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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Taking trust online: Digitalisation and the practice of information sharing in diplomatic negotiations

Kristin Anabel Eggeling ⓘ and Larissa Versloot* ⓘ

Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, Denmark
*Corresponding author. Email: lav@ifs.ku.dk

Abstract

Can trust – a core element of diplomacy – be taken online and if so, how? This article starts form the concern that trust is tied to face-to-face diplomacy, which is challenged in digitalising settings. We adopt a practice theoretical lens and study diplomatic information sharing in the Council of the European Union. Drawing on fieldwork from 2018–2021, we find that digital tools are indispensable for trust's enactment and, contrary to commonly held assumptions, do not negatively impede diplomatic trust, per se. Theorising from how diplomats handle digital tools, we find that this leads to a renegotiation of the place and boundaries of trust in diplomatic work. First, we show how digital tools create both new opportunities for and challenges to diplomatic trust, though these opportunities are more accessible to some than others. Second, whereas trust is *taken* online, it is not easily *built* digitally. Third, digital tools lead to a rearticulation of the place of transparency and confidentiality in diplomatic negotiations. It pushes diplomats to reconsider what it means to share information in an (un)trustworthy manner. Altogether, these findings further our understanding of contemporary diplomatic practice and offer a refined conception of diplomatic trust.

Keywords: Trust; Diplomatic Practice; Digitalisation; Negotiations; Council of the EU

Introduction

Visibly surprised that his attempt to hack into the videoconference of the EU Ministers of Defence on 20 November 2020 actually worked, Dutch journalist Daniël Verlaan started laughing, waved into the camera, and politely apologised for the interruption (Figure 1). 'You know that you have been jumping into a secret conference', asked Josep Borrell, chair of the meeting and European High Representative of Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. 'Yes, yes, I am a journalist from the Netherlands … I am sorry for interrupting your conference so I will be leaving again', Verlaan said to the virtual faces of the EU27 defence ministers.[1] He accessed the meeting after the Dutch defence minister, Ank Bijleveld, tweeted a screenshot displaying partial login details – a 'stupid mistake', a ministry spokesperson later declared.[2]

This seemingly funny episode illustrates a serious concern in international diplomacy today where the use of digital tools[3] poses new uncertainties and vulnerabilities to confidential communication channels. Luckily for the EU ministers, the breach was immediately noticed and came in

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[1]See: {https://www.politico.eu/article/dutch-reporter-hacked-eu-council-interview/}.

[2]See: {https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/tech/artikel/5198276/rtl-nieuws-hack-defensie-ministers-europa-overleg-bijleeld}.

[3]In this article, we understand 'digital tools' as tools enabling digitally mediated communication via the Internet, such as emails, social media, videoconferences, and texting.
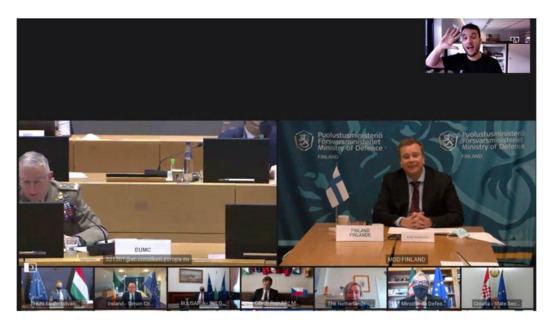
Figure 1. Dutch journalist Daniel Verlaan crashes the virtual meeting of EU defence ministers, 20 November 2020.
Source: {https://twitter.com/danielverlaan/status/1329790472206888964}.

the form of a friendly-minded journalist. Some therefore saw Verlaan's hack as a blessing in disguise. As one EU diplomat explained: 'If you think about it, this [the hack] is the best thing that could have happened … the question how we can securely communicate via virtual tools … is experiencing a sort of revival now.'[4]

The 'revival of the question of secure communication' is a local formulation of broader discussions about the effects digital tools have on international diplomacy. Some see a general break between 'classic' negotiation rituals and protocols and 'the latest information and communication technologies',[5] some argue optimistically that 'hierarchical communication flows are replaced by multidirectional flows',[6] while others more pessimistically see diplomatic work facing 'an existential challenge in the digital space'.[7] In the context of the move of much of diplomatic communication online due to COVID-19, moreover, analyses were written on what happens to diplomacy when conducted partially digitally or entirely online. Virtual negotiations are said to have 'dramatically altered the normal rhythm and flow'[8] of diplomatic work; are seen as 'hollowing out' diplomatic summits due to the 'elimination of the performative and interpersonal dimension';[9] as resulting in a 'missing sense of togetherness and trust';[10] or as reproducing existing

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[4]Fieldnotes from webinar, 15 December 2020.

[5]Thierry Balzaqc, Frédéric Charilon, and Frédéric Ramel (eds), *Global Diplomacy: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 13.

[6]Brian Hocking, 'Communication and diplomacy: Change and continuity', in Balzaqc, Charilon, and Ramel (eds), *Global Diplomacy: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, p. 83.

[7]Taylor Owen, 'The networked state and the end of 20th century diplomacy', *Global Affairs*, 2:3 (2016), p. 302.

[8]Heidi Maurer and Nicholas Wright, 'A new paradigm for EU diplomacy? EU council negotiations in a time of physical restrictions', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 15:4 (2020), pp. 556–68.

[9]Tristen Naylor, 'All that's lost: The hollowing of summit diplomacy in a socially distanced world', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 15:4 (2020), pp. 583–98.

[10]Isabel Bramsen and Anine Hagemann, 'The missing sense of peace: Diplomatic approachment and virtualization during the COVID-19 lockdown', *International Affairs*, 97:2 (2021), pp. 539–60.

'hierarchies, heroism, and professional essentialism'.[11] One thread that runs through both older and recent scholarship on the digitalisation of diplomacy is that exchanging through and with digital tools is particularly challenging as it hinders the formation and upkeep of one of the core elements of diplomacy: trust.[12]

In this article, we take on what can be summarised as the challenge of 'taking trust online'[13] and ask: *can diplomatic trust be taken online and if so, how?* We ground our work in scholarship on diplomacy as 'social practice' that studies tacit rules, everyday performances and ordinary sayings and doings.[14] Our theoretical starting point is a definition of practice as 'competent performance'.[15] The analysis builds on interview and ethnographic observation data gathered from 2018–2021. To analyse this data, we work up from practical understandings of how trust is enacted digitally by diplomats working in the Council of the EU. Through this lens, we place trust in the act of *trusting* as an expression of temporal 'suspension' of uncertainty and vulnerability.[16] As we will explain, we focus on practices of information sharing in and through digital tools to reveal enactments of diplomatic trust.

Contrary to what is oftentimes assumed, our analysis shows that digital tools neither hinder nor disrupt trust, per se, but become meaningful in situated use. Theorising from observations of their everyday handling, we find a renegotiation of the place and boundaries of trust in diplomatic work. This happens along three lines. First, we show how digital tools are involved in reconfirming old sites (such as access-restricted face-to-face meetings) and carving out new spaces (such as WhatsApp chats) for diplomatic trust. While trust can and is taken online, we argue, the way it is performed here is nevertheless different form 'offline' trust due to both social factors (e.g., the age of the diplomat) and new uncertainties and vulnerabilities (e.g., the possibility of a hack). Second, we find that whereas trust can be *taken* online, trust is more difficult to *build* digitally. Online enactments of trust are most meaningful when they work in tandem with 'offline' enactments of trust. Digital tools are fruitful for maintaining already manifested trust (e.g., by sending text messages to colleagues sitting in the same physical room), but less so for building it (e.g., when negotiating only in a VTC setting). Third, the presence of digital tools pushes diplomats to reconsider what it means to do information sharing 'competently' and reopens a social negotiation of the place of transparency and confidentiality in diplomatic communication.

The article proceeds in four parts. First, we theoretically lay out and relate diplomatic practice, trust, and digitalisation. Given our use of practice theory, we already embed this discussion in the field of EU diplomacy. Second, we outline the methodology of our research and motivate our focus on *information sharing*. Third, we analyse how 'taking trust online' happens in practice. The analysis is split into two parts: first, we establish what is means to share information competently in EU diplomacy and outline which uncertainties and vulnerabilities are attached

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[11]Kristin Anabel Eggeling and Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'The synthetic situation in diplomacy: Scopic media and the digital mediation of estrangement', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 1:2 (2021), pp. 1–14.

