

Public Engagement with Foreign Policy Using “Diplotainment”: A Conceptual Exploration and Illustrative Analysis

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This article advances the debate on the democratising effects of digitalisation on diplomatic contents by examining a newly emergent pathway to public engagement with foreign policy. Our analysis explores the liminal spaces in the conduct of foreign policy, focusing on the digitalisation of the statecraft practice of public diplomacy and transnational activism of late night talk-show hosts, particularly in contesting a norm-breaking turn in a state's foreign policy. The relational dynamic between public diplomacy and transnational activism serves as a backdrop to our conceptualisation of *diplotainment*, a hybrid memetic genre and participatory strategy that blends diplomatic officialdom with entertainment broadcasting, producing affective memetic YouTube videos that satirise a state's foreign policy across national media landscapes. As an illustration of the rise and use of diplotainment in the transnational activism of entertainment broadcasters, we explore *Every Second Counts*, an innovative connective action inspired by the Dutch late night talk-show, *Zondag Met Lubach*, opposing Donald Trump's *America First* foreign policy. We then employ a mixed-methods approach to analyse the potential of diplotainment in fostering public engagement with foreign policy through the opportunistic use of YouTube, and the appropriation of soft power resources into a humorous and subversive memetic content. Overall, this study demonstrates that transnational activism by entertainment broadcasters can drive public engagement with foreign policy, and shape the patterns of that engagement among social media users.

Este artículo proporciona una nueva vía de debate con respecto a los efectos democratizadores de la digitalización en los contenidos diplomáticos debido a que analiza una nueva vía emergente para el compromiso público con la política exterior. Nuestro análisis estudia los espacios liminales que tienen lugar durante la gestión de la política exterior y se centra en la digitalización de la práctica de la diplomacia pública y el activismo transnacional de los presentadores de programas de entrevistas nocturnos, en particular, en la impugnación de un giro que rompe las normas en la política exterior de un Estado. La dinámica relacional entre la diplomacia pública y el activismo transnacional nos sirve de telón de fondo para nuestra conceptualización del «*diplotainment* (diplotretenimiento)» como un género memético híbrido y como una estrategia participativa que combina la oficialidad diplomática con la radiodifusión de entretenimiento, produciendo vídeos meméticos afectivos de *YouTube* que satirizan la política exterior de un Estado en los paisajes mediáticos nacionales. Como ilustración del auge y del uso del *diplotainment* en el activismo transnacional de las emisoras de entretenimiento, estudiamos «*Every Second Counts* (cada segundo cuenta)», una innovadora acción conectiva inspirada en el programa de entrevistas nocturno holandés «*Zondag Met Lubach*» que se opone a la política exterior «*America First*» de Donald Trump. A continuación, utilizamos un enfoque de métodos mixtos con el fin de analizar el potencial que tiene el *diplotainment* para fomentar el compromiso público con la política exterior a través del uso oportunista de *YouTube* y de la apropiación de recursos de poder blando en un contenido memético humorístico y subversivo. En general, este estudio demuestra que el activismo transnacional de las emisoras de entretenimiento puede impulsar el compromiso público con la política exterior y dar forma a los patrones de ese compromiso entre los usuarios de las redes sociales.

Cet article fait progresser le débat sur les effets démocratisant de la numérisation sur les contenus diplomatiques en examinant une nouvelle trajectoire qui se dessine pour l'implication publique dans la politique étrangère. Notre analyse s'intéresse aux espaces liminaux dans la conduite de la politique étrangère, en se concentrant sur la numérisation de la pratique politique de diplomatie publique et du militantisme transnational des présentateurs de talk-shows de deuxième partie de soirée, et plus particulièrement lorsqu'il s'agit de remettre en question un revirement contraire à la norme dans la politique étrangère d'un État. La dynamique relationnelle entre la diplomatie publique et le militantisme transnational sert de toile de fond à notre conceptualisation du « divertissement diplomatique ». Il s'agit d'un genre mémétique hybride et d'une stratégie de participation qui mélange autorité diplomatique et diffusion à des fins de divertissement pour produire des vidéos mémétiques affectives sur YouTube qui satirisent la politique étrangère d'un État dans l'ensemble des paysages médiatiques nationaux. Pour illustrer l'essor et l'utilisation du divertissement diplomatique dans le militantisme transnational des diffuseurs de divertissement, nous nous intéressons à « Every Second Counts », une initiative inspirée par le talk-show danois Zondag Met Lubach qui s'oppose à la politique étrangère « America First » de Donald Trump. Nous employons ensuite une approche aux

méthodes mixtes pour analyser le potentiel du divertissement diplomatique quand il s'agit de favoriser l'implication de la population en politique étrangère par l'utilisation opportuniste de YouTube, ainsi que l'appropriation de ressources de soft power dans un contenu mémétique humoristique et subversif. Dans l'ensemble, cette étude démontre que le militantisme transnational par des diffuseurs de divertissements peut favoriser l'implication du public en politique étrangère et façonner les schémas de cette implication chez les utilisateurs de réseaux sociaux.

Introduction

This article introduces the concept of *diplotainment*, a memetic genre for public engagement with foreign policy. The term describes deliberately devised social media video *memes*, blending existing formats of public diplomacy and entertainment broadcasting. The significance of diplotainment stems from its liminality, its position as a genre in-between diplomatic officialdom and entertainment broadcasting. As a strategy aiding social media users' cross-national interactions on foreign policy, diplotainment has the potential for activating public engagement, which refers to “the abilities and means by which human beings express and participate in social institutions that reflect their ongoing yearnings for awareness, intentionality, free will, and identity” (Lagos et al. 2014, 398). Simultaneously, we understand memes as shareable digital “texts” with common characteristics of content, created with awareness of each other, and circulated on social media worldwide (Shifman 2014). Diplotainment thus emerges as a distinctive genre within memetic format.

The first use of this new genre, its foundational moment, is the 2017 *Every Second Counts* (ESC),¹ a participatory connective action launched in opposition to a norm-breaking turn in the foreign policy of the then newly inaugurated Donald Trump. Our identification of ESC as the birth of diplotainment is dictated by the fact that it was run in a connective action mode that utilized a participation strategy for the production of memetic videos. The presidential inauguration is an international event of high-importance to public engagement with US foreign policy (Cull 2008), and was used by Trump to announce his *America First* foreign policy. This event precipitated a humorous retort during the January 22, 2017 broadcast of the Dutch *Zondag met Lubach*, a show well known for defending liberal norms (Nieuwenhuis 2022). The YouTube video, satirizing the announcement of the changing US foreign policy by posturing as the Dutch government's response to Trump's *America First*, was conceived by Arjen Lubach to expand the share of audience of his late-night talk show. In it, the Netherlands made a (satirical) persuasive case to be “second” in the Trumpian international pecking order. While the video directly addresses Trump, the prime recipients of this segment were the late-night talk show audience in the Netherlands. Its content, subverting Trump's public diplomacy and opposing his foreign policy, quickly went viral and generated engagement with YouTube users beyond the Dutch media landscape. Once uploaded to YouTube, the video became a meme, initially being amplified by calls for imitative participation made by comedian Jan Böhmermann, the host of the German *Neo Magazin Royale*. In addition to showcasing the *Germany second* video, during his February 2, 2017 broadcast, Böhmermann announced the terms of the European Union-branded ESC comedy summit. By mobilizing other talk-show hosts, initially across Europe and then be-

yond, he launched a participatory connective action to find the best video arguing for a nation's “second best” status to Trump's US. The videos began to have a viral effect, each repeating the diplomatic posture as the represented state. The videos connected publics across Europe with a sentiment opposing Trump's foreign policy. They appealed to publics who, while embedded in national settings, were social media users open to engaging with content on international politics. These users had a baseline awareness of *America First* and could therefore be prompted to engage with problems around this foreign policy across national borders. As well as being unified by this sentiment, these publics were English-speaking, digitally literate, and preferred long video formats. In addition to news coverage and acknowledgment by the White House, the ESC garnered substantial interest among YouTube users, representing a fascinating instance of transnational activism around a matter of foreign policy, using social media content but grounded in a traditional broadcast entertainment format. In other words, diplotainment.

