

# **The Scottish Government's Digital Influence**

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This report was prepared for the Scottish Government by the Digital Influence and Intelligence Lab (DIIL). DIIL is a consortium of the Neuropolitics Research Lab at the University of Edinburgh with ICR Research Ltd. and M&C Saatchi World Services, and is based in the Edinburgh Futures Institute.

Report authors:

Stuart McDonald, FRSA, ICR Research Ltd.  
Professor Laura Cram  
Dr. Gerry Power

## Disclaimer

The views summarised in this report are those of the organisations and individuals who chose to submit them. The recommendations expressed in this report are those of the contractors appointed. The report does not represent the views or intentions of the Scottish Government.

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# Glossary

Digital Diplomacy	The use of digital tools in the practice of diplomacy: social media, online conferencing, big data and AI analysis, etc.
Digital Influence	(Digital) influence is the capacity to affect others to take actions and/or change opinions or behaviour. It can happen directly (persuasion) and indirectly.
(Digital) reach	How far information will travel across the social continuum.
(Digital) relevance	Alignment to interests of the moment. Relevance is situation sensitive; what is relevant to someone in one context or point in time is quite different to what is relevant in other contexts or later in time.
(Digital) resonance	The ripple effect of information. It determines how long a conversational thread will remain topical or how many people feel compelled to offer their opinion in the matter.
Digital transformation	The integration of digital technology into all areas of an organisation, fundamentally changing how it operates and delivers value.
International Organisations	An international organisation is a stable set of norms and rules meant to govern the behaviour of states and other actors in the international system. Organisations may be established by a treaty or be an instrument governed by international law and possess their own legal personality. Examples include the United Nations, the World Health Organization and NATO.
Issue networks	An alliance of various interest groups and individuals who unite in order to promote a common cause or agenda in a way that influences government policy.
Multilateral relationships	Process of organising relations between groups of three or more states.
Productive networks	The nexus of interconnected functions, operations and transactions through which a specific topic, product, service, or activity is produced, distributed and consumed.
Social media	Websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.
Social media analysis	Collecting data from social media sites and blogs and evaluating that data to make business decisions.
Soft power	The ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment.
Vanity metrics	Metrics that make you look good to others but do not help you understand your own performance in a way that informs future strategies.

# Executive Summary

1. [A Fairer, Greener Scotland: Programme for Government 2021-22](#) sets out a vision for 'Scotland in the world' which aims to increase Scotland's international standing and: "...embrace the opportunities of international connection and cooperation, acting as a good global citizen to champion our values-based approach on the world stage, starting at home by ensuring that we are a truly participatory democracy."
2. This research contributes to that vision by reviewing the role and functions of digital communications technologies in Scotland's international engagement.
3. We surveyed the academic and policy literature to gain an overview of contemporary good practice and understand the Scottish Government's existing policies and strategies. We assessed current levels of capacity and capability, identified Scotland's existing strengths and weaknesses in relation to digital influence, and explored future visions.
4. Our key findings were:
  - 4.1 In today's world, the practice of international relations is hybrid – it has to involve both traditional and digital channels and methods;
  - 4.2 This requires new capacities and capabilities, and a strategic approach;
  - 4.3 The Scottish Government would benefit from an explicit strategy for the use of digital in Scotland's international engagement;
  - 4.4 International communications could usefully be optimised for the most effective use of digital diplomacy practices or tools;
  - 4.5 Scotland's global narrative should deepen the link between policy content and communication;
  - 4.6 Scotland aspires to exert influence both in bilateral and multilateral contexts. There are important differences in how digital influence works in these two areas;
  - 4.7 The Scottish Government's digital influence abroad could be further strengthened by a better understanding of its international audience;
  - 4.8 An explicit strategy would target existing resources as effectively as possible on digital influence;
  - 4.9 Scotland should ensure that, through the effective use of digital influence, it does not fall behind its key comparators in key markets;
  - 4.10 There is evidence to suggest that Scotland could increase its international economic promotion in order to further improve its reputation and build stronger international relations;

- 4.11 There is a view that to deliver the commitments in the Programme for Government within available resources, a strategic approach to the use of digital communications in Scotland's external relations would be beneficial;
- 4.12 Similarly, given the commitments in the Programme for Government it is important for Scotland to be able to influence decisions that are taken about digital governance in international fora as these decisions can either foster or hinder the development of democratic and inclusive societies;
- 4.13 Small countries can have a high profile and a disproportionate impact on these debates through digital foreign policies that are relevant to global debates on digital and are implemented successfully; and
- 4.14 Digital foreign policies as practiced today by Denmark and Switzerland offer models from which Scotland could learn.

5. Our key recommendations:

An explicit strategic approach to digital influence that is effectively delivered offers Scotland the potential to raise its international profile and standing. We therefore recommend that, if resources allow, the Scottish Government should:

- 5.1 Aim, over the medium to long-term, to be a thought leader among smaller nations in the development and use of digital tools and the practice of multi-stakeholder governance in external relations;
- 5.2 Transform its international engagement into a digital-first operation in both policy and practice;
- 5.3 Continue to build capacity and capability in digital diplomacy;
- 5.4 Engage more effectively in relation to key global topics by realising the benefits of effective digital diplomacy:
  - 5.4.1 Increased *reach* to much larger, potentially global, audiences;
  - 5.4.2 Greater *relevance* through sustained and distinctive engagement in online networks and fora with influence on topics with global, regional, or national significance;
  - 5.4.3 Greater *resonance* (as contributions 'ripple out' through the networks of those who influence the topic under discussion).
- 5.5 Leverage Scotland's digital assets in Government, its higher education institutions and business; and
- 5.6 Build the data and analytical capability to support the strategy.

6. There are some early steps that could be taken, including pilot projects to test these new ideas out, as work continues to deliver the existing commitments in the Programme for Government. Evaluations of these pilots

can contribute as action research that will feed findings into the strategy development process.

# Introduction

## The brief

7. This report was commissioned by the Scottish Government as a one off project from the [Digital Influence and Intelligence Lab](#) (DIIL) on ‘digital influence’.

8. The brief was to:

*“... map current and future (next 3-5 years) user requirements with an international focus across the Scottish Government, situate it within existing best practice, internationally, and explore issues identified.”*

9. It also called for:

9.1 The identification of priorities and options for the Scottish Government in relation to these identified needs. The options would be costed, where possible, and analysed in terms of value for money;

9.2 An outlined benefits case for the Scottish Government to consider, taking account of other recent research literature and current practice;

9.3 Benchmarking the Scottish Government approach against a small number of comparator countries such as Sweden and Switzerland; and

9.4 Recent research on soft power in the contemporary competitive environment, Digital Diplomacy and Digital Cultural Relations.

## Policy context

10. The context for this work was [A Fairer, Greener Scotland: Programme for Government 2021-22](#), which sets out the Scottish Government’s aspirations and activities designed to promote Scotland’s standing in the world.

