Utilizing Digital Platforms for Diplomacy in ASEAN:

A Preliminary Overview

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a preliminary overview that aims to seek the general answer of who are the state and non-state actors involved in ASEAN digital diplomacy. By using the theory of network diplomacy and the concept of digital diplomacy, this paper outlines official websites and social media accounts related to ASEAN. The methodology uses in this paper is descriptive qualitative with secondary data. This paper finds that ASEAN acts as a state actor to conduct digital diplomacy by utilizing digital platforms through the ASEAN official website and social media accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The contents of ASEAN official accounts cover the internal and external cooperation as part of its network diplomacy. Moreover, youth organization, think tank, and educational institution are part of the non-state actors discussed in this paper. These non-state actors also actively participated in disseminating information regarding ASEAN internal and external issues. Therefore, both state and non-state actors related to ASEAN have utilized digital platforms to communicate with the public and support the maintenance of ASEAN network diplomacy.

1. Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN has been established since 8 August 1967. This regional organization has developed its focus to three pillars, namely political-security, economy, and socio-culture. Moreover, ASEAN has stressed on the various occasion that this organization has attempted to implement its "people-centric" approach. The continuous effort of conducting public diplomacy is highly crucial for ASEAN to connect to its people. Along with the advancement of technology and the use of social media, public diplomacy can be conducted digitally, which is often referred to as digital diplomacy. Regional Conference on Digital Diplomacy has been held in 2019, as an initiative by Indonesia. This conference is a platform for stakeholders in ASEAN and beyond to utilize the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to conduct public diplomacy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019). This initiative shows that the recognition of the importance of digital diplomacy in ASEAN is growing. Hence, examining this particular issue in academic discussion is much needed.

Studies of digital diplomacy in various international institutions have been conducted. A work by Corrie (2015), for instance, addressed the practice of digital diplomacy of the International Criminal Court (ICC) as one of the ways to engage in network diplomacy. Network diplomacy emphasizes the importance of building and maintaining *both* internal and external networks with other actors. Based on the study by Corrie (2015), this paper attempts to analyze the practice of

digital diplomacy by using the network diplomacy theory in ASEAN. There is a limited amount of literature on the study of digital diplomacy in ASEAN. Previous research by Chachavalpongpun (2010) highlights the diplomatic approaches in Southeast Asia, particularly *cyberactivism* by examining the use of social media by the ASEAN Secretariat and some other state leaders in the ASEAN Member States. Moreover, his work also mentions the emergence of scholars, NGOs, and global citizens in participating in the attempt of achieving "ASEAN goes digital". The following part outlines the overview of the ASEAN "people-centered" Community, the theory of network diplomacy, and the concept of digital diplomacy.

a. ASEAN "People-centered" Community

As a crucial regional organization in Southeast Asia, ASEAN has been emphasizing the idea of unity throughout its motto, "One Vision, One Identity, One Community". In its development, ASEAN has been criticized as being an "elite" organization, by neglecting the involvement of its people. Acharya (2017) mentions that one of the challenges faced by ASEAN is its *disconnection* between ASEAN officials and ASEAN people. His work also mentions that in order to be a community, a regional organization requires a *bottom-up* rather than a *top-down* approach.

With the three pillars of the ASEAN Community, ASEAN has declared its commitment to focus on political-security, economic, and socio-cultural issues. On its official website, ASEAN publishes various news that portrays its efforts to push for a people-centered, people-oriented, and resilient community. The purpose of the people-centered community is to make ASEAN a relevant regional organization to the citizens of the Member States. It is expected that ASEAN people can get the benefit from living in ASEAN countries and will actively contribute to the development of ASEAN further.

b. Network Diplomacy

Corrie (2015, p. 145) mentions that network diplomacy is "diplomacy conducted through building sustained connections between governments, corporations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and individuals, which can be used to achieve common goals". This definition highlights the importance of *sustained connections* which involve the state actors and non-state actors. This paper argues that it is necessary for ASEAN to have strong network diplomacy to enhance its *sustained connections* among its member states, non-state actors, and the public in general. Furthermore, Corrie (2015) also mentions that digital diplomacy is one of the ways to build and maintain network diplomacy. Therefore, this paper seeks to describe ASEAN's digital presence to conduct digital diplomacy and build its network diplomacy.