We argue that diplotainment opens new pathways to, and has the ability to shape the patterns of public engagement with foreign policy. This line of reasoning is supported with three claims concerning the circumstances of its emergence. First, diplotainment was conceived in order to increase audience share in the context of entertainment broadcasting but then was employed as a participatory persuasion strategy, countering a specific state's public diplomacy, to meet the goals of transnational activism of late-night talk show hosts opposing changes to US foreign policy. Second, diplotainment generates meaning through the juxtaposition of the narrative formats used in public diplomacy and entertainment broadcasting tropes, and seeks to activate public engagement with US foreign policy by satirizing its populist premises. Third, diplotainment needs to be fittingly attractive in order to mobilize participation so that its resulting digital footprint becomes a substantive indicator of public engagement with US foreign policy among social media users.

The regular use of content related to foreign policy among entertainment broadcasters (i.e., *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, *Saturday Night Live* in the United States, and *Mock the Week* in the United Kingdom) would indicate that the late-night talk show audience finds humorous commentary on international politics appealing. Therefore, in order to advance the debate on the democratizing effects of digitalization on the conduct of foreign policy (Kaarbo and Theis 2024), we study the 2017 ESC meme complex, an instantiation of the interest of entertainment broadcasters in foreign policy that went beyond comedic commentary, evolving into a form of transnational activism by the late-night talk show hosts who nurtured it. In particular, we focus on the ways in which ESC meme content was created from the interplay of the narratives used in public diplomacy and satirical entertainment broadcasting, holding up for ridicule Donald Trump's *America First* foreign policy initiative. Trump's populist foreign policy challenged and am-

¹This pun on an acronym ESC is a reference to the abbreviation of “*European Song Contest*,” a public diplomacy mega-event.

plified the notion that liberal hegemony in international politics lacks a legitimate alternative (Löffmann 2019). Accordingly, the goals of the activism behind the *ESC* memes were to draw attention to the changes associated with *America First* and induce public engagement by a strategy that fostered cross-national interactions on this populist foreign policy. We investigate the nature of diplotainment as a strategic tool to activate public engagement among YouTube users by exploring how this transnational activism of late-night talk show hosts satirizes Trump's foreign policy through the interplay of "older," entertainment broadcast formats and tropes and "newer," social media stylistic elements and affordances, across national media landscapes and borders.

Since the advent of social media, public engagement has become an essential axis in foreign policy analysis, while the study of transnational activism explores public engagement on social media but pays little attention to foreign policy. We show how they in fact intersect. Our study sits between foreign policy analysis, focused specifically on the ongoing *digitalization of public diplomacy*, which is a statecraft practice attempting "to advance the ends of policy by engaging with foreign publics" (Cowan and Cull 2008, 6) and *a consideration of the transnational activism of entertainment broadcasters*, which in addition to occurring across national borders, adapts to the shifts in media contexts by utilizing broadcast media management and social media strategies (Treré 2017). Alongside capturing qualitative changes stemming from the interlinking of public diplomacy and transnational activism, we offer a framework that explains how diplotainment may affect quantitative patterns of public engagement with foreign policy among users of the YouTube platform.

In summary, we consider how, by employing diplotainment and exploiting the affective and viral workings of this genre, the transnational activism of entertainment broadcasters may open pathways to public engagement with foreign policy. Our analysis is, therefore, guided by the central aim of determining whether the transnational activism of entertainment broadcasters can drive public engagement with foreign policy among social users?

The contribution we make here is conceptual, empirical, and methodological. First, contributing conceptually to the study of activism and public diplomacy, we explain how, by interlinking acts of mobilization and participation, social media can be utilized in the production and circulation of diplotainment for public engagement with foreign policy. Second, we identify and analyze an illuminating case of diplotainment initiated by Arjen Lubach, the host of the Dutch late-night talk show *Zondag met Lubach*, and opposing Trump's *America First*. Third, by applying a mixed-method design employing automated analytical features alongside the manual coding of unique memetic content, we advance methodological approaches to the study of public engagement with foreign policy. Finally, we discuss the significance of the diplotainment genre for activism and foreign policy analysis.

Diplomats Laugh with Activists: Social Media, Public Engagement, and Memes

A departure point for our analysis of diplotainment is the recognition of how context shapes the meanings of memes. Their understanding may not be intuitive to publics outside their settings and require subject knowledge or digital literacy, which is epistemologically important as social media increasingly affect the conduct of foreign policy through its role in public diplomacy (Kaarbo and Theis 2024). Since Obama's presidency, scholars have been ex-

ploring how digitalization drives the intertwining of social media and public diplomacy (Hayden et al. 2013) or how foreign publics engage with diplomatic content on digital platforms (Ingenhoff et al. 2021). Simultaneously, digitalization has normalized the use of humor in diplomatic practices as a resource for public engagement with foreign policy (Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi 2019; Crilley and Chatterjee-Dooddy 2021; Manor 2021; Chernobrov 2022; Chernobrov 2024; Spencer and Oppermann 2024). As a largely humorous social media user-generated content format, memes are known for their entertainment value, but evidence of their effects on public diplomacy is scarce (Surowiec and Miles 2020; Browning and Brassett 2023). In fact, the interplay of humor and entertainment in memes, traveling virally across social media, has been described as "memetic engagement" (Manor and Bjola 2021). For Malmvig (2023), this search for engagement with foreign policy, often arising at the expense of accuracy, marks the emergence of "entertainment politics," while for Baspehlivan (2024, 36), it denotes "the memescape" as the configuration over which memes and politics circulate. These standpoints (Malmvig 2023; Baspehlivan 2024) on the encroachment of entertainment on diplomatic officialdom indicate the importance of situating diplotainment within scholarship on activism in a way that accounts for its relational dynamic vis-à-vis the conduct of foreign policy.