*“At a time of increasing insularity, Scotland's strength will remain in its internationalism. We will continue to work with our friends and partners in Europe and beyond to reaffirm diplomatic ties, improve our global networks, enhance international communications activity, and unlock new economic and trading opportunities”.*

11. The Programme also commits to strengthening Scotland’s network of international offices to increase Scotland’s economic and cultural visibility and support the development of bilateral relationships.



12. Scotland's international relations are conducted within the framework of the devolution settlement. While Scotland does not have the full powers of an independent state, it nevertheless has the scope to conduct a substantial range of international relations activities with the agreement of the UK Government.<sup>1</sup>

## Policy aims

13. The Scottish Government considered that it would benefit from having an explicit strategic approach to digital influence, which is increasingly central to international relations. Policymakers have a need for strategies that help them understand and navigate the digital ecosystem. There are many opportunities for international relations utilising new technologies. Online infrastructures can play a role in redesigning international relations, political dialogue, cultural exchange and the conditions for the creation of new ideas.<sup>2</sup> Among the many areas where digital communications technologies currently have an impact on international relations are horizon scanning, threat assessment, the communication of strategic narratives (including disinformation) and the facilitation of global networks of those seeking to influence decision making on issues of common concern such as the pandemic or climate change.<sup>3</sup> Digital communications technologies should also be recognised as a source of creativity for those involved in international relations, and as offering the Scottish Government opportunities to process information, contribute to the definition of emerging issues and the shaping of agendas for action, create networks, and two-way flows of communication.

14. Given the pace of change and increasing levels of complexity, it is hard, however, to measure influence in this new world. This reflects the fact that influence is highly nuanced and any attempt to reduce it to a single number, based on a single digital data source that can be 'gamed', is a flawed concept. Tools which attempted to do this are seen as inadequate, and approaches such as social media analysis that counts re-tweets, followers, hashtags etc. are no longer seen as satisfactory.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, work on digital influence needs to consider data, methods, and tools for analysis and interpretation including the use of data-driven analytical services through which organisations can

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<sup>1</sup> See: Scotland's European and International Policy, Jeffery, C., 2010. Scotland's European and international policy. *Foreign policy of constituents units at the beginning of 21st century*, pp.103-120.

<sup>2</sup> See [Inquiry by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Commons, March 2021: Tech and the future of UK foreign policy](#)

<sup>3</sup> See: [House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee - Oral evidence: Tech and the future of UK foreign policy \(2021\)](#) for further examples.

<sup>4</sup> Klout, Peerindex and Kred were amongst a number of social influence ranking, or 'social capital' tools that were popular for a period of time but then were either built into other tools or evolved into influencer marketing platforms.

analyse the nuanced impact of their digital influence activities over time and in comparative contexts.<sup>5</sup>

## **The evidence**

15. There is very little literature which analyses and appraises Scotland's digital engagement. There are, however, a number of policy documents published by the Scottish Government which are discussed here.

16. There is a substantial and growing academic and grey literature on digital diplomacy and a much smaller but growing number of commentaries and studies on digital foreign policy. This is unsurprising as the concept of digital foreign policy is much more recent than that of digital diplomacy. There are academic and business-led studies on the measurement of digital influence and a vast literature on digital transformation, digital communications, and digital governance. These were drawn on selectively for the literature review and for the two case studies, in so far as they were directly relevant to the aims of the Scottish Government.

17. To obtain a more in-depth and nuanced view of the evidence, a limited number of interviews with Scottish Government staff and external stakeholders from Scottish public bodies were conducted. A workshop was held in which options were presented to Scottish Government staff for discussion. The interview material and workshop conclusions supported and enriched the evidence from the desk research.

## **Acknowledgements**

18. Our approach to the brief was to be as systematic in data collection and analysis as possible. This was helped by the range of expertise within the DIIL team which includes leading experts in digital influence, international relations, communications and public policy. This enabled rigorous quality assurance of the research throughout.

19. The Scottish Government team who led on this research were also essential. We are grateful to them for sharing their time and insights, and for their practical assistance at a time when the Scottish Government was preparing for one of the most important international events of our time – COP

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<sup>5</sup> “Diplometrics,” the new term coined by Ministries of Foreign Affairs for measuring digital impact, seeks, for instance, to identify quantitative combinations of factors (measurable objectives, progress indicators, engagement ratios etc.) that can best track and shape the impact of digital policies and campaigns in real time. At the same time, getting digital diplomacy right cannot be reduced to an exercise of fine-tuning quantitative metrics of message dissemination. It must also involve a qualitative approach by which to capture whether digital engagement can shape the views of the target audience and whether it can generate online relationships of relevance for offline diplomatic activity. Sourced from: [The American Academy in Berlin – Digital Diplomacy: From Tactics to Strategy](#)

26, which was held in Glasgow during the time when this research was underway.

20. Finally, we are grateful to the interviewees who gave their time to participate and share their insights and experience.

## Methodology

21. The methodology for this project consisted of three elements:
  - 21.1 A desk-based literature review to map current understanding of digital influence and the user need within the Scottish Government and its agencies;
  - 21.2 Interviews with Scottish Government staff and external stakeholders in 6 major internationally engaged Scottish public sector organisations. Interviewees were selected by DIIL from a long list following discussions with the Scottish Government. The original aim was to situate the findings from the desk-based literature review within the Scottish Government's existing best practice, internationally, and explore issues identified; and
  - 21.3 Deliver a workshop for the Scottish Government team to share the emerging research findings and identify options for a strategic approach, including the opportunities, challenges, pros and cons, of each option.
  
22. The methodology was amended during the course of the project to include case studies from two comparator (similar-size) countries, Denmark and Switzerland. These case studies were developed from desk research.

# Literature Review

## Aims of the literature review

23. This literature review is part of a series of conversations between the Scottish Government and the DIIL team on how the Scottish Government can best leverage its digital assets. It maps understanding of digital influence in the Scottish Government based on an overview of their currently articulated strategic aims, goals, and practices. It focuses on how digital influence can contribute to Scotland's international influence and engagement in bilateral and multilateral contexts. Given this policy emphasis, it is framed through the lens of digital diplomacy: '*...the use of digital information communication technologies, such as the Internet, to achieve diplomatic objectives*'.<sup>6</sup> It also contextualises the Scottish Government's current approach by drawing on recent relevant academic research and grey material on the role of digital influence in international relations.

