communicating the assistance provided overseas, which is highly related to government communication at an international level. Matching coincidentally with the COVID-19 outbreak, the recommendations of Melissen (2020) acquire more relevance in regard to consular assistance:

1. Civil society initiates consular communication; therefore, MFAs must understand the communication behavior of citizens to adapt to this new perspective.
2. It is imperative to prevent falling in the commoditization of consular services, since they can reduce relations to “product-consumer” that is opposite to the interests and objectives of foreign policy, which is to gather support from civil society.
3. The professionalization of consular communication implicates digital innovation and competencies to manage several communication channels at the same time.

4. Encourage the organizational capacity of MFAs to better manage consular communication, to be up to date with new digital trends.
5. Bring awareness and conceptually value the relevance of consular diplomacy and establishing close links with foreign and security policies.

The present study is an opportunity to explore whether the consular assistance MFAs of the Americas provided through Twitter during the first months of the pandemic acquired the characteristics previously outlined by Melissen, and particularly the first three.

OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main objective of the research consists in analyzing the activity of Twitter accounts developed by the MFA of the United States, Mexico, Brazil, El Salvador, Ecuador, Peru and Chile, and their level of engagement with the Twitter communities during the health crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. It is important for this research, on the one hand, to identify the generated levels of popularity, virality and commitment by the MFAs studied during the COVID-19 health crisis and, on the other, to explore how the accounts interacted on Twitter with their audiences, diasporas and nationals that were overseas.

Thus, the following research questions are examined in the study:

1. What level of engagement did the Twitter publications of MFAs garner during the health crisis caused by COVID-19?
2. To what extent did the MFAs use the principles of the Theory of Dialogic Communication to communicate with their citizens through Twitter in the context of the coronavirus pandemic?

METHODS

In the public sector, *engagement* refers to citizen participation on social matters (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012), meaning, the interaction between citizens and leaders online. Both the analysis of engagement, as well as the dialogue established through social media between MFAs

and citizens (domestic or foreign) are fundamental, especially during times of crisis, so that the first ones understand the needs of the second ones, and may create customized messages (Manor & Segev, 2015, p. 2), providing timely solutions to improve their situation or solve their problems.

Engagement and dialogic communication, two metrics useful to examine the reaction and interaction of citizens with official accounts of MFAs, were measured with the indicators of *popularity*, *commitment* and *virality*.

Citizens are exposed to content published or received through different digital platforms, among those on social media. This is how they interact with other users and give them a “like” or spread throughout via retweets, just as they were received or with an added comment. This form of interaction evidences that there was a process on the user’s end that might have been limited simply to looking or reading the content with no value judgement, nor expressing a reaction or interaction, indicating in some cases a bigger involvement with a certain publication (Ksiazek et al., 2016, p. 505).

Bonsón and Ratkai (2013) used reactions (likes, comments and shares or retweets) that users manifest on each publication to create formulas which would allow to calculate indicators identifying the level of engagement of citizens with the contents of public administration present in social media. The three metrics: 1) popularity, measured through likes or favorites; 2) commitment, which is obtained through the amount of comments or replies; and 3) virality, which is calculated from the times a content is shared (share or retweet), have been widely used in academia (Bonsón et al., 2015, 2017, 2019; Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018) as indicators of dialogue and feedback between institutions and users. Table 1 provides the systematization of formulas used to calculate the level of engagement of a Twitter account in the present study.

Dialogic communication encourages the dialogue between two or more actors. In specific, it means the exchange of ideas and opinions. Kent and Taylor (1998, p. 325) highlighted five principles that apply to dialogic communication on the web: 1) dialogic loop, through which audiences are capable of requesting information to organizations

and they can provide the requested information; 2) utility of information, through which is presumed that organizations provide useful information for all audiences; 3) generation of return visits, meaning, websites have characteristics which make users return; 4) easy interface related to the way information is presented; and 5) visitor retention.

TABLE 1
METRICS TO CALCULATE CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT ON TWITTER

Popularity	P1. Recount of tweets of sample that have been marked as favorites (Like) / Total N° of tweets published by the MFA P2. The sum of favorites (Likes) that have been achieved by tweets of the sample / N° of tweets published by the MFA P3. $(P2 / \text{Total of followers of account}) * 1\ 000$
Commitment	C1. Recount of tweets commented (Reply) in the sample / Total N° of tweets published by the MFA C2. The sum of comments a tweet has achieved / Total N° of tweets published by the MFA C3. $(C2 / \text{N° of followers of the account}) * 1\ 000$
Virality	V1. Recount of tweets that have been retweeted in the sample / Total N° of tweets published by the MFA V2. The sum of retweets made of tweets published in the sample / Total N° of tweets published by the MFA V3. $(V2 / \text{N° of followers of the account}) * 1\ 000$
Engagement	EGN. $P3 + C3 + V3$

Source: The authors based on metrics and formulas proposed by Bosón et al. (2019, p. 483).