To position diplotainment within pertinent debates, it is vital to acknowledge that digitalization has likewise affected the field of activism, inspiring a vision of the global public sphere in which public diplomacy would be supplanted by "people-to-people" interactions (Castells 2008). This prospect of transnational activism around issues of foreign policy depends on a premise that social media would be central to the de-institutionalization of public engagement away from the diplomacy of a state. Since then, scholarship has made inroads on the discussion of interdependence in the global public sphere (Volkmer 2014), but despite the technological advancements across national media landscapes and shaping the European public sphere, ethnocentrism continues to play a substantial role in news reporting of foreign affairs (Van Dooremalen and Duyvendak 2025). However, it is the stage of the process of digitalization associated with the proliferation of social media among diplomatic institutions and their increasing use in transnational activism from 2004 onward that has led to a true diffusion of power, exposing the conduct of foreign policy to the effects of the conditions of hyper-connectivity (Surowiec and Long 2023). Indeed, since Bennet and Toft's (2009) linking of activism with digitalization, research has shown how social media impact the delivery of foreign policy goals (Wolfsfeld et al. 2013; Poell 2019), decision-making on foreign policy (Brändle et al. 2021), and the engagement with foreign policymakers abroad (Cheng et al. 2023). Yet, foreign policy analysis has paid no attention to the transnational activism of entertainment broadcasters, and their social media strategies opposing foreign policy remain under-explored. We approach this form of activism as a function of hybrid media landscapes (Chadwick 2013), seeking to determine how far it might drive public engagement with foreign policy.

Unlike in foreign policy analysis, the study of humor in activism has a long tradition, and the process of digitalization has enhanced its visibility as a means to public engagement (Highfield 2016). Albeit Korkut et al. (2022) have analyzed humor in activism, challenging the autocratization of a political regime, it is still under-studied in relation to foreign policy. Also, in contrast to foreign policy

analysis, scholarship has afforded memes a prominent place in the study of activism. From the onset of digitalization, the construction of memes has been understood as indicative of independent thinking and creativity, qualities associated with an ability to engage the public. For example, Häkkinen and Leppänen (2013) were among the first to analyze YouTube mashups as playful satirical memes. The analysis of memes has been extended across various strands of activism, reflecting their potential for encouraging everyday social media user interactions (Halversen and Weeks 2023). Although analysis of memes has mainly focused on activism in the US or European democracies, they also have been studied among groups of participants engaged in important, but often silenced by autocracies, political conversations (Moreano-Almeida 2021), or within the settings of the recent antidemocratic backlash in Hungary, where the narrative of memes has been used to assess the success or failure of public engagement (Lukács 2021). However, analyses of memes in the study of transnational activism (McSwiney et al. 2021; Ristić 2023) still underplay a relational dynamic unlocked by interactions across hybrid media landscapes.

Transnational activism initiated by late-night talk show hosts extends the scope of public engagement with foreign policy beyond a single format (Baum 2002) or medium (Ingenhoff et al. 2021) to one conceived by the pairing of the formats derived from entertainment broadcasting and public diplomacy. On the one hand, late-night talk show hosts assume the role of adversary toward a particular state by opposing its foreign policy and, on the other hand, engage their publics with content on its formulations. This newfound pathway to engagement with foreign policy requires an explanation accounting for interactions across hybrid media landscapes, and responding to changes to foreign policy that undermine liberal norms and order. Following Grincheva (2023), who posits that memes are germane to foreign policy analysis through their use in various forms of activism countering public diplomacy, below we conceptualize the emergence of the diplotainment genre from the ESC meme complex as a form of response mobilized by the announcement of Donald Trump’s *America First* and constituting a strategy for public engagement with this foreign policy deployed to meet the goals of the transnational activism of the late-night talk show hosts. In developing our theoretical framework, after Zaharna (2018), we recognize that pathways to engagement with foreign policy are interwoven with holistic, relational, and individual logics.

Interconnected Hybrid Media Landscapes

To account for the holistic logic of engagement, it makes sense to consider interconnected hybrid media landscapes (Chadwick 2013). These set the conditions for understanding the pathway to public engagement with foreign policy, which, in the case of diplotainment, has emerged through interdependent interactions *between* entertainment broadcasters and *other* social media users, and extends beyond any single “national” media landscape. We focus on hybrid media landscapes because entertainment broadcasters exhibit tendencies to broaden their interests, identities, and needs when engaging with social media. While they might be primarily commercially motivated to seek out creative ways to increase audience share, in some instances, satirical content can evolve into diplotainment that serves transnational activism goals in addition to commercial ones. Hybrid media landscapes amplify such possibilities, as they create conditions and spaces for publics to become connected to each other, their settings, and relational circles (Surowiec and

Long 2020). In other words, the satirical content countering changes to US foreign policy produced by the late-night talk show hosts of the ESC initially advances the interests of entertainment broadcasters in pursuing greater audience shares. Subsequently, however, by mobilizing the connective action involving virality across national borders, entertainment broadcasters were able to exploit this form of hyperconnectivity to develop pathways to public engagement with foreign policy among social media users.

Hybrid media landscapes provide multifarious opportunities for entertainment broadcasters to induce public engagement with foreign policy. In considering the emergence of the diplotainment genre from the ESC meme complex, we can, however, differentiate between certain generic and specific features of activism across these hybrid media landscapes. The former describes the participatory connective action of entertainment broadcasters, through which publics engage via routes of sentiment (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). The latter describes the creatively conceived and strategically deployed memetic genre of diplotainment. Utilized in combination with connective action, it shows the ability to oppose foreign policy through narratives, which, on the one hand, satirize changes associated with the announcement of the policy, and on the other hand, seek to sustain public engagement with the policy among social media users (Tufekci 2017). Reinforcing the conditions for the diffusion of power and hyperconnectivity in international politics, interconnected hybrid media landscapes coalesce diplomatic officialdom and entertainment broadcasting, and so shape the holistic logic of public engagement with foreign policy.

Hybrid Memetic Genre

A further important perspective is that of the relational logic of engagement. For Zaharna (2018), the foundation for understanding public engagement is the paired and interdependent relations that shape new content. This encourages a consideration of the liminal qualities of diplotainment, which arise from the *blend* of narrative formats commonly used in public diplomacy and discursive tropes associated with entertainment broadcasting in order to create a *hybrid* memetic genre that can induce engagement with foreign policy. The genre of diplotainment emerges through the satirical political commentary of late-night talk show hosts that forms a response to a precipitating international event, is used to announce changes to foreign policy, and is framed as carrying the potential for worldwide engagement with this foreign policy. Such a response centers on how the turn in US foreign policy proclaimed by Trump challenges the notion that liberal hegemony in international politics lacks a credible alternative, and sheds light on how participatory strategies for public engagement with foreign policy intensify user interactions on social media across national borders.

In creative terms, diplotainment is an exemplar of genre hybridity. While the entertainment-oriented “soft news” format is established as a pathway to public engagement with foreign policy (Baum 2002), its current characteristics depend on formats and tropes borne from the interplay of older, entertainment broadcasting and newer, social media. Diplotainment exploits the merging of the stylings of diplomatic officialdom with the affective power of late-night talk shows satire. As such, it mixes creative, attractive, and subversive appropriations of soft power resources, ordinarily found in narratives used in public diplomacy, with the comic qualities of satire. This resulting genre can be conceived

of as a counter-narrative, gaining meaning through its relation to a state's public diplomacy. Taking advantage of the porous boundaries between older, broadcast, and newer media, social media, and diplotainment can then be positioned to mobilize the production of participatory and reiterative counter-narratives for public engagement with foreign policy across national boundaries among platform users.