## Context: what is digital influence?

24. For the purpose of this report, we will use the following as the definition for Digital Influence: "*The ability to cause effect, change behaviour, and drive measurable outcomes online.*"<sup>7</sup>
25. There are three main conceptual cornerstones of digital influence<sup>8</sup>:
- 25.1 Reach: How far information will travel across the social continuum. More salient topics will travel farther;
  - 25.2 Relevance: Alignment to interests of the moment. Relevance is situation sensitive; what is relevant to someone in one context or point in time is quite different to what is relevant in other contexts or later in time; and
  - 25.3 Resonance: The ripple effect of information. It determines how long a conversational thread will remain topical or how many people feel compelled to offer their opinion in the matter.
26. These three considerations must be in place to describe digital influence but that is not enough. True digital influence must also

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<sup>6</sup> Definition from Holmes (2020): [Oxford Bibliographies – Digital Diplomacy](#). 'Diplomatic objectives' are taken here to include the international activities of the Scottish Government a sub-state actor. See (Douglas-Scott, 2016): [European and External Relations Committee – Treaties, Devolution and Brexit](#)

<sup>7</sup> Solis, B. and Webber, A., 2012. The rise of digital influence. *Altimeter Group*.

<sup>8</sup> Many of these outcomes may also be measurable offline.

contribute to some sort of change or effect, depending on how resonance is operationalised.<sup>9</sup>

27. The nature of this change is identified by Rogers as operating at three levels<sup>10</sup>:
  - 27.1 Attracting attention and connections in a fashion characterised by Jenna Wortham in The New York Times as “*success theater*”<sup>11</sup>, that is showing others that you are successful (which has similarities to virtue signaling);
  - 27.2 Building productive networks which refers to connective value, where worthwhile ties are forged. How individuals or entities are situated in networks affects their influence; and
  - 27.3 Capturing and propagating trends, and going beyond that to define issues, set agendas, and shape policy trajectories, by identifying individuals (or organisations) who influence cohorts with their interests or activities.<sup>12</sup>
28. We would add an additional measure:

Digital Impact: The effect in, practice, of digital influence on the attitudes and behaviours of individuals, organisations, businesses.

## How digital influence works in international relations

29. The origins of the internet are rooted in the international environment of the Cold War, when both the United States and the Soviet Union built rival supercomputers. After the launch of the Soviet Satellite Sputnik 1 in 1957, the US recognised the need for a communications system that would connect these supercomputers and could not be affected by a Soviet nuclear attack. The first message was sent over the ARPANET in October 1969. The internet has since grown into a world-wide broadcasting capability, a mechanism for information dissemination, and a medium for collaboration and interaction between

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<sup>9</sup> See for example: [The American Academy in Berlin – Digital Diplomacy: From Tactics to Strategy](#) which makes the point that digital diplomacy has the same goal as traditional diplomacy, that is, the achievement of diplomatic goals.

<sup>10</sup> Rogers, Richard. Digital Traces in Context | Otherwise Engaged: Social Media from Vanity Metrics to Critical Analytics. International Journal of Communication, [S.l.], v. 12, p. 23, Jan. 2018. ISSN 1932-8036. Available at: [USC Annenberg – International Journal of Comuncation \(2018\)](#). Date accessed: 15 Sep. 2021.

<sup>11</sup> See: [The New York Times - Digital Diary: Facebook Poke and the Tedium of Success Theater \(2012\)](#)

<sup>12</sup> Rogers (2018).

individuals and their computers without regard for geographic location.<sup>13</sup>

30. Westcott identified early on that the internet was having a profound impact on international relations thanks to its ability, along with the IT systems it connects, to allow an enormous increase in people's ability to communicate both one-to-one and one-to-many.<sup>14</sup> This increase partly came about due to the low entry costs of digital communications. In effect, anyone with broadband access could publish to the Internet at close to zero cost. This contributed to the rise of multiple non-state actors, 'the power of organizing without organizations'<sup>15</sup> and facilitated the rise of the post-truth condition, facilitating the ways in which positions taken and propagated using social media contribute to the polarisation of positions, exacerbate ideological tensions and highlight geopolitical power struggles.<sup>16</sup>

31. Today, the most high-profile way in which digital technology impacts on international relations is through the practice of digital diplomacy, sometimes referred to as "*international change management*"<sup>17</sup>, a term which suggests that the use of digital tools provides a unique way for diplomats, foreign ministries, and others involved in international relations, to proactively listen, and respond to, changes in the international system. It is not just the high-profile positioning or the more performative aspects of digital diplomacy that matter, but the everyday presence, consistency of image, messaging and policy practice, the community built, and the resonance and attachment created, that underpin its practice.

32. The term is used by academics alongside other terms such as: "e-Diplomacy", "cyber Diplomacy", "net diplomacy", "#diplomacy", "diplomacy 2.0", "public diplomacy 2.0", "networked diplomacy", "real-time diplomacy", "21st-century statecraft", "diplomacy in the digital age", "digitalisation of diplomacy", or "digidiplomacy", yet each term shares a

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<sup>13</sup> See: [Internation Society - Brief History of the Internet](#)

<sup>14</sup> Westcott, N., 2008, July. Digital Diplomacy: The Impact of the Internet on International Relations, Oxford Internet Institute, Research Report 16.

<sup>15</sup> Michelis, D. and Stumpp, S., 2021, May. Organisieren ohne Organisationen (Clay Shirky). In Social Media Handbuch (pp. 175-190). Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG.

<sup>16</sup> Cosentino, G., 2020. Social media and the post-truth world order: the global dynamics of disinformation. Springer Nature.

<sup>17</sup> Marcus Holmes compiles an evolving online bibliography on these topics. See: [Oxford Bibliographies - Digital Diplomacy](#)

common perspective: the use of digital information communication technologies, such as the Internet, to achieve diplomatic objectives.

## The Scottish Government's current strategic aims, goals, and practices (the publicly available baseline)

33. There is a lack of academic research on the role of digital technology in Scotland's international engagement. While there are numerous articles on Scotland and digital health, education, and the environment, the most relevant topics that have been considered to date are digital nation branding<sup>18</sup> and research into social media and its impact on the constitutional debate.<sup>19</sup> From the digital influence point of view, local history is the subject of far more research interest than contemporary international relations. In terms of practical research, although a British Council report on Scotland's Soft Power commented favourably on Scotland's digital diplomacy, its coverage was too limited to be useful for the purposes of this report.<sup>20</sup> This review, therefore, focuses on the following policy documents and initiatives which relate to Scotland's international engagement and to Scotland's digital ambitions.

## International Framework (2017)

34. Scotland's International Framework sets out how the Scottish Government's international work supports the central purpose of creating a more successful country. The Framework aims to: *"...influence the world around us on the issues that matter most in helping Scotland flourish."*<sup>21</sup>
35. The Framework contains goals which a competence in digital influence would support, especially those that call for greater ability to engage globally, and participation in international learning and exchange. Improved digital influence capacity and capability would also support business objectives, those relating to international perceptions of Scotland, digital connectivity, and bilateral and multilateral

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<sup>18</sup> See for example: Johnson, M.A., 2018. Culture as soft power: Digital branding by Catalonia, the Basque Country and Scotland. *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies*, 10(1), pp.115-123.