In the last decade, the Theory of Dialogic Communication of Kent and Taylor has been adapted to studies related to dialogic communication on social media (Bosón & Ratkai, 2013; Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018; Uysal, 2018), also, it has been used to prove online communication of MFAs with citizens, as well as its application in studies related to public diplomacy (Cha et al., 2015; Ittefaq, 2019; Manor, 2017, 2019; Manor & Segev, 2015). The results mentioned in the literature point towards general failures when seeking to achieve the communication potential

of social media (Ittefaq, 2019, p. 65; Manor & Segev, 2015, p. 11) since MFAs send messages, but do not respond to comments, questions or requests of users through this channel.

In this sense, the second stage of the present study applies the Theory of Dialogic Communication to analyze the conversations held by MFAs with citizens that requested help from their countries because they were in diverse situations of vulnerability abroad. This helps determine whether the relations between MFAs and their audiences are evolving towards a bidirectional communication (Cha et al., 2015, p. 299). It is worth noting that, for Kent and Taylor (1998) the dialogic communication is spread and may happen beyond misunderstandings or opposite ideas between these actors. For this reason, even though users might manifest complaints or criticism towards the management of the institutional account, this is an adequate method for the study of diplomatic (consular) communication. As seen in Table 2, quantitative metrics are proposed to identify dialogic communication taking place on Twitter between users and MFAs.

TABLE 2
METRICS TO CALCULATE DIALOGIC ENGAGEMENT ON TWITTER

<i>Dialogic loop</i>	DL1_Ec	Recount of tweets of Foreign Offices replying to user queries / Total N° of tweets published by MFA * 100
Generation of return visits	VR_Ec	Recount of publications mentioning MFA / N° of users tagging MFA
Utility of information	UI_Ec	Sum of tweets marked as favorites / Recount of tweets published by Foreign Office * 100

Source: The authors.

The publications that are part of this study were extracted from Twitter accounts belonging to the MFAs of the following countries: Chile (@Minrel_Chile), Brazil (@ItamaratyGovBr), Ecuador (@CancilleriaEc), United States (@StateDept), El Salvador (@cancilleriasv), Mexico

(@SRE_mx) and Peru (@CancilleriaPeru). The selection of accounts has an intentional nature, which seeks to explore diversity rather than absolute representation.

The corpus of tweets was collected in two stages. The first (sample 1) consisted on downloading with the aid of the analysis tools FanPage Karma and Allmytweets the publications retweets (RTs) and replies to users from the MFA accounts between February 15th and April 30th, 2020. The research team decided to work with this timeframe with the objective of identifying changes in the messaging by MFA Twitter accounts as the pandemic advanced throughout the Americas. A database with the original tweets, replies and retweets published in that first period was elaborated, which included 9 979 units of analysis. A first filter was applied, which included keywords such as *pandemic*, *coronavirus*, *COVID-19*, *stay home* and *repatriation*; of those, 82.9% of the tweets included in the sample were related to some kind of aspect of the pandemic, while 17.1% was not.

During the second stage of collection (sample 2) the TAGS⁵ application was used to extract publications and comments in which users tagged or referred to the seven MFA accounts. Due to the limitations of TAGS for downloading publications and comments of two weeks prior to the collection start date, the sample covers the period between April 12th and April 25th, 2020. During this time, 72 010 units of analysis were analyzed in a second database to determine if dialogic communication was observable in the tweets.

The sampling technique of this exploratory study is therefore a non-probabilistic purposive one. This means the Twitter accounts were deliberately chosen aiming to explore the responses and communications achieved from different geographical locations, cultures and governments in the Americas. According to literature, this method is especially useful when there are not enough funds or other resources (Campbell, 1955; Karmel & Jain, 1987; Tongco, 2007;

⁵ Acronym for *Twitter Archiving Google Spreadsheet*, a tool created by Martin Hawksey to collect tweets in an automatic way. The tool is free and can be configured linking a Google spreadsheet with a Twitter account. Initial configuration can be done at <https://tags.hawksey.info/>

Topp et al., 2004), which in this case meant access and possibility of downloading data from the seven official accounts on Twitter using the extraction and analysis tools mentioned above.