[12]Naylor, 'All that's lost', p. 593; Bramsen and Hagemann, 'The missing sense of peace', pp. 556–7; Marcus Holmes, 'The force of face-to-face diplomacy: Mirror neurons and the problem of intentions', *International Organization*, 67:4 (2013), pp. 829–61; Marcus Holmes and Nicholas J. Wheeler, 'Social bonding in diplomacy', *International Theory*, 12:1 (2020), pp. 133–61; Marcus Holmes, Mark N. K. Saunders, and Nicholas J. Wheeler, 'UN General Assembly: Why virtual meetings make it hard for diplomats to trust each other', *The Conversation* (2021), available at: {https://theconversation.com/un-general-assembly-why-virtual-meetings-make-it-hard-for-diplomats-to-trust-each-other-146508}.

[13]We are inspired by Osler's excellent paper – and title: Lucy Osler, 'Taking empathy online', *Inquiry*, online first (2021), pp. 1–37.

[14]Iver B. Neumann, *At Home with the Diplomats: Inside a European Foreign Ministry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'Symbolic power in European diplomacy: The struggle between national foreign services and the EU's External Action Service', *Review of International Studies*, 40:4 (2014), pp. 657–81.

[15]Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, 'International practices', *International Theory*, 3:1 (2011), p. 6.

[16]The conceptualisation of trust as suspension is based on Guido Möllering, *Trust: Reason, Routine, Reflexivity* (Bingley, UK: Emerald, 2006).

to this; and second, we explore performances of trust in three core digital information sharing practices: using a smartphone, emailing, and teleconferencing. What we find leads us to reframe the meeting of digitalisation and diplomatic trust not as one of inherent threat or opportunity, but one of situated use. Rather than being 'lost' or 'missing', trust is enacted online and remains a central feature of diplomatic practice in the digital age.

Diplomatic practice, trust, and digitalisation

Three concepts – diplomatic practice, trust, and digitalisation – sit at the heart of this article whose relation we unpack via a case study of information sharing practices in the Council of the EU. Our ambition is to show what the enactment ('taking') of a core ingredient of diplomatic practice ('trust') looks like for a particular condition ('online') in a particular field (diplomacy in the Council of the EU). In this section, we introduce the three concepts and their relation in two steps: first, diplomatic practice and trust; and second, diplomatic trust in the digital context.

Diplomatic practice and enactments of trust

In recent years, studies of diplomacy have been strengthened by the IR 'practice turn'. Its proponents suggest bringing studies of international politics 'down to the ground' and 'empirically scrutinize the process whereby certain *competent performances* produce effects of a world political nature'.[17] From a practice perspective, diplomacy is a socially emergent performance that plays a fundamental role in 'making the world go round'.[18] Fine-grained analyses exist of how practices such as pen holding,[19] empty chairing,[20] or making track changes[21] speak to international relations. A majority of studies adopt Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot's definition of practice as 'competent performances. More precisely … socially meaningful patterns of action [that are], being performed more or less competently.'[22] Following this definition, one of the main ambitions of the practice turn in diplomatic studies has been to study the everyday and informal. While trust lies at the core of informal diplomatic work, it is often mentioned only in passing.[23] In this article, we put diplomatic trust at the centre of attention.

Following others who have studied trust in IR and diplomacy, we take a social approach to trust and consider trust a relational achievement.[24] In interactions, trust's unique feature is

[17]Adler and Pouliot, 'International practices', p. 6; used for instance in Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Vincent Pouliot, 'Power in practice: Negotiating the international intervention in Libya', *European Journal of International Relations*, 20:4 (2014), pp. 5–8; Jason Ralph and Jess Gifkins 'The purpose of United Nations Security Council practice: Contesting competence claims in the normative context created by the Responsibility to Protect', *European Journal of International Relations*, 23:3 (2017), pp. 631–2; Andrew F. Cooper and Jérémie Cornut, 'The changing practices of frontline diplomacy: New directions for inquiry', *Review of International Studies*, 45:2 (2019), p. 302; for a critique, see Lauren Wilcox, 'Practising gender, queering theory', *Review of International Studies*, 43:5 (2017), pp. 789–808.

[18]Vincent Pouliot and Jérémie Cornut, 'Practice theory and the study of diplomacy: A research agenda', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 50:3 (2015), p. 298.

[19]Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, 'Power in practice'.

[20]Kristin Anabel Eggeling, 'At work with practice theory, "failed" fieldwork, or how to see international politics in an empty chair', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 50:1 (2021), pp. 149–73.

[21]Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Alena Drieschova, 'Track-change diplomacy: Technology, affordances, and the practice of international negotiations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 63:3 (2019), pp. 531–45.

[22]Adler and Pouliot, 'International practices', p. 6.

[23]See, for instance, Vincent Pouliot, 'A logic of practicality: A theory of practice of security communities', *International Organization*, 62:2 (2008), pp. 278–9.

[24]See, for example, Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Trusting Enemies* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018); Vincent Keating and Jan Ruzicka, 'Trusting relationships in international politics: No need to hedge', *Review of International Studies*, 40:4 (2014), pp. 753–70; Clara Weinhardt, 'Relational trust in international cooperation: The case of North-South trade negotiations', *Journal of Trust Research*, 5:1 (2005), pp. 27–54. For approaches to trust as individual disposition, emotion, or rational

that it suspends vulnerability and uncertainty.[25] Trust momentarily evokes an environment 'as if' the future was known, even if control and certainty remain an 'illusion'.[26] This enables behaviour where self-insurance and safeguarding seem irrelevant[27] as the act of trust carries the presumption that shared vulnerabilities will be handled with discretion.[28] A relational approach to trust further implies that trust is not an end state but always 'in-the-making': it is a social process of *trusting*.[29] The 'illusion' that trust evokes thus needs to be reconstituted in interaction.[30]

Such reconstitution takes place in and through practical enactments of trust, which are relevant both for the broader environment of trustworthiness[31] in which diplomats operate as well as for trust that is maintained and developed in relationships. Enactment of trust are symbolic exchanges that reconfirm that the other is 'seen' as, for instance, a trusted friend.[32] Symbolic exchanges are meaningful as they provide an opportunity to reconfirm the value of the relationship. Enactments of trust are thereby performative (I share this secret because you are a trusted friend) and demanding (I assume you handle this information with discretion). This makes enactments of trust expressions of interdependence, as their social meaning cannot be controlled by one actor only. They take shape as collaborative moves made without or with very little safeguarding, as they assume recognition of, and discretion towards shared vulnerabilities.[33] In practice, they demand and/or (re)confirm that others are worthy of our trust.

Enactments of trust always take place in a particular environment. How trust is manifested in this environment is relevant for how trust is enacted – for instance, how it is taken online. Multilateral diplomacy of permanent representation (PERMREPs), such as that to the EU, is the environment we focus on. Trust is generally considered important in this highly socialised diplomatic community due to institutionalised social rules and the shared practical presumption that others can be trusted to know about them.[34] These shared understandings foster an environment of trustworthiness, which can facilitate the sustenance of trust.[35] The Council of the EU therefore is a useful site to observe and understand the workings of manifested diplomatic trust, as it can be presumed trust is regularly enacted.[36]

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choice in IR, see Brian C. Rathbun, *Trust in International Cooperation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Andrew H. Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[25]Möllering, *Trust: Reason, Routine, Reflexivity*.

[26]Ibid., pp. 110, 112.

[27]Keating and Ruzicka, 'Trusting relationships in international politics', p. 761; Lukas Kasten, 'Trustful behaviour is meaningful behaviour: Implications for theory on identification-based trusting relations', *Journal of Trust Research*, 8:1 (2018), pp. 103–19.

[28]Emma-Louise Anderson, Laura Considine, and Amy S. Patterson, 'The power-trust cycle in global health: Trust as belonging in relations of dependency', *Review of International Studies*, 47:4 (2021), pp. 422–42.

[29]For process views of trust, see Guido Möllering, 'Process views of trusting and crises', in Reinhard Bachmann and Akbar Zaheer (eds), *Handbook of Advances in Trust Research* (Cheltenham/Northampton, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd, 2013), pp. 285–306.

[30]Möllering, *Trust: Reason, Routine, Reflexivity*, p. 99.

[31]Trust and trustworthiness are related but distinct concepts. Trust – as we use it – refers to a particular social relation, which is (re)produced in practice; trustworthiness is about whether the other is worthy of our trust. For a classic text on trustworthiness, see Roger C. Mayer, James H. Davis, and F. David Schoorman, 'An integrative model of organizational trust', *Academy of Management Review*, 20:3 (1995), pp. 709–34.