<sup>19</sup> See for example: [AQMeN - The impact of social media discussion threads on public sentiment](#)

<sup>20</sup> See: [British Council Scotland: Gauging International Perceptions: Scotland and Soft Power \(2019\)](#)

<sup>21</sup> See: [The Scottish Government - Scotland's International Framework \(2017\)](#)



relationships. Indeed, an explicit strategic approach to digital influence would support all the objectives of the Framework.

### Scotland is Now (2018)

36. *Scotland is Now* is a campaign which aims to: ‘...put Scotland in the international spotlight and showcase the country’s world-leading assets to a global audience.’<sup>22</sup> Its aim is to promote Scotland: ‘Attracting more migrant talent, international students, expanding overseas businesses and high-spend tourists will grow Scotland’s economy and further cement its reputation as an open, diverse and welcoming country.’
37. The campaign is a partnership between the Scottish Government, VisitScotland, Scottish Development International and Universities Scotland. The partners combine all or part of their existing international marketing spend (£6 million) to deliver ‘*Scotland is Now*’ which includes online, cinema and press advertising, social media assets and the web portal [Scotland.org](https://www.scotland.org).

### Enabling Digital Government (2019)

38. Following these international initiatives, and in addition to them, there is a significant body of work on digital government. Audit Scotland’s ‘*Enabling Digital Government*’ report called for effective strategic leadership to encourage and promote digital government.<sup>23</sup> It also identified a gap in current policy: ‘*The Scottish Government does not have a complete picture of what has been achieved across the public sector so far (in digital government), including which actions have had the most impact and where there are gaps in progress. And it does not know how much public money is being invested across the public sector to achieve the strategy’s actions, or what is needed to fully deliver on its ambition. This means it cannot properly prioritise the work that will make the biggest impact on public services and learn from experience.*’<sup>24</sup>

### A changing nation: how Scotland will thrive in a digital world (2021)

39. The strategy states that: “*For Scotland to thrive in this digital world, our response must embrace three key opportunities: designing and implementing technology in a secure, efficient and user centred*

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<sup>22</sup> See: [The Scottish Government - Global campaign takes Scotland to the world \(2018\)](#)

<sup>23</sup> [Audit Scotland - Enabling Digital Government \(2019\)](#)

<sup>24</sup> For a progress report on the Digital Strategy see: [The Scottish Government - Realising Scotland’s full potential in a digital world: a digital strategy for Scotland Progress Report 2017 – 2021, \(2021\)](#)

*way, realising the potential of data to improve services, increase efficiency and deliver better outcomes, and transforming our culture and the way we work through digital thinking, with its emphasis on openness, networking and agility.”<sup>25</sup>*

40. The following paragraphs explicitly state three ambitions relevant to international relations, which are:

- 40.1 That Scotland wishes to be recognised throughout the world as a vibrant, inclusive, greener, open and outward-looking digital nation;
- 40.2 That Scotland needs to find new ways of ensuring that post EU-Exit it remains an attractive destination for talent and investment; and
- 40.3 That Scotland’s digital technologies’ sector and wider economy succeed in an increasingly interdependent world.

41. These aims are very similar to the aims of Scotland is Now and can be related to Roger’s three levels of change (see paragraph 4 above):

- 41.1 Attraction: the desire for Scotland to be a destination for talent and investment, and to shape peoples’ perceptions – Wortham’s ‘*success theatre*’;
- 41.2 The need for productive networks to support economic growth in an interconnected world; and
- 41.3 Impact on decision-making: change priorities at the individual level in relation to work location, study, or tourism, and at the corporate or business level in relation to investment.

42. These three levels will have a different significance in a post-COVID world, especially in relation to issues such as remote working and distance education.

43. The aims of the strategy include identifying the potential of digital technology in the international domain, supporting exports, working in new ways, personalising services (that could be offered globally, for example to the Scottish diaspora), tackling global issues such as climate change and supporting international connections and engagement.

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<sup>25</sup> See: [The Scottish Government - A changing nation: how Scotland will thrive in a digital world](#)

## A Fairer, Greener Scotland: Programme for Government 2021-22

44. The Programme for Government has international ambitions. It states that *“Scotland is a proudly internationalist nation and we will embrace the opportunities of international connection and cooperation, acting as a good global citizen to champion our values-based approach on the world stage, starting at home by ensuring that we are a truly participatory democracy”*.<sup>26</sup>
45. There are specific plans to:
- 45.1 Maintain friendships with European neighbours in the aftermath of EU Exit and seek to re-join the European Union;
  - 45.2 Reconstitute a Ministerial working group on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development to align domestic policy objectives and activity with international development objectives;
  - 45.3 Invest more in International Development, including support for African partner countries with their response to COVID-19;
  - 45.4 Sustain the Humanitarian Emergency Fund;
  - 45.5 Support our internationally recognised culture sector with the funding needed to make a strong recovery from COVID-19;
  - 45.6 Showcase Scotland internationally through our Brand Scotland collaboration and campaigns, raising Scotland's international profile, and hosting major events like the inaugural UCI Cycling World Championships in 2023; and
  - 45.7 Strengthen diplomatic ties and international presence.
46. Many of the commitments in the Programme for Government, such as those to *“reaffirm diplomatic ties, improve global networks, enhance international communications activity, and unlock new economic and trading opportunities”*, will require the use of both traditional and digital means, but this presents challenges. Digital diplomacy alone is not the answer, though it is essential. It should be noted that digital diplomacy is about both outcomes and processes. Success is not only defined by the impact of digital diplomacy but on how well its practice evolves, especially how successfully practitioners work in the absence of face to face contact, and develop ways to build the personal and social relationships and norms that traditional practice depends on.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See: [The Scottish Government - A Fairer, Greener Scotland: Programme for Government 2021-22](#)

<sup>27</sup> Elsa Hedling, Niklas Bremberg, Practice Approaches to the Digital Transformations of Diplomacy: Toward a New Research Agenda, *International Studies Review*, 2021;, viab027, Available at: [Oxford Academic](#)

## Impact of digital influence on bilateral relations

### *Digital influence and bilateral relations*

47. Digital diplomacy exists at two levels: the national and at the level of local representations such as Scotland's network of international offices around the world. By operating at these two levels, especially in bilateral relationships where the unique characteristics of local audiences with regard to history, culture, values and traditions are known, countries can tailor their policy and nation-branding messages. This facilitates the acceptance of their communications and the image they aim to promote.<sup>28</sup>

### *Scotland's current bilateral engagement strategies*

48. The Scottish Government website refers to: "...working with countries and institutions across the world to strengthen our international relationships, increase our trade and investment, and ultimately achieve our overarching objective of sustainable economic growth in Scotland."<sup>29</sup>

49. Scotland's bilateral relations with other countries have to align with the constitutional competencies of the Scottish Government and of the other countries.<sup>30</sup> Scotland's bilateral relations are formalised through engagement strategies with a range of countries including the USA, China, and India. Scotland also engages bilaterally in the context of the European Union and through processes such as the Scottish-Arctic dialogue.