Another study on network diplomacy has been written by Mergenthaler (2015). This study stressed the differences between traditional diplomacy and network diplomacy, in the context of the European Union's mode of dealing with global challenges. It highlights that while on one hand, traditional diplomacy emphasizes the importance of diplomats with *centralized structures* to implement various policies, network diplomacy focuses on the significant roles of *collective* actions by *various actors* through a network (p. 62). Hence, this paper utilizes Mergenthaler's ideas in the context of analyzing digital diplomacy as part of network diplomacy in ASEAN. The following section addressed the existing concept and studies on digital diplomacy, particularly in ASEAN.

c. Digital Diplomacy

The discussion on the matter of digital diplomacy for government and scholars is growing significantly. Bjola (2015) defines digital diplomacy as the use of digital technology, including but not limited to social media, for diplomatic purposes, which also influences the practice of strategic

planning, information management, and international negotiations (p. 4). Moreover, his work also stressed the importance of examining digital diplomacy as a method of change management. From this study, it can be seen that the advancement of technology, along with the use of social media by official states' leaders and institutions, influence the way diplomacy is conducted. It is also worth noting that the public can give direct responses and feedback to certain government officials through social media. Hence, engagement with both state and non-state actors can be analyzed with the concept of digital diplomacy.

In the context of digital diplomacy as a part of network diplomacy, digital diplomacy is utilized to build and maintain the connection of ASEAN *internally,* which means among the ASEAN Member States, and *externally,* which means among ASEAN other partners. Both internal and external engagement in network diplomacy by using digital diplomacy involve state and non-state actors. Lee & Ayhan (2015) highlights that the inclusion of non-state actors will enhance the effectiveness of public diplomacy. Non-state actors in this paper refer to NGOs, including youth organizations, think tanks, and educational institutions. This paper aims to provide a preliminary overview of the utilization of digital platforms for diplomacy in ASEAN, particularly by describing the state and non-state actors involved in ASEAN digital diplomacy.

2. Method

This paper aims to seek a general answer to the research question by using the theory of network diplomacy. This paper uses a descriptive qualitative method with secondary data gathered from various academic literature, official website, and social media accounts related to ASEAN. Data are gathered from the official website of ASEAN (asean.org) and official social media accounts of ASEAN, namely Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram accounts (@asean). Furthermore, to assess the connection with non-state actors, this research also gathered data from social media accounts of the institutions that are related to ASEAN and have contents or messages about ASEAN. This paper specifically focuses on the content of the posts in the year 2020, to assess the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic issue. This paper acknowledges its limitation by examining only a limited sample of social media account contents, as its purpose is to only provide a preliminary general overview. Therefore, further research on this matter should be conducted in the future to provide an in-depth analysis of ASEAN digital diplomacy and the involvement of state and non-state actors.

3. Results and Discussion

This paper argues that ASEAN has conducted its digital diplomacy through the use of digital platforms such as website and social media accounts to support the ASEAN network among its Member States and with external partners. Moreover, this paper finds that both state and non-state actors are involved in disseminating ASEAN information to support ASEAN's "people-centered community". The following discussion will be divided into state and non-state actors of ASEAN digital diplomacy, based on data gathered from various official websites and social media accounts.

a. ASEAN as State Actor in Digital Diplomacy

ASEAN state actors have actively participated in digital diplomacy. ASEAN has its official website (asean.org) as well as official accounts on social media. As of 26 June 2022, ASEAN has different numbers of followers on three social media, namely an Instagram account (@asean) with 125.000 followers; a Twitter account (@asean) with 152.200 followers; and a Facebook page (ASEAN) with 856.000 followers.

A prominent aspect that has to be noticed on the ASEAN website is its effort to display both internal network and external network information. The internal network is depicted through various information regarding the history of ASEAN, motto, member states, statements and communique, news, opportunities, and communities. This website has a specific menu that highlights the three pillars of the ASEAN Community: political-security, economy, and socio-culture. On the other hand, the presence of the external network can also be seen on this website. On the section of "who we work with", this website shows ASEAN external relations information, including the dialogue partnerships, sectoral dialogue partnerships, development partnerships, regional cooperation mechanism, as well as ASEAN relations with international and regional organizations.