[32]David F. Hass and Forrest A. Deseran, 'Trust and symbolic exchange', *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 44:1 (1981), pp. 3–13.

[33]Kasten, 'Trustful behaviour', pp. 105, 108.

[34]Jeffrey T. Checkel, 'International institutions and socialization in Europe: Introduction and framework', *International Organization*, 59:4 (2005), pp. 801–26; Jeffrey Lewis, 'The methods of community in EU decision-making and administrative rivalry in the Council's infrastructure', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 7:2 (2000), pp. 261–89.

[35]Nicholas J. Wheeler, '"A presumption of trust" in international society', *International Relations*, 34:4 (2020), pp. 637–8.

[36]Larissa Versloot, 'The vitality of trusting relations in multilateral diplomacy: An account of the European Union', *International Affairs*, 98:2 (2022), pp. 509–28.

Trusting in the digitalising diplomatic field

Classic accounts of diplomacy have long imagined it as a string of face-to-face closed-door meetings. The now normalised use of digital tools (emails, text message, social media), however, has over the last years effectively transformed diplomacy from 'naked' face-to-face encounters into 'synthetic situations' or an altogether 'blended performance' mediated and assembled by digital communication tools.[37] Even though these tools have become a common sight in diplomatic settings for years, we still know little about their impact on the workings of diplomatic trust.

As outlined in the introduction, much recent scholarship notes that digital tools negatively affect trust development and maintenance. The starting point of many such works is the assumption that face-to-face meetings provide a unique opportunity for 'picking up' and 'giving off' trust-enforcing signals via body language.[38] Isabel Bramsen and Anine Hagemann, for instance, note that 'the multiplicity of sensibilities at work in face-to-face meetings cannot be recreated in virtual space' and that these environments make it difficult to 'generate trust'.[39] Relatedly, Tristen Naylor warns about the 'hollowing out' of summit diplomacy without its so-called 'inter-moments' (e.g., accidental 'brush-bys', 'pull-asides' or 'walk-and-talks'). These are not only crucial for the negotiation process, but in such moments 'trust can be forged'.[40] Marcus Holmes, Mark N. K. Saunders, and Nicholas J. Wheeler nuance this view by arguing that it may indeed be possible to maintain existing trustvirtually, yet that it will be more difficult for newcomers to build trust in and through virtual platforms only.[41] Holmes and Wheeler further theorise that bodily co-presence is not a prerequisite for social bonds to develop. Weak bonds can also emerge at a distance, for instance through writing letters.[42] They rest their theory on work in other disciplines which has illuminated that empathy and emotions *can* be conveyed in text-based communication and thereby facilitate a 'shared mood' also across distance.[43]

Following them, we also looked to research outside of IR on the overlap of digitalisation, trust, and information sharing in confidential negotiations. Writing in psychology, Charles E. Naquin and Gaylen D. Paulson, for example, argue that negotiations via email are often more complicated and less 'successful', as text-based information exchanges lend themselves to conveying task-based content (do this) but are 'not optimal for conveying relational messages' (if you do this, I do that).[44] Online, remote, or 'faceless' interaction moreover ups the stakes of trusting others, as it increases the perception that 'opportunities are ripe for unethical behaviour', such as leaking, bluffing, or lying.[45] Similarly, Jeanne M. Wilson, Susan G. Straus, and Bill McEvily highlight how trust levels are lower in 'computer mediated' forms of engagement due to the 'behavioural invisibility' of the actions of the other(s).[46] Writing in philosphy, Lucy

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[37]Kristin Anabel Eggeling and Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'The synthetic situation in diplomacy: Scopic media and the digital mediation of estrangement', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2:1 (2021), pp. 1–14; Rebecca Adler-Nisen and Kristin Anabel Eggeling, 'Blended diplomacy: The entanglement and contestation of digital technologies in everyday diplomatic practice', *European Journal of International Relations*, 28:3 (2022), pp. 640–66.

[38]Marcus Holmes, *Face-to-Face Diplomacy: Social Neuroscience in International Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Seanon S. Wong, 'Emotions and the communication of intentions in face-to-face diplomacy', *European Journal of International Relations*, 22:1 (2016), pp. 144–67.

[39]Bramsen and Hagemann, 'The missing sense of peace', pp. 18, 21.

[40]Naylor, 'All that's lost'.

[41]Holmes, Saunders, and Wheeler, 'Why virtual meetings make it hard for diplomats to trust each other'.

[42]Nicholas J. Wheeler and Marcus Holmes, 'The strength of weak bonds: Substituting bodily copresence in diplomatic social bonding', *European Journal of International Relations*, 27:3 (2021), pp. 730–52.

[43]Ibid., p. 6.

[44]Charles E. Naquin and Gaylen D. Paulson, 'Online bargaining and interpersonal trust', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 88:1 (2003), p. 114.

[45]Ibid., p. 115.

[46]Jeanne M. Wilson, Susan G. Straus, and Bill McEvily, 'All in due time: The development of trust in computer-mediated and face-to-face teams', *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 99:1 (2005), p. 16.

Osler has explored how empathy, a conceptual sibling of trust,[47] can be practiced online. Drawing on the phenomenological distinction between 'the physical, objective body' and the 'expressive, lived body', she argues that empathy is about perceiving someone's expressive, lived body and that this body is not tied to the body's physicality and can be taken out of immediate face-to-face encounters.[48] Such ideas are also probed back in IR, where Holmes and Wheeler suggest that future research may investigate whether similar dynamics hold in diplomatic communication via 'telephone, texts, or video conferencing'[49] – a task we take on in this article.

Methodology: Studying enactments of trust via digital information sharing

Our methodological approach builds on the above conceptualisation of trust as a social process that can be 'grasped' by studying its enactment; and a conceptualisation of digitalisation as a socio-material process rather than an immutable technical condition.[50] To get at whether and how trust can be taken online, we opted for long-term, qualitative fieldwork among and with members of the EU diplomatic corps in Brussels.

Our research started with explorations of how EU diplomats consider the role of 'trust' in their work[51] and how they perceive and experience the increasing 'digitalisation' of their field.[52] We started this research, simultaneously but initially not jointly, in autumn 2018. The material we draw on consists of fieldnotes written over eight months of fieldwork between November 2018 and January 2020, 'remote' research from March 2020 to May 2021, and the return of in-person fieldwork in June 2021 and September to November 2021.[53] Next to observational accounts, we draw on eighty-plus formal interviews with ambassadors, lower ranked diplomats, EU officials, bureaucrats and interpreters conducted face-to-face (2018, 2019, January 2020, and autumn 2021) and via telephone and video meetings (spring 2020 to summer 2021).[54]

This analysis combines these two research agendas. We made a methodological choice to focus on practices of information sharing to explore the conceptual relation and practical nexus between diplomacy, digitalisation, and trust.

Theoretically, information sharing is a suitable unit of analysis to observe enactments of trust. Sharing sensitive information assumes recognition of, and discretion towards, shared vulnerabilities. It thereby serves as a symbolic exchange that can confirm trustworthiness and facilitates a (further) suspension of uncertainty. Importantly, information sharing can equally be an act of betrayal or distrust – for instance, when shared information is leaked or insincere. Finally, information can be shared without either trust or distrust being relevant, as not all kinds of information are considered as equally sensitive or important. Rather than taking information sharing as indicative of trust's presence, we take it as a methodological *opportunity* to make enactments of trust 'visible'.

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[47]Wheeler, *Trusting Enemies*, pp. 53–4.

[48]Osler, 'Taking empathy online'.

[49]Wheeler and Holmes, 'The strength of weak bonds', p. 19.

[50]Wanda J. Orlikowski, 'Sociomaterial practices: Exploring technology at work', *Organization Studies*, 28:9 (2007), pp. 1435–48; Mareile Kaufmann and Julien Jeandesboz, 'Politics and "the digital": From singularity to specificity', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 20:3 (2017), pp. 309–28.

[51]The main research focus of Larissa Versloot.

[52]The main research focus of Kristin Anabel Eggeling.