50. The aims of the [US Engagement Strategy](#) require outcomes where digital influence can be crucial (see paragraph 18): raised awareness, national promotion, support for networks, knowledge exchange, diaspora engagement. These support the Scottish Government's overall aim "To influence the world around us on the issues that matter most in helping Scotland".<sup>31</sup> The strategy does not, however, include any reference to the potential of digital to support delivery of its aims.

51. The other bilateral engagement strategies for China, Canada, India, and Pakistan follow a similar pattern – they identify priority areas for engagement, many of which could be supported through a strategy for digital influence, but the published documents do not refer explicitly to whether the mechanisms for delivery include a digital component, with the

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<sup>28</sup> Manor, I., & Segev, C. (2015). America's selfie: How the US portrays itself on its social media accounts. In C. Bjola & M. Holmes (Eds.), *Digital diplomacy: Theory and practice* (pp. 89–108). New York, NY: Routledge.

<sup>29</sup> See: [The Scottish Government - International Relations](#)

<sup>30</sup> This requirement is spelled out in the [foreword to the Ireland-Scotland Joint Bilateral Review \(2021\)](#)

<sup>31</sup> See: [Scotland's International Framework US Engagement Strategy](#) pg. 1

exception of social media campaigns such as the promotion of gender equality in China. The same observation could be made of the work of Scotland's international offices in Berlin, Brussels, Dublin, London, Ottawa, and Paris.

52. Digital does play a role in more recent strategy documents, perhaps reflecting the turn to the digital during the pandemic. The review of Irish-Scottish relations (2021) identifies specific areas of cooperation on digital initiatives through the [Scottish-Irish Health Forum](#), and through the development of online cultural events at festivals during the pandemic.<sup>32</sup> While these are examples of cooperation enabled by digital technology, there are other areas of these strategies where digital influence could assist, particularly through the development of productive networks for mutual benefit.<sup>33</sup>

## Impact of digital influence on Scotland's multilateral relations

### *Digital influence and International Organisations (IOs)*

53. Digital offers new possibilities for multilateral engagement. The first online participation session in multilateral diplomacy was held by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in 1963.<sup>34</sup> Today, 'Zoom diplomacy' is commonplace, accelerated by the pandemic, and even the United Nations has gone virtual.<sup>35</sup>
54. The advent of digital communications technologies has transformed the ways in which IOs, such as the United Nations or the European Union, work.<sup>36</sup> In particular, the use of social media both by the institutions and by

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<sup>32</sup> See: [Government of Ireland and Scottish Government - Ireland-Scotland Joint Bilateral Review Report and Recommendations \(2021-25\)](#)

<sup>33</sup> See for example [Franco-Scottish Links In Research, Innovation And Higher Education](#) (March 2021), especially the "*informal individual connections*" between researchers in Scotland and France.

<sup>34</sup> See: [Diplo - Ancient History of e-Participation](#)

<sup>35</sup> See: [The Guardian - Bye Bye Bilaterals: UN general assembly to embrace Zoom diplomacy \(2020\)](#)

<sup>36</sup> IOs are defined by the [OECD](#): "IOs take different forms: international, regional, groups of like-minded countries or institutions sharing common issues and priorities. They underpin collective action in different ways, including through developing and managing common rules through a wide variety of international instruments."

the multiple actors trying to influence them has made them much more visible on the global digital stage.<sup>37</sup>

55. IOs have characteristics that distinguish them. Their scale and scope mean that the number and range of those engaging with them is global and includes a vast range of stakeholders and influencers, both within the IO and outside it who have different roles, some acting as gatekeepers to flows of influence. Some of these flows are downward, from the IO to its stakeholders, some are upward, from stakeholders to the IO and some are horizontal, between parts of the IO.
56. Crucial to engagement with an IO is the establishment of channels of communication through which to convey important information, engaging in dialogue with stakeholders to persuade them to collaborate towards influencing the IO's discussions, decisions, and policies. With a few exceptions (most significantly the European Parliament), IOs lack the democratic legitimacy of national governments and therefore tend to be judged on their actions. Social media forms an important channel through which discussions on the legitimacy of IOs can take place. IOs can also use social media to raise awareness of global issues or problems and to maintain relevance and legitimacy. Countries that are small or lack resources can enhance their prestige by being present in, and central to, such global debates within the IO.

### *Scotland's multilateral engagement*

57. The Scottish Government engages with a range of multilateral bodies, including the European Union and the Arctic Council. These are particularly relevant to a discussion of digital influence given their scale, complexity and geographies.
58. The Scottish Government has a wide range of engagement activities which target the EU, reflecting the importance of the EU to Scotland's economy, aspirations, and identity.<sup>38</sup> These engagements range from intergovernmental engagement on EU Exit, to influencing specific EU programmes, to working through Scotland's Innovation and Investment Hubs in Europe to promote trade and investment.
59. The Programme for Government 2021-22 promises to strengthen Scotland's presence in Brussels and open offices in Copenhagen, "*to increase Scotland's economic and cultural visibility in the Nordic regions*"

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<sup>37</sup> See: Bjola, C. and Zaiotti, R. eds., 2020. Digital diplomacy and international organisations: Autonomy, legitimacy and contestation. Routledge.

<sup>38</sup> See: [The Scottish Government - Europe](#)

and in Warsaw, “as part of our continued commitment to enhancing our external reach and voice”.<sup>39</sup>

60. Scotland’s Arctic Policy Framework (2019)<sup>40</sup> is described as a “...new platform for policy and knowledge exchange” (p3) which promotes engagement with countries in the Arctic Council.<sup>41</sup> Scotland aims to engage both bilaterally and multilaterally with Arctic countries and institutions and reflect and influence the priorities pursued by cooperation forums operating in the region. The Framework does not refer to digital influence as such. It is nevertheless conceived as a ‘platform’ and digital connectivity and knowledge exchange are recurring themes throughout the document. There is also a desire to raise Scotland’s profile with the Arctic Council countries and influence the outcome of deliberation in networks and forums that are often geographically remote and dispersed.