In compositional terms, diplotainment draws from both tangible and intangible soft power resources (Chitty et al. 2023). It is relational to a state's public diplomacy insofar as its persuasiveness depends on the publics' recognition of the provenance of appropriated soft power resources. Additionally, in an act of posturing embedded in this format intended to go "viral," diplotainment exhibits an appropriation of the identity markers imitating diplomatic officialdom. It is paramount, then, in any investigation of the dynamics of diplotainment to account for source attribution as a public engagement-inducing feature (Schatz and Levine 2010). This relational reading of soft power resources allows us to group them in accordance to features shaping compositional elements of this multi-resource genre. First, pathos-evoking *affective* resources (Solomon 2014) are key to the understanding of humor grounded in satire, and are a recognized driver of engagement in public diplomacy (Chernobrov 2022) and transnational activism (Brassett et al. 2021). Second, *symbolic* resources involve expressions bridging diplomatic symbolism with political identification. According to Hayden (2012), these include attempts at public engagement using political values, ideas, and cultures. Third, *tangible* resources, according to Bakalov (2020), are polyvalent as they can be vehicles (e.g., money) or structural (e.g., nuclear weapons). To meet their objectives, activists might make use of tangible resources through the simulation of their efficacy.

As noted, diplotainment also draws from the formats of entertainment broadcasting, which, although commercially conceived to increase audience share, when deployed on social media, serve to help meet the transnational activism goals of the late-night talk show hosts, promoting public engagement with foreign policy by expressing sentiments under-represented in traditional news (Brunn 2014). So, the established format prescribes an opening comedic monologue by a host, whose commentary on international politics in general and foreign policy in particular provides a stage-setting background and a tone-setting prelude to the introduction of diplotainment. Irrespective of other segments in the late-night talk shows, satirizing foreign policy is key to understanding diplotainment.

Notably, although the role of satire has been contested in foreign policy analysis, since the advent of digitalization its appeal via the affective route to persuasion has been gaining attention among broadcast entertainers because of its ability to spur public engagement through the elicitation of sentiment on social media. The entertainment formats of late-night talk shows draw on these qualities and allow broadcasters to adapt their social media contents to engage users (Lee and Jang 2017). Accordingly, diplotainment, as the nexus of the formats of public diplomacy and entertainment broadcasting, illuminates how transnational activism embodied by late-night talk show hosts uses satire for public engagement with foreign policy.

Blurred Boundaries

The effort to reach out and create relations with others is the foundation of the individual logic of engagement (Zaharna 2018). The emergence and circulation of the diplotainment

genre lead us to theorize that interactions between social media users across hybrid media landscapes blur the boundaries between "the individual" and "the public," as well as between "domestic" and "foreign" publics. Elsewhere, Zaharna and Uysal (2016) have identified dynamics according to which the transnational activism of the late-night talk show hosts, in countering a state's public diplomacy, can be framed as embodying an *adversarial* relationship to a state. By sharing satirical content on social media, the talk-show hosts mobilize their inner circle, and are then able to engage other platform users, establishing multifaceted relations across national borders based on satirizing a state's foreign policy.

This use of social media, in the cause of transnational activism, to circulate diplotainment content then affects how the users of these platforms interact with each other. By focusing closely on social media users' engagement across the spectra of popularity, interactivity, and reception, we might capture the patterns of public engagement with foreign policy induced by diplotainment in a cross-national dynamic. Using an established approach to study the popularity and interactivity of YouTube videos, we analyze the former via social media analytics and the latter through tracking the unfolding of "content-user" and "user-user" dynamics (Ksiazek et al. 2016). So, "content-user" interactivity involves posting an opening comment thread, whereas "user-user" interactivity is typified by replying to a comment. However imperfect, leaving comments following exposure to diplotainment demonstrates engagement via deliberation, in contrast to the passivity of lurking. Finally, following Papacharissi (2014), we recognize the significance of affective sentiment for connecting publics. The sentiment expressed toward foreign policy is illuminating here in two ways. First, we would assume that diplotainment opposing foreign policy needs to be suitably attractive to mobilize connective action. Second, social media users interacting with diplotainment content will leave digital footprints conveying their sentiments in comments beneath the videos, the tonality of which will serve as another indicator of the patterns of public engagement with foreign policy.

Analytical Case

We examine the significance of diplotainment through the exploration of an illustrative case accounting for its conception as an expression of the transnational activism of entertainment broadcasters, and its role in shaping public engagement with foreign policy among social media users. Given the current state of scholarship, as well as the originality and satirical humor of diplotainment as inaugurated by the *ESC*, we developed three research questions in order to both *qualitatively* explore the affective resources underpinning the composition of memetic videos exemplifying the genre of diplotainment and *quantitatively* investigate how affective, symbolic, and tangible soft power resources appropriated into their content may have shaped patterns of public engagement. The research questions, addressing a research aim of this study (p. 5), were formulated in the following ways:

RQ1: *What affective resources aid the composition of diplotainment expressed in the videos?*

RQ2: *In what ways do soft power resources featured in the videos affect user interactivity with diplotainment?*

RQ3: How do different types of soft power resources represented in diplotainment videos affect their reception as exhibited in the tonality of user comments?

Design

This *exploratory* study examines how the repertoire of soft power resources utilized in diplotainment countering Trump's public diplomacy may drive YouTube user engagement with foreign policy. In an effort to account for the unique design and trend-setting significance of the content of *ESC*, we adopted a sequential, qualitative to quantitative, *mixed-method design* to comprehensively analyze the qualitative shift associated with the interweaving of public diplomacy with transnational activism, as well as to explore whether diplotainment affects quantitative patterns of public engagement with foreign policy across national borders. While quantitative content analysis was a *principal* method of inquiry, it was preceded by a *facilitative* use of qualitative content analysis. This design supports the (difficult to credibly quantify) affective resources such as humor and the ways in which diplotainment as a genre might predict the patterns of engagement with foreign policy. The preliminary video-level analysis was followed up with comment-level inquiry. RQ1 yields qualitative insights into the categories of affective soft power resources expressed in the videos and the choice of predictors in the second research sequence. RQ2 and RQ3 combine video and comment levels, and quantitative techniques are applied to answer them.

Sampling

We used two sampling techniques, reflecting the *ESC* design. The convenience sampling of YouTube videos ($n = 50$), the first order platform utilized by the late-night talk show hosts, included the following criteria: memetic format; geopolitical bias with $n = 27$ videos posted on behalf of the EU members (55.90 percent) and $n = 23$ on behalf of non-EU states (44.01 percent); number of views above the threshold of 35,000, ranging from 35,132 of the Cyprus video to 28,703,724 for the Netherlands video; timespan from January 23 to April 12, 2017 marking the period when videos were posted on YouTube. Additionally, we considered restrictions to YouTube imposed by state authorities between 2017 (start of the *ESC*) and 2020 (year of data collection) that may have affected users' access to the platform. Importantly, despite restricted YouTube access in China and Iran, the videos representing these states received viewing numbers fitting the aforesaid thresholds of 35,000 and induced substantial user engagement (see Table 1 in [supplementary material](#)).

While accounting for these criteria, we treated *ESC* as a viral self-referential connective action, striving for a consistent approach in the collection of videos and comments. In December 2020, we then scraped comments using the Mozdeh software. Using a stratified random technique to ensure representativeness,² we sampled $n = 9,922$ comments nested under selected videos, with the highest number for the Netherlands (378), and the lowest (30) for UK videos (see Table 2 in [supplementary material](#)). Where relevant, comments were translated to English by Google Sheets as it "is a reliable venue for accu-

rate automated document translation" (Windsor et al. 2019, 10–11).