[53]During the first COVID-19 lockdown (spring to summer 2020) and in subsequent waves, research possibilities became curtailed (see also Eggeling and Adler-Nissen, 'The synthetic situation in diplomacy'). At the same time, large parts of the EU diplomatic field migrated deeper into virtual settings and some previously tangential aspects of how diplomatic work was conducted (such as videoconferences or WhatsApp channels) became central sites of everyday diplomatic exchange. By 'tragic serendipity' (Kristin A. Eggeling 'Embracing the "inverted commas", or how COVID-19 can show us new directions for ethnographic "fieldwork"', *Qualitative Research*, online first (2022), p. 7), our pre-pandemic research question of how diplomats do their work with and through digital tools became the lived reality of the field.

[54]For further details, see the methodological appendix in the online supplementary material.

Empirically, information sharing in the context of ongoing negotiations emerged as an important thing that Brussels diplomats do from our own data. This reconfirms the general understanding in the literature that information sharing is a key practice in multilateral diplomatic contexts as it is crucial for the negotiation process. As Pouliot put it, diplomats at permanent representations are akin to 'professional gossipers' as being a competent negotiator means a need to stay 'in the loop at all times'.[55] Moreover, and given that information sharing regularly involves the use of digital tools (e.g., emailing, texting, or posting information online) the practice bundles the article's central concerns.

Methodologically, a focus on information sharing opens many possible research sites. Despite popular criticism of the EU's cumbersome bureaucratic apparatus, the diplomatic community in Brussels in their day-to-day work resembles a 'political beehive'[56] of working group meetings, expert committees, and coordination meetings with national ministries, and, in regular intervals, ambassadorial, ministerial, and heads of state summits. Such meetings and the legwork done to prepare and administer them are all potential 'sites' to study information sharing and the overlap between digitalisation and enactments of trust.[57] The Council of the EU is also a rotating and stratified institution. This allows us to observe performances of trusting at different levels of hierarchy and confidentiality and as they are performed by diplomats who have been part of its institutions for longer or shorter amounts of time and are at different stages in their career.

Digital information sharing and enactments of trust in diplomatic negotiations at the EU

The following analysis brings together the conceptual lens outlined above and our empirical material from the field. To answer our research question – *can trust be taken online, and if so, how?* – it is split into two parts. First, and to set the scene, we unpack what it means to competently perform information sharing in EU diplomacy, and thereby which social rules serve as a yardstick for (un)trustworthy information sharing in the field. Second, we discuss how digitalisation has generated new uncertainties and vulnerabilities when it comes to information sharing and if and how diplomatic trust helps suspend them. We do so by zooming in on the use of three core digital information sharing practices: *using a smartphone, emailing,* and *teleconferencing.* Together, the analysis shows how trust is taken online in Brussels diplomacy and points to the renegotiation of the place and boundaries of trust in digitally mediated work environments. The implications of this renegotiation will be summarised in the conclusion.

Sharing information, competently

A core task of diplomats working at the Council of the EU is to be a provider, gatherer, and conductor of information. When asked about their core professional task, many EU diplomats understand themselves as informational bridge-builders between their capitals and the EU institutions, as well as within the relations between PERMREPs in Brussels. A key competence is 'the ability to generate consensus, to be a deal-maker, if you like' (I:15-11-2018). To do that well, one needs to 'convey' and 'represent' one's member state's message (I:15-11-2018), 'find out' the positions of other governments by 'coordinating with colleagues' (I:13-11-2018), and 'become the

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[55]Vincent Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 128–9.

[56]Eggeling and Adler-Nissen, 'The synthetic situation in diplomacy', p. 6.

[57]Following Neumann (Iver B. Neumann, *Diplomatic Sites: A Critical Enquiry* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 3), a diplomatic site is a place where 'something happens' and 'diplomacy is on display'. 'A site', he writes, 'may be physical or virtual, but in both cases, it is where diplomacy actually takes place and where it can be captured analytically. The negotiation table and the permanent representation abroad remain important, but diplomacy has also cascaded onto a number of new sites.' Ibid., p. 3. The digital communication channels we focus on are examples of such new sites.

interface' between the capital, the PERMREPs, and public (I:14-11-2018). To do any of these things, one needs to share information.

Information sharing, however, is highly diverse and an abundance of information is flowing around Brussels. Not all is equally sensitive or important, and therefore relevant to the negotiation process. As noted by one diplomat:

> some people would just call me to get my position, and then I would give [it] … But you … need more than just the formal position to know where the possibilities are and to know where there is room for compromise. If you just want the formal positions, you could also hire people to call for you.
> (I: 09-02-2021)

This comment that one could just 'hire people' – that is, not diplomats – highlights that the sharing of some information is a routine part of the job. Diplomats do not necessarily make themselves vulnerable when sharing information and trust (or distrust) is not *always* enacted in the practice of information sharing. Yet the kind of information diplomats first and foremost are expected to gather, and share is of a particular kind. It includes information about 'the current situation and how it is likely to develop rather than of the pattern of past regularities'.[58] In other words, information that is crucial for negotiation processes. Such information derives from 'day-to-day personal dealings'[59] and cannot be found in official statements. It contains sensitive promises or assertions about upcoming negotiations, for instance a colleague's perception of another or one's capitals red lines.

In relation to the sharing of information of such nature, trust becomes key. As one diplomat explains: 'When it comes to decision-making, this has to be based on something more [than one ambassador having friendly relations with the other]' (I: I:26-03-2019). This something more 'is a relationship of mutual trust' (I:26-03-2019). When it comes to the exchange of sensitive information, another diplomat tells us, 'you need people you can trust' (I:28-06-2019). To ascertain if this is the case, politics also plays a role. Diplomats are not naïve and aware of the risks of leaks and betrayal, especially when they represent states with different positions. One diplomat notes: 'With my dear colleague from [state X], I know that he will always support me, I share all information with him … but for instance, even if I like the [state X] colleague as a person, I would not trust him with the same amount of information just because he's a nice friend, because he doesn't want the same thing' (I:20-06-2019). Figuring out when, how, what and with whom to share information in the negotiation process is part of the 'competent performance' of diplomatic practice.

Two socially negotiated rules illuminate what it means to competently share information in EU: keep up *internal transparency* and ensure *external confidentiality*. The first – *internal transparency* – refers to an expectation of mutual openness and sincerity about information shared. Naturally, diplomats know that they will not, and cannot, always share all information with one another. It would be unfruitful in a negotiation process to lay 'all cards on the table from the start' (I:19-03-2019). Moreover, in Brussels – an environment where stakes are high and negotiations complex – complete honesty 'out in the open' is likely not *believed* by others, as illustrated in the below example from a diplomatic training session:

> What would happen if I, as a negotiator in a meeting [trainer walks up to one of the participants, with a sheet of paper] say: 'look, here is my mandate, this is what I want, what do you think?'
>   I wouldn't believe you,' the diplomat-participant says.

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[58] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (2nd edn, Houndsmills and London, UK: Macmillan Press, 1995), p. 174.
[59] Ibid., pp. 174–5.

'Exactly,' the trainer continues, 'you wouldn't trust me that what is on the piece of paper is in fact true. You don't know if I'm smoke screening you. … That's why it's necessary to informally explore what it is that others *really* want.'[60]

Sincerity should therefore not be confused with full disclosure. It rather refers to the expectation that, if asked informally, diplomats keep each other in the loop. For instance, within a particular like-minded group, it is expected that if you pick up relevant information from the 'other camp', you share it with the group (I:21-06-2021(1).[61] It is also expected that members keep each other updated about relevant political developments in their capitals. EU diplomats know that national positions can always change. They therefore rely on the 'informal agreement' to 'let the others know' as soon as possible if this is the case to avoid surprises (I:04-02-2021). Sincerity also refers to the expectation that promises will be kept, such as when diplomats discuss how to best approach a particular negotiation and internally agree in advance 'who is going to say what' (I:02-05-2019).

The second rule, *external confidentiality*, refers to the expectation that diplomats keep secrets from the right people, at the right time. Where those boundaries lie differs depending on context. Those who are not supposed to know about a particular piece of information can be the broader public, journalists, another group of member states, the capital back home or even a particular diplomat or EU official. Those who are supposed to know can be equally diverse. Regardless, it is expected they refrain from sharing information, troubles, or dissent and instead 'solve things internally' before 'going public' (I:09-02-2021; I:23-11-2018).