## Scotland’s reputation

61. The Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index<sup>SM</sup>: 2020 Report for Scotland concluded that Scotland was maintaining its position at 17<sup>th</sup> of 50 nations, albeit with a slight relative decline (Scotland was ranked 16<sup>th</sup> in 2018), and was below the 1.0 point threshold for Scotland’s National Indicator ‘Scotland’s Reputation’.<sup>42</sup> This review identified Scotland’s ‘competitors’ for digital influence as similar like-minded countries, and the UK. The 2021 Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index again places Scotland at 17<sup>th</sup> (out of 60), behind the UK (5<sup>th</sup>), and behind comparator countries such as Sweden, Norway, New Zealand and Finland, but ahead of others, Belgium, Ireland, Wales, Northern Ireland.<sup>43</sup>

## Data, analytics, measuring impact

62. Holmes (2020) points out that academics are increasingly asking: What is the baseline upon which we can judge “successful” or “unsuccessful”

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<sup>39</sup> See: [The Scottish Government - A Fairer, Greener Scotland: Programme for Government 2021-22 \(2021\)](#)

<sup>40</sup> See: [The Scottish Government – Arctic Connections: Scotland’s Arctic Policy Framework \(2019\)](#)

<sup>41</sup> The Arctic Council consists of eight countries with land areas north of the Arctic Circle: Norway, Sweden, Denmark (with the Faroe Islands and Greenland), Iceland, Finland, Russia, the United States of America and Canada.

<sup>42</sup> See: [The Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index<sup>SM</sup>: 2020 Report for Scotland](#)

<sup>43</sup> See: [Germany maintains top “nation brand” ranking, Canada and Japan overtake the UK to round out the top three](#)

digital diplomacy initiatives? What are the practical policy implications, and recommendations, that follow from these empirical perspectives?

63. Hicks (2021), in a literature review for UK Aid, found no sources of straightforward indicators for use in measuring diplomatic influence. It is hard to measure influence as such, so evaluations rely on intermediate goals as proxy measures for ‘immeasurable’ long-term influence. *“Programme designers tend to design programmes to support diplomatic influence without specific and measurable objectives because influencing processes are by nature non-linear. In these cases, evaluations will be correspondingly unable to provide specific and measurable indicators of achievement”*. However, Digital Diplomacy opens the possibility for evaluation metrics such as the number of likes, or the content of comments on social media posts.<sup>44</sup>

64. These measures are, however, critiqued by Rogers (2018) as ‘vanity metrics’, a term used to admonish analysts for a reliance on counting page views and likes as indicators of success.<sup>45</sup> He suggests a focus instead on ‘issue networks’ – groups that are concerned with specific topics. He suggests that measures of dominant voice (who dominates discussion of a topic), concern (the ‘issue areas’ that are most concerned with the topic), commitment (engagement over time), positioning (specific articulation for or against), and alignment (the actors who are interested in the same topic but who may not be allies). In the view of DIIL, we would go further and suggest that the question is not just who has the dominant voice (the message delivery or broadcast element), but the reception and resonance of that message in different groups and across different types of individuals – whether that message results in attitudinal or behavioural shifts in practice.

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<sup>44</sup> Hicks, J. (2021). Defining and Measuring Diplomatic Influence. K4D Helpdesk Report 950. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies. DOI: 10.19088/K4D.2021.032

<sup>45</sup> Rogers (2018), p.6.



## Interviews

65. A limited number of semi-structured interviews were carried out with a sample of people with responsibilities for international communications and engagement in the Scottish Government, its public bodies, and in the higher education sector.<sup>46</sup> The roles of interviewees were in external relations policy, trade and foreign investment, service delivery and technical support. Interviewees were selected by DIIL with support from the Scottish Government.
66. The aim of the interviews was to describe the current level of understanding, activity, and contextual awareness of digital influence in relevant bodies in Scotland. This would not be enough to constitute a formal baseline but would inform the development of policy and strategy.
67. A qualitative approach was taken to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation, reflecting the fact that there was a small sample of participants (n=11). The interviews were semi-structured to leave enough flexibility to elicit detailed responses to a core set of standard questions (see Appendix A). Responses were entered onto a grid to facilitate comparison against a list of standard categories designed to conceptually organise the findings. The data were disaggregated, broken down into manageable segments, and attributed to these categories, but they were not coded (i.e. identifiers were not attributed) due to the small sample size. This approach generated valuable insights into what was the current understanding and dialogue on digital influence within the Scottish Government and the wider Scottish public sector, and what topics and issues were on the minds of participants. The small sample means, however, that the results need to be treated with some caution.
68. The following paragraphs summarise the analysis of the responses of participants. They follow the order of the core questions.
69. There was a good level of understanding of digital influence among all those with responsibility for communications both within the Scottish Government and in external agencies. The most common understanding of the definition was that it concerns the use of digital channels to influence people's thoughts and behaviours, with a smaller number who stressed influence on perceptions of Scotland. Policy participants with external

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<sup>46</sup> Scottish Government n=5, External: Agencies and External Bodies n=6. In addition, 1 agency supplied written responses to the core interview questions.

Executive non-departmental public bodies: NatureScot, Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh, Scottish Enterprise; the Improvement Service, classed as an 'other Scottish body', and Universities Scotland, the membership organisation working for the Principals and Directors of Scotland's 19 higher education institutions.

relations responsibilities emphasised their role in soft power and contribution to Scotland's ability to exert international influence.

70. Interviewees were asked which dimensions of digital influence were most important in their work. Two dimensions were universally identified: raising awareness and changing behaviour, with influence over perceptions coming a close third. The dimensions of engagement on specific topics (such as climate change) and the development of productive networks were relevant to the work of a smaller number of interviewees despite the potential they offer to raise the profile of Scotland in relation to issues of common concern, or for Scotland to shape opinion by forming online networks to build coalitions and communities of interest. This last point is relevant to Scotland's attempts to exert influence in multilateral settings where small countries, in particular, need to work with others to achieve results.
71. The target audiences for digital influence were other governments, consumers and individuals, and businesses. The focus on individuals was mostly found in the external agencies, while the Scottish Government focused more on governments, topic-based networks, and multilateral organisations. Engagement with existing stakeholders to further improve the understanding of domestic and international audiences was stressed as an important activity in the conduct of bilateral relations.
72. It is important to understand who Scotland's 'competitors' for influence in the digital space are if it is to develop effective policies and strategies. There was consensus that these were similar-sized countries with similar characteristics including those with highly educated and English speaking populations. However, the countries identified varied depending on the context. In the European Union, the list included Ireland and the Nordic countries. In Asian export markets, Belgium and New Zealand were also significant. The competition for Scotland in these markets was increasing, and came both from comparable exporting countries and from fast-developing local interests. In relation to competition for foreign students, the competition came from English speaking countries with good higher education systems, such as Australia or Canada, and countries offering English language courses such as Germany or the Netherlands. One interesting comment was that in relation to raising awareness among individuals and/or consumers, there was enormous competition for attention from global entertainment media.

73. There were divergent views of the current state of capacity and capability in digital influence.<sup>47</sup> While some expressed that Scotland had been active in the digital space for a long time and was well able to leverage its small scale to achieve results, others also mentioned the need for further skills and capacity building.

74. There was universal support from this second group of interviewees for the development of a strategy for digital influence. Although there is a strategy for international strategic communications and digital plays a role in this, the Scottish Government would benefit from further exploration of the role of digital in the international context.