Analyses

In the first research sequence, a deductive *qualitative* content analysis (Schreier 2012) was used to explore affective resources included within the videos (RQ1). The coding matrix was generated from a review of the literature on humor and satire in the study of activism, and consisted of twenty-four codes across six categories. The six categories were disparagement (eight codes), intertextuality (four codes), tone (five codes), humor script types (three codes), humor pattern types (two codes), and tropes (two codes). As well as being sensitive to the contextual disposition of humor, the coding hinged on granulated codes employed to uncover the stylistic and structural features of videos. To establish data familiarity, each video was viewed twice. The coding focused on idiosyncratically exhibited characteristics, allowing us to generate a profile for each video that captured the dominant codes and the variations across the sample (see Table 3 in [supplementary material](#)).

In the second research sequence, we used *quantitative* hybrid content analysis (Baden et al. 2020). The choice of predictors was determined by theoretical and practical considerations. The former corresponds with the appropriation of soft power resources into the content of the *ESC* videos, which we grouped into affective (Solomon 2014), symbolic (Hayden 2012), and tangible (Bakalov 2020) categories. The latter consideration entailed insights from the qualitative study by Surowiec and Miles (2020), which enabled us to pin down the particularities of Trump's public diplomacy satirized in *ESC* videos. Done this way, predictors of engagement were set at the video level and dependent variables at the comment level. Put simply, we predict public engagement with foreign policy exhibited in YouTube user comments from a range of characteristics of the *ESC* YouTube videos.

We included variables measuring generic features of videos (number of views, likes, and dislikes; date of posting; EU/non-EU source attribution; part of talk-show; reference to old media), as well as the content characteristics that pertained to the presence of soft power: (a) *affective resources*—populist appeals to "people," adversarial personalized statements, mirroring of Trump's style, mirroring of Trump's policies; (b) *symbolic resources*—political values, iconic tourism landscapes, foreign policy, and media coverage of Trump; (c) *tangible resources*—wealth, business, and technology, people and public figures, military or security capabilities, and issue-, national-, or system-level frames. While the formal features of the videos were only used for an initial inspection, it is the content characteristics of the videos, i.e., the presence or absence of soft power resources in the videos, that were used as the key predictors for our analysis of YouTube user engagement.

User reception was measured by the tonality of sentiments toward videos, home state, and other states and their soft power resources. As traces of user engagement, comments were coded for tonality on a four-point scale (positive, negative, ambivalent/neutral, and no valence). Then, we coded for the number of days since posting the video (capturing the rapidity of engagement), the numbers of comment likes, and replies to a comment. While videos and comments were manually coded, the functionality of Google Sheets aided the coding of comment length. Coding was done by three trained coders, who undertook four rounds of inter-coder testing until a pairwise agreement of 100 percent and the

²Slovin's formula was calculated as follows: $n = N / (1 + Ne^2)$, whereby n is the determined sample size *per* video, N is the total population size of comments *per* state, and e is the 5 percent error margin.

Gwet's AC_1 reached 1 for videos, and a very high pairwise agreement of 93.4 percent and a Gwet's AC_1 of 0.92 were reached for comments.³

To answer RQ2, we adopted Ksiazek et al.'s (2016) metrics of popularity and interactivity as predictors of engagement. The popularity variables included exposure matrices devised as "ratio variables" offering more conservative measures than raw data skewed toward videos posted earlier: views ratio (scaled by the size of the YouTube public in national settings),⁴ and likes and dislikes ratios (both scaled by the number of views). The tests for interactivity included the following dependent variables recognized in the study of social media content on politics (Stetka et al. 2018): (a) comment length (dichotomized to 1–10 words or above, whereby 1–10 words indicate lower brevity of engagement and above 10 words higher brevity of YouTube user engagement); (b) number of days since posting the original video (to explore user-content interactivity); (c) numbers of comment likes and comment replies to gauge user–user interactivity. To answer RQ3, we used tonality to predict engagement with diplotainment, measured by valence (Chitty et al. 2023) (see Table 4 in supplementary material).

The examination started with a preliminary analysis of video performance variables (views, likes, and dislikes) corrected for data skewness by a log-transformation. We used correlations to inspect how these three performance variables are associated. Next, we visually inspected how the core independent variables, i.e., variables describing the ESC content in terms of soft power resources, are associated with video performance.

We then used *t*-tests to explore possible differences between the EU and non-EU states and correlations to test associations between measures of video' popularity (For the principal analysis, we constructed a separate regression model *per* each soft power resource category and video characteristics, including four sets of independent variables. For analysis of user-content and user–user interactivity (RQ2), we used video content variables to predict user engagement on the comment level. To better understand the effect of our predictors, we controlled for the number of views. In order to explore the tonality of user receptions of the counter-narrative (RQ3), we ran multilevel multinomial logistic regressions with valence toward home video, valence toward home state, and valence toward other state as dependent variables (coded at the comment level), distinguishing between positive, negative, and ambivalent/neutral valence and using "no valence" as a residual reference category. As predictors, we used the same variables as in the previous RQs, i.e., soft power resources in the videos. For each dependent variable in our models, we computed a null Interclass Correlation Model (ICC) model.⁵

³We report the Gwet's AC_1 coefficient. In relation to the YouTube users' comments, we established the following inter-coder reliability when coding for populist appeals to "people"—0.94; adversarial personalized statements—0.93; mirroring of Trump's style—0.93; mirroring of Trump's policies—0.94; foreign policy issues—0.94; political values—0.90; iconic tourist landscapes—0.94; people and public figures—0.90; wealth, business, and technology—0.97; military or security capabilities—0.98; Trump's media coverage—0.99; valence toward the source state—0.87; valence toward the video—0.79; valence toward "other" states or "other" states' soft power resources—0.92.

⁴Secondary data for the year 2020 were derived from Statista and StatCounter.

⁵Since no meaningful residual variance can be computed for a logistic regression, we use the quasi-ICC computed by the formula $(\text{intercept variance})/(\text{intercept variance} + \pi^2/3)$. ICC was very low for comment length, meaning that videos do not much differ across the states in the proportion of long comments, and low but not negligible in the remaining models, meaning that videos differ to some extent across the states they represent in the other dependent variables.

Preliminary Qualitative Analysis: Understanding the Satire of Diplotainment

The qualitative content analysis reveals that, in order to gain popularity, the ESC videos rely on humorous satire as the dominant affective soft power resource (RQ1). The videos imitate the Dutch template, which functions as the viral "seed" and a nucleus from which the videos on behalf of other states are reiterated. However, variations against the template's style and structure become meaningful across videos. We report here the more striking divergences, including where differences between EU and non-EU member states' videos exist.

Disparagement

We find that the videos fall into three groupings: those largely disparaging their own state (i.e., the Dutch self-satire), those in which the narrative disparages others (i.e., Serbs satirizing Croatia or Albania), and those that achieve a rough balance between disparaging themselves and others (i.e., the even-handed spectacle of disparagement displayed in the video representing Cyprus). Disparagement defines ESC because (a) as a central feature of humor it drives connective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2013); (b) it plays on the personalized agonism visible in Trump's populist style (Surowiec and Miles 2020); and (c) it fuels affective investment (Solomon 2014) insofar as it fosters affect among users. The analysis revealed that a higher proportion of videos representing EU members displayed disparagement of the home state rather than other states, as well as greater disparagement of home state vis-à-vis expressions of its superiority.