RESULTS

After an initial manual filter of topics within publications of the MFA Twitter accounts of sample 1, as expected, a significant increase in communications regarding COVID-19 was identified (e.g. repatriations, hygiene measures to prevent contagion, international donations of sanitary material, among others) as cases of the disease extended throughout the Americas and, therefore, the first measures of lockdown and border closure were taken.

The turning point of consular communication matches the dates when countries began to close their borders (around March 15th and 16th, 2020). The frequency was unstable from that point forward, but always above the average of initial dates, surpassing on four occasions 30 daily publications on average.

ENGAGEMENT OF MFAS OF THE AMERICAS

On a general level, users clicked on the “like” button of the tweets of the different MFAs with more frequency. The levels of popularity are distributed in a similar way in the sample, despite this, the accounts of El Salvador and Chile reached the highest numbers with 35.60% and 35.20%, respectively, followed by Peru with 25.90% (see Table 3), surpassing the average of this indicator for the total of accounts: 21.20%. None of the three countries that reached high popularity stand out for their number of followers and number of publications made during the analyzed period. In fact, the country that obtained the lowest popularity was Ecuador (3.40%), despite the fact that it published the highest amount of tweets of the sample (n=2 178). Seen another way, the publications on Twitter of the MFAs of El Salvador and Chile obtained 10 times more popularity than the account of Ecuador. The two accounts that led the numbers of popularity garnered more than three times the popularity of tweets from United States (10.40%) and

double of Mexico's (16.60%), although both countries have the highest amount of followers.

TABLE 3
LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT ACHIEVED BY MFAS,
MARCH 15TH TO APRIL 30TH

Country	N° of followers	N° of tweets	Popularity	Commitment	Virality	Engagement
Chile	86 000	177	0.352	0.199	0.206	0.757
Brazil	296 000	1 507	0.212	0.011	0.050	0.273
Ecuador	231 500	2 178	0.034	0.010	0.000	0.044
United States	5 800 000	446	0.104	0.010	0.043	0.157
El Salvador	108 600	471	0.356	0.031	0.001	0.388
Mexico	1 000 000	329	0.166	0.008	0.078	0.252
Peru	261 400	205	0.259	0.028	0.078	0.365

Source: The authors.

The indicator of commitment had the lowest results. The account of the Chilean MFA had the most commitment with 19.90%, well above the average of the sample (4.20%), despite being the one with the least amount of followers. With the objective of ruling out that this was an error, the Pearson correlation between the indicators of commitment and popularity reached by each country was calculated. In this case the coefficient obtained is of $r -0.26$, thus a significant correlation between commitment and popularity is discarded. It was also analyzed whether there was a correlation between the commitment indicator and the account activity and a negative coefficient was obtained ($r -0.36$) and close to 0, and this correlation was also discarded. Results obtained in the calculation of commitment confirm the coherence of coefficients. The account with the greatest number of followers –United States, with 5 800 000– and the account with the most number of publications –Ecuador, with 2 178– reached 1% of commitment, very close to the minimum, which was Mexico (0.80%).

Lastly, virality reached its highest number (20.60%) in the case of Chile, followed by Mexico and Peru, both with 7.80%. Also, it is not possible to establish a relation of this data with the number of followers, nor with the number of published posts. In both cases, the Pearson correlation was not significant either (r -0.14 and r -0.48, respectively).

Based on previous results, the account of the Chilean MFA was the one with the most engagement, with 75.70%, almost doubling the accounts that are in second and third place –El Salvador (38.8%) and Peru (36.5%), respectively– while the average of the total sample was 31.92%.

On average, 88% of tweets of the sample were marked as “like” (P1), 51% received responses (C1) and 66% were retweeted (V1) by citizens. The average values of popularity (P2), commitment (C2) and virality (V2) were considerably higher than others, following the tendency of previous research, where the popularity average is higher than the one of other indicators, and at the same time, the average of virality is higher than the one of commitment (Bonsón et al., 2019, p. 485).