75. Development of a digital strategy would mean:

75.1 Building greater resources in SG to focus on growing markets, influencing existing stakeholders, raising awareness of Scotland, developing networks, changing perceptions and contributing to the shaping of preferences in favour of Scotland; and

75.2 Increasing coherence between policy and communication activities and between teams.

76. Interviewees were invited to suggest what were Scotland's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats, in relation to digital influence. There was consensus in all areas, with the exception of opportunities, but the differences there were only of the level of ambition, rather than disagreement as to what could be done.

76.1 **Strengths:** Scotland has a high level of recognition for a small country with a strong online brand.

*"...a strength is there is already a good perception or a positive perception of Scotland. So we are building from a good start."  
(Scottish Government official - International Office)*

*"[Scotland has a] ...recognised online brand, where the trust values are high. So, things that we tend to put out, people tend to listen to them and particularly if they're fronted by the First Minister, where she is a strength from a digital perspective."  
(Scottish Government official)*

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<sup>47</sup> This view was expressed in one interview. It is worth noting that the academic literature suggests that small scale may not be an advantage in international relations as the challenges facing small (EU) states are often of an entirely different order to those faced by larger polities and that the lack of resources, especially human resources, is a limiting factor to the ability to change and modernise." [A Research Agenda for Public Administration](#), Randma-Liiv and Sarapuu (2019)

76.2 **Weaknesses:** Two key challenges were identified by interviewees. Firstly, there were issues relating to the strategic coherence and coordination of narratives. Secondly, interviewees suggested that Scotland suffered from a lack of resources compared to ‘competitor’ countries, especially in-country.

*“I think it's the resource constraints in tailor-making campaigns for in-country. I think that is probably the key weakness or it could be a risk there. Actually a risk ... is making sure the comms people, are always linked up to the substance.”*

*(Scottish Government official - International Office)*

*“... a lot of our engagement is one way at the moment. And there are ongoing discussions about that, because it's very much a capacity issue.”*

*(Scottish Government official)*

76.3 **Opportunities:** There were two views. Firstly, there was an evolutionary approach which stressed the need to build on Scotland’s existing reputation and high level of recognition, making better use of existing resources through improved cohesion, and stressing innovation. Secondly, there was a desire to turn the Scottish Government and its agencies into digital-first organisations, capitalising on the digital turn during COVID to build new networks and promote a stronger, more differentiated identity. There was consensus that Scottish Government would need to further build capability in this area.

*“... with the COVID pandemic and everything going digital, I think Scottish government has a real opportunity now to look a bit more into this space and try and find the right platforms or different ways to get more into the digital space. And I think also the Scotland's AI strategy is a good opportunity.”*

*(External agency)*

*“...we could have more cohesion and coordination within the Scottish Government where there are areas where we need to have influence to have a, kind of, multi-channel approach.”*

*(Scottish Government official)*

76.4 **Threats:** There was consensus that cyber security was the principal threat (though only one actual incident was cited<sup>48</sup>).

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<sup>48</sup> See: [Scottish Environment Protection Agency - Cyber Attack](#)

Other threats were mixed and inaccurate messaging, and increased international competition.

*“...cybersecurity. Increased international competition - make sure that our content is up to date, is current, is relevant.”*  
(External agency)

*“Threat to security: thinking we need to do on the extent to which when we're trying to present an accurate, authentic perception of Scotland others are less keen to do so or could actively present a picture that's not accurate or interpret our position on issues in a way that's not accurate. We know how quickly an idea can take hold in the digital space when it's left unchallenged or when it attracts a certain amount of following.”*  
(Scottish Government official)

77. Interviewees were asked how they would describe their current levels of comfort with three elements of digital influence. They were asked first about **digital diplomacy**, identified in the literature review as the most useful concept from which to consider digital influence and the most prominent practice of digital influence in the context of international relations. They were then asked about their familiarity with **social media, as the main tool of digital influence**, to assess the extent to which practitioners increasingly rely on them to inform publics about their activities.<sup>49</sup> Finally, they were asked about their familiarity with the **use of data and analytics to measure impact**.
78. There were variable levels of familiarity with the three concepts, with a clear divide in understanding and comfort levels between those whose roles required them to use social media or analytics in their daily work, and those who did not need to do so. Understanding of digital diplomacy was highest among practitioners of digital communications. In relation to social media and the use of data and analytics, there was a clear divide between specialists who were very familiar with social media and others who were not familiar several reported that they had received training which had helped grow their skills and confidence and communications specialists said that familiarity with digital media tools was a requirement at the recruitment stage.
79. Interviewees were asked to describe their vision of success by suggesting what could have changed in three years' time. There were some differences in emphasis between Scottish Government and external agency staff, but overall there was a sense that Scotland had potential to

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<sup>49</sup> See, for example: Summa, G., 2020. Media@ LSE Working Paper Series.

further increase its digital influence as a way of helping it achieve its international goals.

79.1 **Outcomes:** Scotland would have brought influence to bear on the international stage and there would be an evidence base which would allow Scotland to measure and benchmark that influence. Scottish values would be better understood and better known to international audiences. There would be evidence of successful exercise of influence on specific international partners. Scotland would be recognised as a leading small country where that was the case. Scotland would have better recognition in key markets and that would be translated into economic gains from increased exports and foreign direct investment. Scotland would be seen as an active contributor at a global level.

79.2 **Policy and strategy:** There would be a more coherent approach to influence. Digital influence would be integrated into policy development at all stages. There would be better links between the Scottish Government's domestic and international activities. There would be more emphasis both on high-level strategic communications, narratives and messaging, with a consistent approach to all channels, and on the development of networks of very localised (by country) channels for in-country engagement.

*"Thinking about influence right the way through, from the genesis of policies right the way through to delivery, trying to ensure how we hope to achieve particular influence with other partners internationally and the digital component of that will be the forefront, it will be the part people really are thinking about."  
(Scottish Government official)*

79.3 **Organisational change:** The Scottish Government and its agencies would be 'digital first' organisations, recognising that this would require culture change and adopting a more agile, modern mind set. Digital outputs and social media would be essential tools for the work that everybody in the organisation does. Business and organisational processes from Human Resources to Procurement would support this and there would be a growth in data-driven approaches and the use of analytics and metrics.