Intertextuality

Across the videos, we found that the satirizing of Trump's public diplomacy is used as an *intertextual* strategy for engagement with a variety of un-Trumpian topics (e.g., home state's superiority, historical misunderstandings, corruption, "vassalage" to superpowers such as the United States or Russia). In the face of Trump's hyperbolic competitiveness, the satirical intertextuality across the videos serves to deflate the US president's foreign policy pretensions through comparative juxtapositions, as well as to present the supplicant states as "honest" diplomatic partners. Our analysis revealed that the template Netherlands video establishes key intertextual references to Trump's *America First* foreign policy such as building the border wall and making Mexico pay for it. It also references three aspects of his public persona: his ownership of Trump Towers, the dispute about the numbers of people engaging with his inauguration, and alleged tax avoidance. As well as these intertextual elements of diplotainment, we found that the Dutch video establishes the stylistic template that the subsequent videos need to adopt in order to be recognized as contest entrants or "versions" of the ur-text. These were mimicry of Trump's accent, imitation of his telegraphic speech, adoption of superlative, simplistic emotional valuations, stereotyping, claims of state or national superiority, and the "grab them by the pussy" soundbite. Additionally, our analysis indicated that some videos posted on behalf of the EU and non-EU states use humor as an intertextual strategy to address issues of international misrecognition, a recognized feature of public diplomacy humor (Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi 2019). Examples here are the Georgian video's efforts to clarify that they are not a state of the United States and the Yemen video's jok-

ing about the international standing of their government. In general, misrecognition was found to be of greater concern in those videos representing non-EU states.

Tone

We found that all the videos pretend to be made on behalf of a “home state” and directly address Trump. However, the Dutch template, and other videos following it, use a narrator who mimics his voice, producing a conceit whereby “Trump” is talking to Trump. This is a clearly illogical premise, but our analysis revealed that it is not remarked upon in any of the videos apart from that representing Greece. Furthermore, in the video representing Italy, the initial narration is an imitation of Berlusconi, though it then transitions to a neutral narrator who does not imitate Trump’s vocal *tone*, but mirrors his linguistic style. This aspect of structural style initiated in the Dutch video has roots in satirical opportunism—Trump’s public persona was already an engaging object of international interest before the launch of the *ESC* meme “contest” and is therefore a transferable affective resource with which to engage YouTube users.

Scripts

In keeping with analytical tradition (Billig 2005) and mindful of the humorous function of satire in narratives on international politics (Brassett and Browning 2025), our coding matrix also sought to analyze affective resources deployed in the *ESC* meme videos using Raskin’s approach to humor. Raskin (1985) holds that humor is produced through the “juxtapositioning” of scripts that represent our understandings of typical social routines and common-sense knowledge of how things are normally done in particular situations. He outlines three basic contrasts that inform all script juxtapositions in humor: actual/non-actual (the contrast between what someone thinks is meant and what is actually meant), expected/unexpected (the contrast between what one expects to occur in a particular situation and what then does occur), and possible/impossible (the contrast between what one understands as plausible in a situation and what one is being led to believe is happening). As well as allowing us to account for ambiguities of diplotainment as a genre commenting on foreign policy, his approach to scripts represents a compelling level of semantic universality, which is useful in the analysis of humorous memetic content produced for social media users and circulating across national borders.

Our analysis revealed that “expected/unexpected” scripts were dominant across the sample of videos, followed by “actual/non-actual” scripts. We found that videos would tend to foreground one of these two, so a video (e.g., Luxembourg) that used multiple “expected/unexpected” scripts would downplay the “actual/non-actual” variety. We identified limited use of the “possible/impossible” contrast, with only the template Dutch video and the video representing Greece exhibiting extensive use of this contrasting script. Surprisingly, then, this latter video, the most open in critiquing the stylistic composition of the original video format, sticks most closely to its comic structure.

Tropes

Qualitative analysis found a significant presence of *tropes*, particularly those reflecting Lee and Jang’s (2017) argument that political satire is born of a reaction to the extensiveness of influence of a target rather than its intensity, as

well as the trope of the carnivalesque, a noted component of memes used in activism (Highfield 2016). The former is best illustrated by the foundational premise of *ESC* that America is going to be “first” and participants of the contest need to battle it out to be the best ally by proving their worth to Trump. When analyzing the videos for explicit references to the extent of Trump’s influence, we found ample examples, such as Denmark’s plea for Trump not to “mess with NATO or the EU” as you will “make our problems great again,” or France’s statement regarding world wars that “our doors are open for you when you want to start the third.” A different expression of this trope was found in videos making reference to Russia as a rival to the United States. Videos on behalf of Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia, Sweden, Moldova, and Serbia contain references to the influence of Russia on their own states or the need for Trump to counteract the threat of that influence by military means or through his friendship with Putin. The carnivalesque tropes were found in the videos (i.e., those representing Cyprus, Poland, India, and Japan) that included sexist or misogynistic motifs that were not explicitly satirical. Many videos include a section on how the women of their nation are more attractive than those elsewhere, and they would therefore please Trump. While these can be construed as referencing Trump’s well-publicized sexist behavior, and therefore understood as carnivalesque, there is little satirical power to them, and it is difficult not to decode them as efforts to provide titillating content for the male gaze.

Preliminary Quantitative Analysis: Popularity

In the next step, we report the results of the analyses of the YouTube videos’ content *per* popularity measures: ratio of views, likes, and dislikes (as defined in the “measures” section).⁶ We found that many of the soft power resources were present in a large majority of the videos. In fact, humor and culture were included in all of them resulting in the necessity to exclude these two from the analysis as there was no variability to study. We also found that potential associations were hard to detect at the video level as the number of observations on this level was limited. The only clear association found was that between the date of posting and number of views: videos that entered the *ESC* earlier collected more views (scaled by the size of YouTube public in national settings). This is not necessarily intuitive, as posting later could benefit from virality effects. However, the data are more consistent with the explanation that, perhaps due to YouTube algorithms, it pays to enter the game early and benefit from increased exposure compared to later videos.

The bulk of videos were posted between 15 and 20 days (median = 17.5) after the original Dutch video, with a single outlier, the video representing the United Kingdom being posted 79 days following the launch of the *ESC*. Eight out of fifty of the sampled videos were part of late-night talk shows with only fifteen out of fifty making references to such broadcasts, indicating that the exposure to televised content in the context of viewing videos was unlikely to affect their popularity. Of all frames, including the issue-level frames per video (median = 4) and system-level frames (median = 2), the number of national-level frames was the highest (median = 10), revealing the prevalence of national posturing through diplotainment. The outliers here were the

⁶We have examined all variables using the Shapiro–Wilk normality test, and none of them resulted in the rejection of the null hypothesis that they are normally distributed. We also conducted visual checks of normality, which further justified using *t*-tests.

video representing Sweden with nine issue-level frames and ten system-level frames, and most nationally centered, the video representing Luxembourg with twenty-one national-level frames (see Figure 1 in [supplementary material](#)).