What the 'right time' is for disclosing information is similarly context dependent. Sometimes, information should *never* be disclosed to the public, journalists or other colleagues, whereas at other times openness is required and even expected. Having socially negotiated rules about information sharing moreover does not mean that diplomats *always* adhere to them. Diplomats know they operate in a highly political environment and sometimes feel it is necessary to break the rules to advance their own negotiation position.[62] Indeed, as explained by one ambassador, it happens regularly that promises are not kept and sensitive information is leaked to external parties, be it 'NGOs or members from industry', 'Americans and Israelis' or the media, especially through 'Politico's morning leak show', the Brussels playbook (I:18-06-2021; I:23-11-2018).[63]

With this in mind, studying information sharing tells us two things. On the one hand, it tells us when trust is enacted in diplomacy. When sincerity is confirmed or promises are kept, information sharing can be an enactment of trust. Trust is furthermore enacted when sensitive information is kept secret from outsiders, thereby reconfirming that shared vulnerabilities are handled discretely. Information sharing, however, can equally be an enactment of distrust when information is disclosed to the 'wrong people' or when promises are broken. In information sharing, the enactment of trust is one of situated use.

On the other hand, studying information sharing gives insight into the environment diplomats operate in. In EU diplomacy, trustworthiness is related to information sharing via the rules of the game of maintaining internal transparency and external confidentiality outlined above. Gaining competence in navigating these rules matters as by collectively doing so, diplomats sustain the presumption that others know about them. Shared practical knowledge about rules of the game is important, as without it, it would be difficult to know (or socially negotiate) who is cheating – who is displaying untrustworthy behaviour – and thereby when one can be held (socially, politically) accountable.

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[60]Fieldnotes, June 2019.

[61]Fieldnotes, 14 October 2021.

[62]On this point, see also Merje Kuus, 'Symbolic power in diplomatic practice: Matters of style in Brussels', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 50:3 (2015), pp. 368–84.

[63]The 'Brussels playbook' is a daily newsletter from the news outlet Politico, which is almost religiously read in Brussels at: {https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/brussels-playbook/}.

Taking trust online: Digital information sharing by texting, posting, emailing, and videoconferencing

In the introduction, we noted that the use of digital tools poses new uncertainties and vulnerabilities to confidential communication channels in diplomatic negotiations. In this section, we unpack this claim by showing how the digitalising environment creates new uncertainties and vulnerabilities that are confirming or contesting the social rules of internal transparency and external confidentiality. This creates both new challenges and opportunities for diplomatic trust. The analysis is structured around the situated use of three forms of everyday digital information sharing: (1) texting and posting on social media; (2) emailing; and (3) videoconferencing. Naturally, the use of these tools does not operate in a vacuum and our choice to single them out is an analytical one.

Contrary to broadly held assumptions, we show that the enactment of trust neither stops nor stops to be important in digitally mediated interactions. What we find is that diplomats manage uncertainties and vulnerabilities related to digital information sharing both by embedding trust in this practice and by socially negotiating what counts as (un)trustworthy behaviour online. Yet the character of digital tools itself makes diplomats vulnerable to hacks from ill-meaning external parties or other 'security gaps'. Such vulnerabilities prove difficult, if not impossible, to suspend via diplomatic trusting. We moreover find that while the continuation of 'offline' trust next to 'online' interactions occurs without too much friction, the building of trust in purely digital interactions is more challenging, particularly for diplomats of an older generation and those with less experience in Brussels.

Using a smart phone

Which tool could you not do your job without? – we asked when interviewing diplomats in Brussels. 'My phone', one replied, 'that thing is in constant us. I am always on it' (I:28-03-2019). Like other professionals and a growing number of people worldwide, the Brussels diplomat is becoming a 'homo interneticus': connected 24/7 on several mobile devices, only a touch away from endless digital information, and routinely available for interactions near and far.[64] Smartphones are both used more passively to 'stay up to date' and 'monitor' Brussels' overlapping political processes (I:19-03-2019, I:28-03-2019); as well as more actively to 'create content' and 'feed the information loop' (I:13-11-2018; I:16-11-2018). We focus on the 'active' use of smartphones below; in particular, on *texting* colleagues and *posting on social media* in the context of ongoing negotiations.

Texting is a contested digital information sharing practice. Some diplomats are 'hating it' (I:28-03-2019), some are 'annoyed by the constant flood of messages' (I:19-03-2019), while others embrace it as the easiest and most convenient way to 'test the waters' for negotiation positions (I:23-01-2020). 'A short text can go a long way', one diplomat explains, 'for example, I just sent a message to a colleague who was at the same meeting this morning to ask if she saw it the same way I did. This makes her feel in the loop and gives me the opportunity to hear if I missed something form her side.'[65] Another ambassador explains the various WhatsApp groups to 'reach everybody on', including an 'official [ambassadors] group', a 'more leisure-oriented group' and some for coordination between groups of 'smaller countries', such as the Nordics or the Benelux (I:27-03-2019). Texting useful information to colleagues or sharing private jokes can serve as a digital enactment of trust. It is a symbolic exchange that confirms others are 'seen' and included. Such recognition helps suspend uncertainty, as by texting it can quickly be confirmed that shared information is sincere or understood in a similar way.

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[64]Bogdan Nadolu and Delia Nadolu, 'Homo interneticus: The sociological reality of mobile online being', *Sustainability*, 12:5 (2020), p. 1.

[65]Fieldnotes, 14 October 2021.

However, when it comes to gaining competence in knowing which WhatsApp groups to be part of, and how to use them, we notice a particular dividing line between older and younger diplomats.[66] One diplomat for instance notes that 'there are many WhatsApp groups now [since the pandemic] … and everyone is responding to this very positively, also the older diplomats … They were at first a bit on the sidelines maybe, as they are not that technical. But after we made sure that everyone felt included, they are also really enjoying it and are having a lot of fun' (I:09-02-2021). Apparently, it is needed to actively 'include' some older diplomats as they may not be as 'technically' competent. While enactments of trust via texting are thus important for upholding internal transparency, our field material shows that it is more difficult for some to perform such enactments than it is for others.

When it comes to upholding external confidentiality, texting comes with uncertainties and vulnerabilities. 'We all know', one diplomat reflects 'that writing on something like WhatsApp is like writing a postcard: The postal service that is sending the message and anyone handling it in between can read it, no problem' (I:18-10-2021). Another diplomat tells us 'If you write something into an app, it will be there forever … you cannot delete it, and so you better not write something that you may regret at some point' (I:15-10-2021). What (not) to put in a text message is thereby a continuous social negotiation. When diplomats gain competence in knowing which information is too sensitive to text, they ensure themselves – and one another – that they are worthy of one another's' trust and collectively work towards preventing potential leaks.

Apart from texting, diplomats use their smartphone for *posting information on social media*. EU diplomats express different opinions about the role and purpose of sharing information about ongoing negotiations on platforms like Twitter or Instagram. While some deem Twitter to be 'the opposite of diplomacy' (I:28-03-2019), others consider it to be a key 'frequency' for Brussels communication (I:23-11-2018).

Posting information on social media poses new uncertainties and vulnerabilities to confidential diplomatic communication channels in two main ways. First, with a single click, sensitive information can potentially be 'out in the open' within seconds, also during critical negotiations. 'In the moments before reaching an agreement', one ambassador tells us, 'we have to be quite honest with each other … If we then constantly needed to worry about leaks, then all of us would become less able to calibrate our message' (I:27-03-2019). Second, and differently, social media posting is considered to potentially undermine diplomatic work in a more fundamental way, as the possibility of live social media updates from negotiation room could turn diplomacy into a publicity spectacle. Reflecting on participating in UN negotiations 'where what delegates are saying is more or less live tweeted to the outside world', an ambassador worries about the character of the negotiation turning into a 'performance for the gallery' (I:19-03-2019). 'I am all for transparency', he says, 'but in the midst of the negotiation process there needs to be an assurance that things are not yet public' (I:19-03-2019).