TABLE 4
METRICS TO ANALYZE POPULARITY, COMMITMENT,
VIRALITY AND ENGAGEMENT

	Code	Max	Average	Min	Standard deviation
Popularity	P1	0.994	0.882	0.789	0.087
	P2	603.762	139.555	7.98	210.824
	P3	0.356	0.212	0.034	0.121
Commitment	C1	0.834	0.511	0	0.317
	C2	58.42	14.287	2.218	20.106
	C3	0.199	0.042	0.008	0.070
Virality	V1	1	0.666	0.002	0.351
	V2	247.594	54.076	0.07	89.316
	V3	0.206	0.065	0	0.070
Engagement	P3 + C3 + V3	0.757	0.3192	0.04	0.226

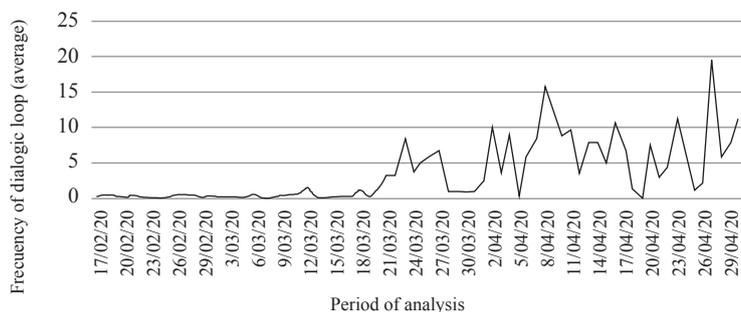
Source: The authors.

These results, albeit descriptive, indicate that MFAs of the Americas presented different levels of activity and followers. In regard to activity, Ecuador leads the way with 2 178 tweets, while Chile has the least tweets published (177). The only other account that surpassed the average of tweets of the sample (1 177) was the Brazilian MFA with 1 507 posts. On the other hand, when considering the number of followers, United States has the highest number of followers (5 800 000) and Chile has the lowest (86 000).

Dialogic Communication in the Age of COVID-19

Regarding the principle of “dialogic loop”, meaning, the tweets of MFAs that respond to user queries between the total of tweets published by MFAs, the accounts who stand out are those of Brazil (68.94%) and of El Salvador (58.59%), meanwhile those of Chile and the United States presented no indication of dialogue. This, despite the fact that the account of the Department of State (United States) was the one that received the biggest number of queries (52.38% of sample 2). In Chart 1, the average evolution of the frequency by which consular offices dialogued with citizens through Twitter provides perspective. To correctly visualize it, it is important to consider that both Chile and the United States obtained a value of 0. Standard deviation corresponding to each date is of 4.33.

TABLE 1
TREND OF AVERAGE FREQUENCY OF DIALOGIC LOOP



Source: The authors with data from sample 2.

In all accounts a “generation of return visits” was observable, this is, when users interact in more than one occasion with their MFA. The Chilean MFA generated the most number of return visits (2.70), and the Brazilian one had the least (1.50). Also, most of the information provided by the accounts can be considered useful for users during the start of the pandemic. The account of the US Department of State obtained the most return visits (100%), and the least return visits belonged to Brazil’s account (78.89%).

Both Table 5 and Table 6 show the final results of the application of the principles of the Theory of Dialogic Communication in consular assistance provided by the countries analyzed through their Twitter accounts.

TABLE 5
DIALOGIC ENGAGEMENT OF THE SEVEN MFAS, APRIL 12th TO 25th, 2020

Country	Nº of users who wrote or tagged the MFA	Dialogic loop	Generation of return visits	Utility of information
Chile	1 281	0	2.7	99.43%
Brazil	5 131	68.94%	1.5	78.89%
Ecuador	2 499	23.87%	2.21	80.67%
United States	17 609	0	2.13	100%
El Salvador	2 229	58.59%	1.79	83.22%
Mexico	6 500	0.91%	1.66	99.39%
Peru	1 057	6.34%	1.58	91.70%

Source: The authors.

TABLE 6
METRICS OF DIALOGIC COMMUNICATION

	Code	Max	Average	Min	Standard deviation
Dialogic loop	DL	68.94	0.22	0	39.739
Generation of return visits	VR	2.7	1.93	1.5	0.608
Utility of information	UI	100	90.47	78.89	10.572

Source: The authors.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This research provided an initial evaluation on the use of Twitter of seven MFAs of the Americas to provide consular assistance during the first few months of COVID-19, focusing on the use and convenience of communication via Twitter to manage consular assistance.

The methodology employed allowed for comparison of accounts with very diverse characteristics. Being in a relatively similar situation throughout the continent, results indicate that the amount of followers or account activity (number of daily publications) is not a determinant to generating engagement. Even though all publications analyzed treated some aspect related to coronavirus, the user responses were quantitatively different. This can be partially explained by what is stated by Bonsón et al. (2019) that the content of the tweet is what mostly determines engagement.