The results of a series of *t*-tests conducted for the log-transformed variables capturing video popularity show no statistically significant differences between the EU and non-EU as source attributions for the ratios of views ($t(45) = 1.874, p = 0.067$), likes ($t(45) = 0.184, p = 0.85$), and dislikes ($t(45) = -1.165, p = 0.25$). We then used correlations to inspect whether the three performance variables at the video level are associated, finding that the results were non-significant, and therefore indicating that they are distinct measures of popularity (see Table 5 in [supplementary material](#)).

Soft Power Resources as Weak Catalysts of Interactivity

The results of regressions addressing RQ2 show only a few statistically significant predictors. We only focused on our interpretation of the results with very low *p*-values ($p < 0.05$ as threshold) and theoretical relevance to the analysis of public engagement (see Table 6 in [supplementary material](#)).

First, the number of issue-level frames present in the videos is negatively associated with long comments ($B = -0.046, p = 0.005$). In other words, videos featuring fewer issues engendered a higher proportion of long comments, which is indicative of users' preference for the lower brevity in engagement (under ten words). This result is consistent with the findings of Uldam and Askanius (2013), who report that YouTube users tend to leave short comments under videos posted by activists. In the case of the *ESC*, it reflects engagement with diplotainment content that is less issue-driven. This finding can be explained by users engaging with content that appears stereotypical or that confirms biased associations between a particular state and a specific issue. This might suggest that in order to generate interactivity that goes beyond brief praise or critique of video content, it may be more effective to focus on carefully selected issues rather than raise a broad, disparate variety of them.

Second, the earlier each respective video was published since the “seed” Dutch video, the more concentrated is the level of interactivity. For each day a video was published earlier, the expected log count of days it took for each individual comment to appear was lower by 0.03, $p = 0.00002$. In other words, entering the *ESC* at its start resulted in significantly higher levels of content-user interactivity shortly after the posting of a video.

Third, when the video exhibited the affective resource of adversarial personalized statements (e.g., the one featuring the former Polish Prime Minister, “If visiting Poland, you would not be the most hated Donald [. . .]. We had one Donald and, just like you, he fucked everyone”), the expected log count of likes generated by each respective comment was higher by 0.706, $p = 0.001$. In summary, adversarial personalized statements produced a context in which comments were more likely to collect likes.

Tenuous “Attractiveness Effects”

In the last stage of analysis, we focus on how the *ESC* videos were received by YouTube users (RQ3). Although activists seek attraction effects for different reasons than state actors of public diplomacy, nevertheless, the tonality of diplotainment, as received by YouTube users, has a bearing on the adversarial dynamic opposing Trump's foreign policy. The transnational activists behind the *ESC* “contest” relied on the

attractiveness effect from its outset: without a positive reception of the initial Dutch video, the successive videos were less likely to go viral (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Beyond that, our results reveal three insights concerning the reception of diplotainment among YouTube users.

First, attractiveness effects, essential to activists seeking to appeal to YouTube users, were generated by a dominant positive tonality in user reception of the *ESC* content. We found that 54 percent of user comments about videos that exhibited affective resources were positive, meaning that the highest proportion of them were associated with emotional and positive reactions to videos. Cumulatively, symbolic resources of soft power dominated with the proportion of positive comments “toward home state” and “toward other state” being 21 and 24 percent, respectively (see Figure 2 in [supplementary material](#)).

Second, the representation of the “wealth, business and technology” tangible resource leads to the more prominent presence of negative ($B = 0.837, p = 0.006$), ambivalent/neutral tonality ($B = 1.197, p = 0.002$) as well as positive tonality ($B = 0.621, p = 0.03$) toward the home video, all compared to “no tonality” as a reference category. The presence of this particular soft power resource in the videos shows a special potential to evoke user sentiment, even if in different directions.

Third, videos posted on behalf of EU members exhibit fewer negative comments about “home state” ($B = -0.626, p < 0.003$). This, however, should not be interpreted as users being more receptive of videos representing EU member states, as their reception also shows less positive tonality ($B = -0.399, p < 0.03$) in the pattern of engagement toward their home state. It transpires that videos representing non-EU member states produced overall more tonality—both negative and positive—toward the home state, whereas videos on behalf of EU members produced less. In addition, videos representing EU members were met with less negative reception toward other states ($B = -0.617, p < 0.001$) (see Table 7 in [supplementary material](#)).

Discussion

Our analysis demonstrates that transnational activism by entertainment broadcasters can drive public engagement with foreign policy and shape the patterns of that public engagement among social media users. The qualitative side of our argument puts diplotainment, a hybrid memetic genre deliberately conceived for the participatory modes of organizationally enabled connective action, at the heart of our analysis of YouTube users' engagement. The persuasive measures of disparagement, intertextuality, tone, scripts, and tropes stand out as qualifiers of the ability of diplotainment to engage social media users with foreign policy. The manner in which *ESC* content (our foundational case of diplotainment) proliferated on YouTube highlights the blurring of domestic and foreign publics opposing a turn in a single state's foreign policy, and demonstrates how its creative narrative countering public diplomacy, however temporarily, engages these publics *across* national borders. As such, this case of transnational activism by entertainment broadcasters can engender a qualitative change in our understanding of public engagement with foreign policy by integrating the democratizing effects of digitalization. It moves us away from a state-centric, horizontal dynamic in considerations of how social media can be used to present foreign policy toward a vertical one, based on shared counter-narratives and oppositions to foreign policy that seek to mutate the

traditional broadcasting cycle out across hybrid media landscapes (Tufekci 2017).

The political significance of diplotainment stems from how our analysis substantiates the interwoven logics of holistic, relational, and individual engagement (Zaharna 2018) and illuminates how seemingly apolitical entertainment broadcasters enjoy the power to generate and amplify interest in changes to foreign policy. This study reports how diplotainment opposes foreign policy by satirizing its populist premises. However, in theory, diplotainment can also be supportive of changes to foreign policy, and future research should capture, analyze, and report on such instances. Our analysis of the *ESC* meme “contest” demonstrates that while entertainment broadcasters exploit a privileged position of power over publics, by mobilizing connective action and imposing deliberative rules on an otherwise state-centric domain (Grincheva 2023), they have highlighted how hyper-connectivity across hybrid media landscapes aids the production of engaging social media content on foreign policy. To that end, we have uncovered the sequence with which the foundational case of transnational activism by entertainment broadcasters utilizes social media to open an avenue for interlinked acts of mobilization, participation, and, by way of virality effects, engagement with foreign policy (Lilleker and Koc-Michalska 2017).

The value of the quantitative side of our argument rests in the analysis of how the compositional content features of diplotainment shape the patterns of public engagement with *America First* foreign policy reported by insights pertaining to popularity, interactivity, and attractiveness effects. The viral dimension of the *ESC* “contest” and the wide exposure of YouTube users to its content were not the only features of this connective action, as demonstrated in our analysis of the patterns of user engagement generated by diplotainment.