One way to deal with these uncertainties is through a collective negotiation of what it means to competently post on social media. This on the hand happens by reconfirming why it is important to ensure external confidentiality. As one ambassador put it, our 'meetings take place in an atmosphere of a certain confidentiality, [we know that] one should not tweet or otherwise share what somebody else is saying' (I:26-03-2019). Without such confidentiality 'people would no longer be prepared to say openly what they think or what their government position is' (I:26-03-2019). Those who post on social media while breaking with such external confidentiality are thereby often stigmatised. 'The other week, there was a real faux-pas at the Foreign Affairs Council', a Council spokesperson remembers,

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[66]For similar insights on age and the use of digital tools in diplomatic negotiations, see Corneliu Bjola and Michaela Coplen, 'Virtual venues and international negotiations: Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic', *International Negotiation*, online first (2022), pp. 11–12, available at: {DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-bja10060}.

when the Spokesperson of Hungarian delegation was tweeting from within the room … Another example was this time last year when Salvini was live-streaming from within the negotiations in the meeting leading up to the summit in Austria … Back then, the Luxembourgish prime minister actually intervened and said he couldn't do that.
(I:19-12-2019)

The debate about posting information on social media reveals the drawing of a boundary around diplomatic work. When sensitive information is leaked by being posted on social media, it tends to negatively affect *everyone* in the meeting room and make the diplomatic negotiation process more vulnerable *as such*. Thinking back to the Introduction, the example of Bijleveld tweeting about the Defence Council and partly displaying the access code further illustrates this point. By holding those who leak sensitive information socially accountable (remember Bijleveld's tweet being called a 'stupid mistake' by her own ministry to pre-empt stigmatisation), diplomats work at upholding an environment of trustworthiness. It allows them to act 'as if' it is no problem that phones are in the room, as there exists a general understanding that compromising external confidentiality is considered untrustworthy, and will bear social and political consequences.

It is thus rare that trust is *enacted* by posting on social media from the room, though it does happen. Diplomats, for instance, can post information from the meeting room to create illusions of fierce negotiations. 'Some colleagues', as noted by one diplomat, are

very keen … to inform … about achievements or milestones, or that the negotiations are in a stalemate and that we need another day … [For] example, in the Council on fisheries … when we get the results too soon, we may disappoint the stakeholders … then they may think: 'Oh, you haven't been fighting so tough.' So that's the need of sharing information from the room. In this sense, keeping the audience posted that 'oh yes we are working … [and] need another two hours, three hours and so', this creates a positive message about us … without revealing anything confidential.
(I:13-11-2018)

In this example, posting on social media is a collective enactment of trust. After all, posting this kind of information online only works if it is not then undermined by someone in the group. If such 'collective deception' of the public is successfully maintained, it reconstitutes trust's illusion 'as if' there is no doubt that shared vulnerabilities will be handled with discretion. Naturally, this example may raise a range of different questions about proper transparency of diplomatic negotiations that lie beyond the scope here.

Diplomats' everyday information sharing via smartphones shows that digital enactments of trust, combined with a shared social understanding of what constitutes trustworthy and untrustworthy information sharing, is useful for (further) suspending uncertainties and vulnerabilities inherent in the negotiation process. Yet our fieldwork also shows that the use of smartphones brings with it certain technological vulnerabilities that are difficult to suspend by trusting. These are not tied to the untrustworthy use of phones by others in the room, but rather to the hacking of these devices by external parties. Diplomatic trust reaches a limit for managing such vulnerability. This can be observed by the fact that at times, information is shared only in a situation characterised by self-insurance and explicit safeguarding. To secure communication channels, the use of phones is increasingly controlled in certain diplomatic spaces. For instance, during the EU Summit in December 2021 the Spokesperson of President Michel tweeted: 'At #EUCO @eucopresident has now switched to debate on #Belarus and #Ukraine – To ensure confidentiality, the discussion takes place without electronic devices.'[67] Similar are practices such as

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[67]See: {https://twitter.com/barendleyts/status/1471506469010886658?s=21} accessed 16 December 2021.

'jamming' the Internet connection in meeting rooms through devices called 'faraday cages', 'small computer boxes that disturb digital signals' (I:04-12-2019). Controlling the diplomatic environment in such ways highlights the boundary between social enactments of trust between diplomatic actors and the seriousness of new vulnerabilities that come with technological change, a point we will take up in the conclusion.

Emailing

Most formal as well as internal information 'travels across Brussels via email' (I:15-11-2018). Meetings are arranged, events are announced, negotiation positions are shared and 'literally all documents are transmitted this way' (I:15-11-2018). '[Emailing] allows other people to also know what we are discussing', one ambassador explains, 'Say I am discussing something with my counterpart, another ambassador, that my Nicolaidis[68] also needs to know … [an email] is the best way to simultaneously share all relevant information with all relevant parties' (I:15-11-2018). Sharing information competently via email thus first and foremost means that internal transparency is upheld. In this context, not CCing someone on an email could be misread for not wanting them to be in the known from which it is a short way to being misread as not being trustworthy.

  Emailing, however, also poses challenges for upholding external confidentiality. These bear resemblance to those attached to sending text messages, such as the question whether someone will read an email they are not 'supposed' to. Since email has been around for a while, diplomats know what *not* to put in an email. 'I mean', one ambassador explains,

> I can tell you things face to face which I will never put on paper. It is always possible that somebody else will read your email … I'm not even saying that this is because of bad faith, but also because words on paper don't say everything. If you want to listen to somebody you need to show understanding, empathy and you are willing to go for a solution, and you don't do that by writing an email.
> (I:20-11-2018)

  When face-to-face meetings were restricted, diplomats acknowledge that they 'spend more time in sending emails and even making phone calls to see if people have gotten these messages' (I:21-04-2020). To uphold the environment of trustworthiness, more digital information sharing became necessary. The shift from pre-COVID to pandemic times is interesting for our core question. When emailing becomes the dominant way to share information – and when this exchange is not followed up by a face-to-face meeting – uncertainty about whether the right information is received by the right people presented itself as more pressing. One way to do deal with this, as noted by this one diplomat, was to increase the number of digital 'check-ins': follow-up emails, phone calls. Against the background of the pandemic, emailing emerged as a main communication site to enact trust: an email served as a quick confirmation that information was properly received, understood, and handled.

  In principle, and as also mentioned by the ambassador at the beginning of this section, emailing is seen as an 'equaliser', upholding the sense of inclusiveness within the broader diplomatic community. As one diplomat notes, it's 'one of the best things about Brussels: that everyone – from the desk officer to the commissioner – is very approachable. And how to you approach people? On email!' (I:20-11-2018). Yet the increased use of emailing during the pandemic illuminated an otherwise perhaps invisible hierarchy, and many diplomats point to the exclusion of 'new' diplomats. One tells us they were 'lucky' to already have been in Brussels before

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[68]The 'Nicolaidis' position is the attaché supporting to PSC ambassador.

the lockdown, 'so I already have a network, both with colleagues but also with the various institutions' – it is 'easier to feel excluded' as 'newcomers' (I:04-02-2021).

Incoming diplomats are not shut off from using digital tools. On the contrary, being put on emailing lists is a prominent way to feel included when arriving in (lockdown) Brussels. As one diplomat recalls: 'once you become part of all kinds of email distributions, you also learn about the different names and the different topics … And then suddenly you know what you're talking about' (I:01-02-2021). Yet newcomers use email differently from those diplomats who built up networks before the pandemic. 'Of course, the new colleague can just email or call someone to get to know each other', we are told, 'but you don't have the same interaction' as when you have met each other before in person (I:24-02-2021). This sentiment is echoed by the reflection of a diplomat who arrived in Brussels in the middle of the pandemic:

> With most colleagues, I haven't been in contact yet [in person], so I don't know them … I feel that when we are discussing some issues and are having phone calls or writing emails … the discussions are really open and we can clearly talk about the positions … but then … maybe there are other older colleagues who are exchanging more information … when you look at the statements by different colleagues from different member states, then you can hear and you can sense that there is something behind it. That they have done some cooperation and the wording is similar ….
> (I:01-03-2021)

The above example reveals how the digital and the analogue have become intertwined in diplomatic practice[69] and how online enactments of trust – such as, via emails – usually find expression in tandem with offline enactments. When it comes to emailing, it works relatively well to 'take trust online'. When trust is already manifested, and uncertainty and vulnerability are (to a certain extent) suspended, it seems justified to use email for sending each other quick messages with useful information. Such enactments of trust via email, in turn, further reconstitute trust's illusion. Yet it proves difficult to build trust via digital tools *only*, as others too have found.[70]

Videoconferencing

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced Brussels into lockdown, many formal and informal meetings had to be conducted virtually. The introduction of video teleconferencing (VTC) for negotiations within Brussels was new. As in most other professions, these systems were previously used for long-distance calls, but not for local day-to-day work. The move to virtual meetings impacted diplomacy in many ways. It is both seen as a timesaver, since there is no need 'to run from one meeting to the other', but it equally presented a challenge for many to retain the 'human touch' (I:21-04-20) and keep a proper 'work-life balance', pushing some 'close to a burn-out' (I:24-06-2021). In 2020/21, some diplomats would participate in 'six, seven or eight hours of negotiating on video' a day (I:09-02-2021; I: 27-09-21) or participate in two VTC meetings at once: 'I had the computer on, where I had the main VTC running … And then on my tablet I had the other VTC running, and then I had my headphones plugged in there and was a bit like a DJ – with one ear plugged in' (I:01-02-2021). When it comes to competent information sharing during VTC meetings, the rules of the game were thus made and improvised during the time we did our research.