The findings help evidence the potential of digital diplomacy in extraordinary situations. Similar to Melissen's thoughts (2020), it was proven that Twitter can be an adequate tool to initiate communication between citizens and foreign services, simultaneously initiated from MFAs to users or from users to MFA. This way, instead of having users seeking the implementation of coordinated actions which lead to think in a sole governmental actor as the only one capable of initiating assistance actions, it is possible to think of "co-dissemination" or "co-participation" dynamics, where citizens take the initiative to improve their situation and that of others, conceptualizing a promising approach for digital diplomacy in the present and the post-pandemic future.

The coronavirus pandemic has affected the international dynamics of diplomatic practices, from multilateral meetings through digital channels and an increase in international cooperation, particularly when managing citizen repatriations, exchange of medical supplies and scientific knowledge (Ramos, 2020). Therefore, an approach towards the future of diplomatic-consular work can be envisioned, namely one which will have a bigger appreciation and advanced use of digital tools. In the same fashion, in this study, identifying heterogeneous patterns in consular assistance by MFAs was expected and observable.

Despite the multiple results obtained, the present study establishes clear differences with previous research, especially to what refers to the Theory of Dialogic Communication applied to digital diplomacy. Previous studies (Kampf et al., 2015, p. 13; Manor, 2019, p. 203) had concluded that, in general, MFAs do not fully explore the communicative advantages offered by social media, and that online dialogue is usually scarce or null; in the present analysis, an increase of interaction between some of the MFAs in the Americas and their citizens when presented with a crisis situation (Brazil and El Salvador) is identifiable. The findings represent a break from the norm in the study of public administration in social media, attributed to the international context in which said online interactions took place.

The present study helps to ascertain the engagement and dialogue between MFAs and users from a quantitative and comparative perspective between the selected countries. Supported by the variables of popularity, commitment and virality, the potential use of Twitter during the coronavirus outbreak and of consular assistance is visible. Although a content analysis was not employed in this study, by limiting the corpus to the single topic (the pandemic), a positive message reception can be inferred, as well as the utility the users give to the messages suggest that the approach of dialogic communication is visible.

Dialogic communication allowed a deeper evaluation of utility of the messaging according to the use and behavior of users of content on coronavirus shared through the seven accounts in the study. From it, a few takeaways are worth highlighting, for instance: four out of the seven accounts provided useful information, rated at 91%. This indicator, ordered from most to least, ranks the following: United States (100%), Chile (99.43%) and Mexico (99.39%). In reference to return visits, or reoccurring requests, Chile led the indicator, followed by Ecuador and the United States. The other four accounts are below the average of 1.93 of return visits. The dialogic loop evidences null levels of dialogue in the accounts of Chile and the United States, while the accounts of Brazil and El Salvador stand out for replying to users in more than 60% of the cases. The dialogic loop, taking these numbers into consideration, offers at least a couple of possible answers: an audience that dialogs with itself more than with the official account (aggregation effect) or,

daring to give another possible explanation, accounts that offer clear information which do not require further consultation or clarification.

To further integrate engagement and dialogic communication to the current thought of digital diplomacy, it can be useful to reiterate what is presented by Melissen (2020), specifically in three points matching the data resulting from this research. Civil society initiates consular communication and the understanding of the digital behavior of the citizen implicates adaptation in the generation of the message. In the cases of smaller countries (Chile, El Salvador and Peru), the interactivity analysis allows detecting some aspects of Twitter management in these issues that incorporate and placate in some way users within their publications. At the same time, even though an analysis of the tone of user responses was not performed, from the metrics of dialogic communication it can be inferred that the support of civil society of tweets about the pandemic has a level of applicability to point number two of Melissen's recommendations.

Additionally, even though referring to a professionalization of consular communication in all its channels is beyond the scope of the study, it would be convenient to keep in perspective comparisons between countries with bigger teams and diplomatic-consular budgets, in contrast to those with less resources. Consular digital innovation following Melissen's points would seem feasible in countries that focus their messaging efforts in fewer channels, contrary to those on many platforms. Notwithstanding, this final point of Melissen requires a more in-depth analysis of an expanded use of digital channels to determine professionalization with more confidence. Said analysis would allow to empirically affirm that these MFAs that stand out are truly taking advantage of all the digital resources available with similar results to what they developed on Twitter.

Lastly, for future research it would be interesting to employ a qualitative content analysis of both sets of actors engaging in consular digital interaction (MFAs and users), as well as analyzing topics discussed and also formats (photographs, links, emoticons, hashtags, among others) of publications found on Twitter, both during times of crisis and normal times. It would also be of interest to incorporate communications between MFAs and users which take place in

other platforms (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, etc.) to investigate the professionalization of digital diplomacy, focused solely on consular affairs

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