The popularity data are revealing in two ways. First, the appropriation of soft power resources into diplotainment reflects how the compositional richness of this genre translates into the ability of entertainment broadcasters to generate and amplify interest in foreign policy. The popularity of the *ESC* videos positioned the Dutch *Zondag met Lubach* as trend-setters in terms of genre composition and the German *Neo Magazin Royale* as activists mobilizing connective action by cementing the form of this new diplotainment genre in order to satirize Trump’s *America First*. Second, the time of posting of videos, which is of relevance from the perspective of virality effects (Chernobrov 2022), correlates with decreasing user engagement. In essence, the timing of a video upload after the template video is positively associated with the levels of exposure it was likely to receive from YouTube users.

Despite being the primary target of the *ESC* contest, none of the predictors that directly relate to Trump are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$ as threshold) in terms of user interactivity with the videos or their reception. To our surprise, none of the seemingly polarizing soft power resources, i.e., “wealth, business and technology,” “military or security capabilities,” or “political values” predict interactivity. Only adversarial personalized statements indicate a strong effect. Arguably, then, it was the confronting use of satire in personalized statements, rather than the Trump-related features of the *ESC* meme videos, that is indicative of user engagement. In line with the work of Sánchez (2020), our findings underscore the significance of “liking” comments as a measure of user–user interactivity. Beyond this, though, the *ESC* “contest” did not generate significant user–user interactivity, which may be the pitfall of diplotainment. Put simply, while the *ESC* videos exhibiting personalized statements pre-

dict users engagement by positive association with comment “likes” on YouTube, our analysis does not reveal a substantive pattern to the deliberative and conversational user–user interactions stimulated by their content.

With regard to attractiveness effects denoting the reception of videos, we found that the presence of “wealth, business and technology” predicted the likelihood of enhancing YouTube user comment tonalities in different directions. Additionally, videos representing non-EU states yielded more tonality—both negative and positive—toward the home state, and videos representing EU members produced fewer negative comments toward other states, indicating their less antagonistic reception. While we approach *ESC* as a satirical reaction to a state’s public diplomacy (Zaharna and Uysal 2016), the reception of the videos paints a *complex pattern of public engagement*. Despite its seemingly negative and oppositional stance toward a single state’s foreign policy, the *ESC* “contest” generated positive comments about home states, other states, and their soft power resources. In particular, sentiments regarding home state videos underscore the “attractiveness effect” of diplotainment (Chitty et al. 2023). Although not official diplomatic communiqués, the positive reception of videos appropriating the repertoire of soft power resources shows how attractiveness effects induced by diplotainment as a genre for national self-presentation translate into public engagement among social media users.

The diplomatic significance of this instance of transnational activism by entertainment broadcasters is multifold (Surowiec and Long 2023). In particular terms, the *ESC* “contest” sets the benchmark for understanding satirical responses to changing US foreign policy from within European liberal democracies. Unlike, for example, Russia, where hybrid formats such as *agitainment* are used to the domestic advantage of autocracy (Tolz and Teper 2018), we can see in the case of *ESC* how the interest of entertainment broadcasters in foreign policy in Europe has been able to engender public engagement among social media users across national borders. In general, our findings extend beyond the *ESC* contest because we perceive diplotainment as a genre in its own right, rather than a simple example of a quotidian media narrative on foreign policy. As a liminal format, diplotainment embodies a strategic ambiguity over entertainment-oriented engagement. On the one hand, entertainment provides an appealing nucleus for sharing cultural meanings about foreign policy (Castells 2008). On the other hand, it stresses the simulative power of late-night talk show hosts who are able to use social media to position diplotainment in a hybrid space between diplomatic officialdom and entertainment broadcasting. Although diplotainment may not generate deep deliberation, it does draw social media users into foreign policy, generating significant commentary on videos that concentrate on fewer issues and, in doing so, we argue, comforts users with humor by affording them the opportunity to question Trump’s populist foreign policy and its premise of being an alternative to liberal hegemony in international politics (Löflmann 2019). To that end, it shows the short-term democratizing effects of digitalization on public engagement with foreign policy.

Finally, this study recognizes diplotainment as a memetic genre existing alongside other online genres and formats that have the capacity for public engagement with foreign policy. For example, “countryballs” (also known as “Polandball”) have emerged on webcomics as a geopolitical satirical meme. As a genre, countryballs personify states as balls decorated with national symbols to satirize national stereotypes, international politics, and historical events. Podcasts

are an online format that also exhibits the potential for public engagement with foreign policy. For example, online versions of the well-established *Foreign Policy* magazine, think-tanks such as the Council on Foreign Relations, or *Pod Save the World* use the format of podcasts for public engagement with foreign policy. We do not have the space here to analyze these in detail, but diplotainment has emerged as yet another digital content category able to draw public interest to foreign policy. As a hybrid genre, it has the capacity to expand its composition beyond the fusion of diplomatic officialdom with entertainment formats other than the late-night talk show, for example, parody, horror, or comics.

Conclusions

This study has explored how diplotainment can open new pathways to, and drive patterns of, public engagement with foreign policy. In doing so, it situates this liminal genre in between discourses of diplomatic officialdom and entertainment broadcasting. Furthermore, it demonstrates the persuasive abilities of satirical counter-narratives, which, we find, affect YouTube user engagement with its content. The significance of our study is two-fold. First, building on the work of Zaharna (2018), by recognizing that diplotainment has evolved through the interdependent interactions between entertainment broadcasters and social media users across hybrid media landscapes, this study promotes a shift of analytical attention regarding public engagement with foreign policy away from diplomatic institutions reactively adopting social media to generate user engagement with the content on their foreign policies and toward transnational activism countering a state's public diplomacy. Second, our findings are pertinent to activists and foreign policymakers who might be seeking to develop strategies for a policy area that has difficulties in engendering engagement. As such, it provides food for thought for the conduct of foreign policy in general and public diplomats in particular, who will need to weigh the costs and benefits of virality effects.

While it was surprising to discover that the soft power resources appropriated in *ESC* videos do not strongly affect user engagement in terms of popularity, our illustrative analysis finds evidence that the content of diplotainment can, to a certain extent, predict user interactivity and engender the positive reception of videos. As such, we offer evidence showing that diplotainment is able, albeit temporarily, to engage social media users with foreign policy across national borders. In addition to other uses of diplotainment, future inquiry could benefit from mitigating the limitations of this study. Future quantitative research may expand the focus on interactivity beyond the analysis of the volume of "replies" to comments into a thematic analysis testing what type of soft power resources are likely to produce a deeper deliberative engagement. In addition to the analysis of content features, future research might also explore the extent to which the type of device a social media platform is accessed from—for example, mobile phones versus laptops—can play a role in determining levels of user engagement with diplotainment, and how the type of device that the platform is accessed from predicts the likelihood of users leaving a comment in reaction to the content on foreign policy. Another avenue of inquiry might concern exploring how the intersections of entertainment politics (Malmvig 2023) and foreign policy analysis can lead to collective action across national borders. For example, we might posit an inquiry into which foreign policy issue may be salient enough to mobilize transnational protests via social media, or which resources of soft power may be appropriated into transnational activism

to mobilize international boycotts via social media. Overall, our study moves the discussion of public engagement with foreign policy beyond the public diplomacy of a state, and into the realm of transnational activism communicated and amplified across a dynamic mélange of traditional and new media. As such, our analysis offers insights into new strategies in the wake of foreign policy change and discusses their significance beyond the particularities of *ESC* and Trump's *America First*.

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Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the *Global Studies Quarterly* data archive.

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