Other than the official website, ASEAN has also included both internal and external networks on its social media accounts. In the context of COVID-19 issues, for instance, the ASEAN Twitter account mentions the collective action of its member states, along with other cooperation with other countries, such as the cooperation with China. On its Instagram account, ASEAN has regularly informed the public about its member states and external partners as well, for instance, ASEAN posted information on the education sector in cooperation with ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund. On Facebook, ASEAN posted information on 27 entities related to this organization. Moreover, ASEAN updated its agenda, such as the ASEAN Foreign Ministerial Meeting and ASEAN dialogue on COVID-19 issues. To portray its connection with the external partners, ASEAN posted information about its cooperation with *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, it can be concluded that ASEAN digital diplomacy, through both the ASEAN website and ASEAN official social media accounts, has portrayed the presence of ASEAN network diplomacy internally and externally.

b. ASEAN's Non-state Actors in Digital Diplomacy

Besides ASEAN state actors, this paper also observes the involvement of non-state actors in digital diplomacy, to assess the ASEAN network diplomacy. This paper finds that youth organizations, think tanks, and educational institutions are actively involved in digital diplomacy to promote ASEAN Community. This paper argues that among others, these three are the most active non-state actors in ASEAN digital diplomacy. Youth organizations consist of young people who are in the generations that use the internet very significantly in their daily lives. Think tanks, university, or any other educational institutions, publish their research and promote their programs to support ASEAN Community digitally.

Talking about youth organizations, this paper finds various social media accounts related to ASEAN, for instance, ASEAN Youth Organization (@ayoasean) on Instagram. This youth-led community comprises more than 400.000 young people in Southeast Asia and frequently conducts various programs to disseminate information about ASEAN (ASEAN Youth Organization, 2020). On Instagram, @ayoasean posted content related to the ASEAN Declaration, ASEAN emblem, fundamental principles of ASEAN, and other knowledge about ASEAN. Moreover, @ayoasean also initiated programs to include youth participation, such as selecting youth ambassadors. Other than publishing information for the internal network of ASEAN, this account also promotes ASEAN's external network. ASEAN-Australia Young Leaders Forum was posted as content on this account. It proves there is an example that youth organization through social media contributes to maintaining network diplomacy through digital diplomacy.

Moving to the second non-state actors: think tanks and educational institutions. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, for instance, actively collaborates with ASEAN Studies Centre in many universities in Indonesia. Another example is The Habibie Centre, a think tank that also emphasizes ASEAN issues as one of its focuses. One of the most active ASEAN Studies Centre in

Indonesia, @ascugm from the University of Gadjah Mada includes many issues on its Instagram account. Other than discussing ASEAN internal issues, this account also posts content on ASEAN external cooperation, for instance, the ASEAN-China Relations 2020, as well as South Korea and Japan as the ASEAN trading partner. The Instagram account of The Habibie Centre @habibiecenter has a designated highlight of its posts on ASEAN issues called "Talking ASEAN". This account has published multiples ASEAN dialogues and publications in newspapers, which cover many topics, for instance, human rights and marine debris. Furthermore, this account also mentions issues related to ASEAN external partners, such as ASEAN Indo-Pacific Outlook. Thus, it can be concluded that both think tanks and universities are part of non-state actors that use the digital platforms to cover ASEAN internal and external cooperation topics.

4. Conclusion

According to the limited examples gathered from various social media accounts, this paper argues that network diplomacy has been conducted by ASEAN by utilizing its digital platforms. Network diplomacy, as mentioned previously at the beginning of this paper, stresses the importance of building and maintaining *both* internal and external connections. This paper concludes that ASEAN as a regional organization has conducted digital diplomacy to maintain its network diplomacy through its official website and social media accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. On its official website, ASEAN has portrayed the importance of internal networks related to its member states and the three pillars of the ASEAN Community as well as the salience of external networks related to its external partners, including other non-member states and other international organizations. Moreover, on its official social media accounts, ASEAN also posted information not limited to internal affairs, but also its external cooperation. Hence, acting as a state actor, ASEAN digital diplomacy supports its network diplomacy. Furthermore, this paper also observes the presence of non-state actors in ASEAN digital diplomacy. By examining a limited number of samples on social media accounts, this paper concludes that non-governmental organizations, among others, youth organizations, think tanks, and educational institutions actively participated in disseminating ASEAN information digitally. Thus, the role of non-state actors is prominent in supporting ASEAN digital diplomacy.

This paper argues that conducting public diplomacy is very crucial for ASEAN. It helps ASEAN to engage more with the citizens of its member states as well as the global public in general. In the end, this paper acknowledges its limitation as a preliminary paper. Further research on ASEAN digital diplomacy needs to be conducted in the future, in order to support ASEAN to create its digital strategy. There are many aspects of digital diplomacy in the Southeast Asian region that have yet to be discussed in academic debates. By utilizing the advancement of technology, ASEAN has the opportunity to disseminate its goals, agendas, dan programs to get public support. Having more communications with the public through digital diplomacy will help this regional organization to achieve its goal: the ASEAN "people-oriented" community.

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