Over time, we learn that internal transparency and external confidentiality are taken by diplomats as a rule of thumb also in the VTC format. Judged on their basis, diplomats tell us that VTC works well in meetings with more marginal figures such as some journalists, lobbyists, or

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[69] Eggeling and Adler-Nissen, 'The synthetic situation in diplomacy'; Adler-Nissen and Eggeling, 'Blended diplomacy'.
[70] Naquin and Paulson, 'Online bargaining and interpersonal trust'.

652   Kristin Anabel Eggeling and Larissa Versloot

academics (I:15-10-2021) and 'when it comes to presentations or first rounds of discussions' but less well when it comes to 'having to negotiate about difficult or sensitive issues' (I:14-07-2020; I:29-01-2021; I:27-09-2021). The main reason for this, is that as a digital tool, VTC bring technological vulnerability from the 'background' to the 'foreground'.[71] 'It is very simple', according to one EU official we talked with in the summer of 2020:

> There is just not a decent VTC system available within the EU. First, we were told to simply use Zoom, Skype, and Webex. That changed after the second week, when we were deliberately told *not* to use Zoom anymore as the Russians and Chinese would listen in [laughs]. So in the end we settled for Webex … But it is still not a secured network. I start every meeting with reminding the member states that this is not a secured VTC. So member states are more reserved in terms of what they say.
> (I:14-07-2020)

Diplomats have grown accustomed to the co-presence of digital devices in the background of negotiations, and rest assured that others will use them in a trustworthy manner. But when negotiations are entirely conducted online, VTC makes diplomats continuously aware of potential breaches of external confidentiality from external parties. The example of journalist Verlaan again comes to mind. This incident was rather harmless but illustrates a broader concern about the vulnerability caused by using VTC for negotiations. As discussed above, such vulnerability is difficult, if not impossible, to suspend via diplomatic trusting. Moreover, in VTC meetings the digital tool cannot be separated from the negotiations but becomes the interface of the negotiation itself. With trust out of the equation as a useful social mechanism for dealing with this vulnerability, explicit control and safeguarding also proved fruitless. Simply put, one cannot ask someone to leave their computer outside of the meeting, when the meeting is taking place *on* the computer. In realms of EU decision-making where highly confidential information *has* to be shared, diplomats thus soon pushed for in-person meetings (I:16-04-2020). For instance, meetings of the COREPER took place in person throughout the pandemic.[72]

Many EU working groups, however, continue to meet via VTC. Besides external hacks, other uncertainty and vulnerability become relevant during these meetings. Many diplomats mention in particular the lost sense of a 'feel for the room', which makes them vulnerable for misinterpreting a situation or being misunderstood (I:24-09-2021; I:29-09-2021). This is explained by one diplomat:

> You could normally discuss in person, look people in the eye, notice the ways in which someone is explaining the matter. I mean, one thing is what they are saying, but another thing is how they are saying it, what is between the lines. It is more difficult to get a sense of these kinds of things via VTC. And this makes it more difficult to get an idea and feeling of the different positions.
> (I:04-02-2021)

Since the start of the pandemic, EU diplomats actively worked at gaining competence in this regard and over time learned to better navigate digital negotiations. Diplomatic 'e-negotiation trainings' were set up, where diplomats for instance learn about the need for 'active verbal compensation' to replace the signals you miss when not being in the room, such as 'if someone in the corner is shaking their head'.[73] Diplomats get told that they cannot 'assume' others will easily

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[71]On fore- and background in digitally mediated diplomatic negotiations see Eggeling and Adler-Nissen, 'The synthetic situation in diplomacy', p. 5.

[72]Maurer and Wright, 'A new paradigm for EU diplomacy', p. 559; Eggeling and Adler-Nissen, 'The synthetic situation in diplomacy', p. 7.

[73]Fieldnotes, January 2021.

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understand them via VTC; chairs of working groups get told to 'ask uncomfortably often' if things are clear and to 'not assume consensus when it stays silent'.[74] Over time, diplomats learn that upholding internal transparency during VTC negotiations means something different than when negotiating face-to-face. For instance, whereas interrupting too much during offline meetings is seen as a token of diplomatic incompetence (I:14-06-2021), staying silent can be seen as untrustworthy on VTC.

Apart from socially negotiating what it means to competently uphold internal transparency during online meetings, we find that diplomats suspend uncertainties during VTC meeting through simultaneous enactments of trust via *other* digital tools, in particular, through texting. During 'offline' meetings, diplomats would normally enact trust via a 'quick wink', nod, or laugh (I:10-06-2021),[75] informing one another that something is well understood, or that a promise will, indeed, be kept. As it is difficult to receive or 'give off'[76] such signals virtually, diplomats recreate such enactments of trust virtually. For example by 'congratulating each other' on a statement via WhatsApp during video meeting or saying things like 'that was a great statement, I totally agree' (I:09-02-2021). In such moments, one digital enactment of trust (texting) serves to help suspend uncertainties and vulnerabilities generated by another digital tool (videoconferencing). But, and as similarly found in other professional settings,[77] maintaining trust over the course of a negotiation in this way is tiring and time consuming. Because diplomats furthermore use various digital devices simultaneously to compensate for the lack of internal transparency during VTC meetings, the negotiation process becomes more strenuous and less efficient and a growing number of diplomats complain about 'digital fatigue' (I:09-02-2021; I:27-09-21).

The latter may be one explanation for the persistent claim that digital communication undermines trust. While digital tools, our analysis shows, are constantly and productively involved in maintaining trust, digital overload may lead to blurred (self-)assessments and hasty judgements. Taking the long-term perspective of our analysis in mind, however, we can see how the presence of digital tools is not an infringement of diplomatic trust per se, but one made meaningful in situated use. We discuss the implications of this use in the next and final section.

Conclusion

Like that of many other professions and people worldwide, the work of diplomats is rapidly digitalising. Today, text messages and videoconferences are similarly important for the conduct of international negotiations as meeting rooms and coffee chats.[78] We have explored in this article how trust – an element that both practitioners and scholars consider to be central for diplomatic negotiation – can be 'taken online'. In contrast to most existing analyses that have stressed the loss or missing sense of trust in digital interactions, we find, more optimistically, that diplomatic trust can, indeed, be taken online and that digital tools have in many ways become indispensable for its everyday enactment. Against currently dominant narratives, digitalisation should therefore not be seen as a challenge for diplomatic trust, per se.

We base our argument on a definition of trust as the momentary suspension of uncertainty and vulnerability *vis-à-vis* the intentions and actions of others; a reading of diplomacy as practice grounded in everyday performances and social rules; digitalisation as part of the tools involved in its doing; and thick empirical material gathered in the form of ethnographic observations and

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[74]Ibid.

[75]Fieldnotes, June 2018.

[76]Holmes, *Face-to-Face Diplomacy*; Wong, 'Emotions and the communication of intentions'; see also Merje Kuus, 'Bureaucratic sociability, or the missing eighty percent of effectiveness: The case of diplomacy', *Geopolitics*, online first (2021), p. 12, available at: {DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1934672}.

[77]Wilson et al., 'All in due time'.

[78]For an in-depth ethnographic exploration of this development in Brussels, see Adler-Nissen and Eggeling, 'Blended diplomacy'.

interviews with diplomats in Brussels conducted from 2018 to 2021. To scope our analysis of this material, we focus on digital information sharing as a diplomatic practice useful for observing enactments of trust. Following the currently dominant definition in diplomatic studies, moreover, we took practice to mean 'competent performance', which provided us with a two-step analytical process: first, to find out what the competent and thereby (un)trustworthy way to share information in Brussels is; and second, whether and how this understanding holds in digitalising contexts.

Our analysis started from the premise that information sharing is indispensable for diplomatic negotiations. At the core of diplomatic work lies the need to 'stay in the loop': to know about others' positions, to convey red lines and to prevent unpleasant surprises. Diplomats, however, make themselves vulnerable when sharing information as they can never be *certain* that information is sincere, properly received, or kept from outsiders. Whereas diplomats can never indefinitely overcome such uncertainties, trust allows them to act in the illusion that vulnerabilities will be handled with discretion. Diplomats maintain this illusion via practical enactments of trust. EU diplomats furthermore work under the presumption that others know what it means to share information in an (un)trustworthy way. They learn that to competently share information means to ensure *internal transparency* and *external confidentiality*. Whereas these 'rules of the game' are regularly bent or broken, it is common knowledge that this is not without social and/or political consequences.

In our analysis, we probed whether and how these norms are considered meaningful when information is shared via digital tools. We focused on practices of using a smartphone (particularly *texting and posting on social media*), *emailing*, and *videoconferencing*. What we find is that digitalising communication channels create new uncertainties and vulnerabilities but also new spaces and possibilities for diplomatic trust. Trust, indeed, can be taken online, and digital tools broaden the horizon for when and where trust can be enacted. In everyday diplomatic work, digital enactments of trust have become central to suspending uncertainty during negotiations, for instance by making sure that everyone is 'in the known' through email ccs, or 'testing the waters' via WhatsApp during VTC meetings.

Zooming in on *how* trust is enacted online reveals a social renegotiation of the places and boundaries of trust in diplomatic work, which both create new hierarchies and lay bare more explicitly existing ones. In other words, some 'win' and some 'lose' when trust is performed digitally. Younger diplomats and those more digitally 'savvy' navigate processes of digital information sharing more easily. They neither find it problematic to multitask nor use multiple digital tools simultaneously, whereas older diplomats run the risk of being overtaken or even excluded. Another but not necessarily symmetrical[79] dynamic exists between newcomers and those with already established networks of trusting relations. Virtual negotiations during COVID-19 were hard for all diplomats, also those who had already been in Brussels. Those who were already there, however, had informal digital channels set up from before the pandemic and were thus both quicker and more flexible in meeting both online as well as 'offline' again. This provided opportunities to suspend uncertainties that newcomers did not share, which entrenches information asymmetries and potentially compromises internal transparency in the long run. To compensate for the uncertainties that come with the use of one digital tool – such as VTC – diplomats actively and simultaneously enact trust via another digital tool – for example, by texting. This, we found, is a fruitful way to suspend uncertainty, but maintaining trust in such a way is demanding and time consuming, impeding on the efficiency of negotiations and depleting diplomatic attention. The digitalisation of communication channels also creates uncertainty that proves difficult to suspend altogether by diplomatic trust. To deal with the risks of potential interruptions from outsiders, not trust but control is seen as the viable option to ensure internal

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[79]Meaning the new resembling the old, and the young the already present.

transparency and external confidentiality, such as when mobile phones are not allowed in a meeting room.

Two broader implications for diplomatic trust can be drawn from our analysis. First, while the increasing normalisation of digital interactions for the preparation and conduct of negotiations indicates that trust is indeed often enacted online, it also works in tandem with 'offline' enactments of trust such as in face-to-face meetings. When these were impossible (as during COVID-19 lockdowns), the maintenance of trusting relations via digital tools becomes more demanding both in a *practical sense* as diplomats need to use a multitude of digital tools to sustain trust; and in a *performative sense* as they need to manage new uncertainties and vulnerabilities (e.g., did I understand the statement from person-x via VTC; is information being leaked). In a momentary shared state of suspension, diplomats can act 'as if' there is no doubt that shared vulnerabilities will be dealt with discretely. While it is possible to uphold this illusion also online, digital enactments of trust tend to serve as complementary to 'offline' enactments of trust. Consequently, whereas it is possible to *sustain* trust virtually, it seems difficult to *build* trust via digital tools only.

Second, the analysis has shown the power of unspoken rules in diplomatic practice and the boundaries they draw around diplomatic work. We focused on how diplomats generally presume that community members understand how to share information competently: by keeping up internal transparency and external confidentiality. These rules serve as an important yardstick when it comes to (un)trustworthy information sharing by texting, posting on social media, emailing, and participating in videoconferences. The fact that diplomats gain competence in navigating these rules helps explain why it is possible that phones and computers are regularly used in diplomatic meetings *despite* the many uncertainties and vulnerabilities that come with their use. Crucially, however, trust is not able to suspend all vulnerabilities that come with these virtual communication channels. Paradoxically, aiming to preserve trust by seeking to control digital tools – prohibiting or avoiding them – might on the long run trigger contestation and reopen a more fundamental social negotiation of what constitutes (un)trustworthy diplomatic behaviour. Is one trustworthy when aiming to share sensitive information during a VTC with the aim of upholding internal transparency? Or is one trustworthy when refusing to share any information via VTC altogether with a similar aim of being trustworthy, fearing a breach of external confidentiality?

For those working on (diplomatic) trust, our findings suggest that 'the digital' is not necessarily bad news for trust, as trust can indeed be taken and maintained online. It thus reconfirms the theoretical suggestions made by Holmes, Saunders, and Wheeler that non-embodied interactions – such as digital information sharing – do not necessarily impinge on manifested diplomatic trust but do provide a challenge for fostering new trusting relations.[80] Further research could examine whether this is mirrored in other diplomatic settings, also in environments which are not as institutionalised and where it may be less clear what constitutes (un)trustworthy behaviour. Theoretically, and for those who investigate trust from a relational perspective, interesting work lies ahead to spill out how digital tools can hinder or facilitate the spread or intensification of already established trust in relationships and broader diplomatic networks.[81]

For those working on digital diplomacy, our findings confirm its 'synthetic' or 'blended' character and further nuance the debate on the impact of technological tools on negotiation.[82] More than the use of certain soft- or hardware, questions of the digitalisation of diplomatic practice speak to the professions' self-understandings, norms and ways of doing things. Further research may look at different diplomatic settings; attempt similar analyses of the impact

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[80]Holmes, Saunders, and Wheeler, 'Why virtual meetings make it hard for diplomats to trust each other'.

[81]For work on the spread of trust in diplomatic networks, see Sian Troath, 'Trusted intermediaries: Macmillan, Kennedy and their ambassadors', *International Relations*, 36:2 (2022), pp. 262–84.

[82]Adler-Nissen and Eggeling, 'Blended diplomacy'.

of digitalisation on other contentious questions of diplomatic practice such as (in)formality, status, or gender; or focus on other digital technologies such as simultaneous interpretation performed by artificial intelligence or the affordances of different videoconference software for structuring diplomatic meetings.

What this article leaves us with is a better understanding of the meaning of digital tools in everyday diplomatic practice and a refined conception of diplomatic trust. Diplomacy is no longer only or even primarily to be understood as a string of closed-door meetings in which deals are made as the outcome of face-to-face negotiations. Diplomatic negotiation, rather, is today also performed in emails, on social media and in chat windows. Paying attention to these new sites and the boundaries they create needs to become a working repertoire of diplomatic studies and IR analyses of diplomacy. At the same time, these digital sites should not be seen as entirely separate from the analogue worlds that produce them.

Trust, often imagined as expressed via a wink, a nod, or a smile across the negotiation table can today equally be enacted in a forwarded email, a virtual smile on VTC or the buzz of an incoming text message. As a social relation, trust is adaptable: in the digital age, the suspension of uncertainty is neither lost nor missing in diplomacy. But keeping up the 'illusion' that trust provides for can be more demanding when worked at only by texting, emailing, or videoconferencing. The possibility to *keep on* trusting online is furthermore not evenly accessible, reaffirming or creating new hierarchies tied to diplomat's age or time spent in Brussels. While enactments of trust adapt to the blended character of diplomacy, they simultaneously reassert the salience of the environment of trustworthiness in which they take place. Digitalisation goes hand in hand with a social renegotiation of what constitutes (un)trustworthy behaviour during diplomatic negotiations – and by extension what diplomatic competence means now digital tools are here to stay.

Kristin Anabel Eggeling is Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen. Her research interests are in diplomacy, digitalisation, international practices, and ethnographic methods in IR. She has published a book about nation-branding, and several articles and book chapters about diplomacy, practice theory, and fieldwork. Author's email: kristin.eggeling@ifs.ku.dk

Larissa Versloot is a postdoc in the Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen. Her research interests are in multilateral cooperation, trust, distrust, and informal diplomatic decision-making. She has published on the workings of trust and distrust in everyday diplomatic practice at the European Union. Author's email: lav@ifs.ku.dk