*"...if we were able to raise people's awareness of digital influence in this sort of sense and its importance for delivery both internationally and domestically then that would be a good place to be in 3 or 5 years' time."  
(Scottish Government official)*

*“In an ideal world we would have more capacity. The world's a big place, if we were able to have more resources in terms of highlighting that message in key markets ... allow people to focus on what they're brilliant at doing ... equip all of our colleagues to have that confidence that they've got resources to then go out and share to their own networks about the work that we are doing.”*  
*(External agency).*

## Workshop

80. The DIIL team held a workshop with Scottish Government staff on 14 October 2021 to share emerging research findings and discuss options for a strategic approach, including the opportunities, challenges, pros and cons of each option. The workshop aims and the participants were agreed at the inception meeting with the Scottish Government on 7 September.
81. The emerging findings were presented by the DIIL team, who situated the research in the context of the Programme for Government's ambitions for [Scotland in the World](#), that is 'to promote democratic participation at home and abroad, and increase our international standing'. It was noted that these ambitions were extensive and that digital influence, if an integral part of a strategic approach, could support delivery alongside more traditional approaches, especially where resources were limited. It was also noted that Scotland's international ambitions were closely linked to domestic performance.<sup>50</sup>
82. In discussion of the key emerging findings, the workshop agreed that:
- 82.1 The international context was increasingly competitive and fast-changing;
  - 82.2 A coherent Scottish Government digital strategy that took full account of the Scottish Government's international ambitions would help Scotland increase its reach internationally;
  - 82.3 Scotland had strengths, particularly a high level of recognition of its identity;
  - 82.4 Challenges included improving strategic coherence and resources where they really mattered for delivery of international outcomes;
  - 82.5 Scotland's approach to communication could also include a stronger focus on engagement and collaboration;
  - 82.6 There were opportunities to address this and develop more engagement through networks and cooperation on specific topics,

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<sup>50</sup> The pandemic has necessarily changed the way we engage with our international neighbours. But it has also reminded us that the world we live in is fundamentally interconnected, and that we need to work internationally to resolve global problems, whether COVID-19 or the climate crisis. Scotland will retain and enhance an outward looking, international focus, acting as a good global citizen and demonstrating our commitment to democracy, fairness and human rights. We will retain and showcase our distinctive national identity on the world stage, supporting the recovery of Scotland's culture and tourism sectors. We will maintain time-tested friendships with our European neighbours in the aftermath of EU Exit, and seek to re-join the European Union as soon as we can." Executive summary, sourced from: [The Scottish Government - A Fairer, Greener Scotland: Programme for Government 2021-22 \(2021\)](#)



both in-country and through communities of interest. It was also possible to differentiate Scotland more;

- 82.7 In terms of delivery, it would be helpful if there was a higher and more consistent level of understanding of what digital influence was, and why it mattered, across the Scottish Government and its agencies. Work needed to be done to integrate digital into policy-making, to develop the channels, platforms, tools and metrics needed for effective international engagement, especially to develop a better understanding of international audiences; and
- 82.8 There was a recognition that change was inevitable and that Scotland should be ambitious in its thinking and planning.

83. The workshop also discussed the different approaches that were required for bilateral and multilateral engagement. It was noted that the former required a substantial level of local knowledge and a long-term commitment. The latter offered new possibilities for online engagement as digital was particularly important in such contexts where the numbers of stakeholders, information flows, and networks of influence were much greater, and potentially global in scope.

84. Three options were presented:

84.1 **Status quo:** Work continues as at present.

84.2 **Evolutionary change:** Building on current strengths, developing a more strategic approach based on incremental improvements in capacity and capability.

84.3 **Transformational change:** Recognising that COVID has accelerated the adoption of digital transformation approaches worldwide, and developing a Whole-Government strategic approach to creating, executing, and adjusting strategy.

85. The workshop concluded by agreeing that the status quo was not a satisfactory option. Change was needed given the fast-changing international and technological environment, and transformational change would potentially be optimal. There were, however, resource constraints that had to be considered in deciding on the best approach going forward.

86. It was suggested that one productive element of the way forward could be to identify a pilot project where digital influence was one of the initial core objectives from the start. The pilot could demonstrate a commitment to move beyond the status quo but not require the resources warranted by an immediate commitment to change. In the view of DIIL, the opening of new Scottish Government Offices overseas could be a good opportunity to develop that pilot.

## International Case Studies

87. To further consider the current status of Scotland's digital influence in an international context, two countries, Switzerland and Denmark, were identified for purposes of comparison. The comparison does not consider all aspects of these countries' activities, rather it focuses on 2 case studies:

87.1 Switzerland's 'Coherent foreign policy in the digital space', the Digital Foreign Policy Strategy 2021–2024;<sup>51</sup> and

87.2 Denmark's 'Tech for Democracy' initiative (2021).<sup>52</sup>

88. Today, several countries including Denmark and Switzerland are developing, or have developed, digital foreign policy strategies.<sup>53</sup> These countries are predominantly of the type of country identified in the interviews as 'competitors' for Scotland, for example Canada, the Netherlands and Norway.

89. A comprehensive digital foreign policy strategy is a strategy document that outlines a country's approach to digital issues and digitisation in relation to its foreign policy. It touches on numerous digital issues and connects the dots between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other ministries and key stakeholders. It also outlines areas of policy priorities on digitisation and how these priorities are pursued as part of the country's foreign policy.

### Switzerland

90. Since the launch of Switzerland's [Foreign Policy Strategy 2020–23](#), digital has been one of Switzerland's four foreign policy priorities. The reason for this is that digitalisation is seen as improving the coherence of Switzerland's foreign policy strategy.

91. The Policy has four focus areas:

91.1 Strengthening of international governance and cooperation forums;

91.2 Digital self-determination for individual users;

91.3 International law; and

91.4 The use of digitalisation to improve international cooperation.

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<sup>51</sup> See: [Switzerland Federal Department of Foreign Affairs - Coherent foreign policy in the digital space \(2020\)](#)

<sup>52</sup> See: [The Tech for Democracy Initiative](#)

<sup>53</sup> See: [Diplo - Digital foreign policy](#)

92. Digital also played a large part in Switzerland's '[Strategy for Communication Abroad](#)' which aimed to promote Switzerland's international image abroad and help safeguard its best interests. It also aimed to raise the profile of Swiss businesses in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic through communication and networking platforms.
93. The Digital Foreign Policy Strategy 2021-24 builds on the earlier policy, which itself was developed from a 2017 mandate to explore '*how Switzerland could become the global epicentre of international governance in the area of cyberspace*'. It therefore aims to '*raise Switzerland's profile in the area of digital governance, further develop its digital foreign policy and position International Geneva as a prime location for discussing digitalisation and technology*'. The strategy is framed as a response to the [UN Secretary General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation](#) and sets out the actions Switzerland will take in its digital foreign policy in the next few years.
94. The strategy recognises that digital is a new area for Swiss foreign policy, but it is presented as a continuation of Switzerland's proven approach to protecting its interests and promoting its values in a new 'space'. As the strategy says:
- "The main aim of Switzerland's foreign policy is to promote its interests and values, as set out in the Federal Constitution. These interests and values do not change with the emergence of new technologies or the progress of digitalisation."*<sup>54</sup>
95. The Swiss strategy emphasises the benefits of a Whole-Government approach, building on cooperation between ministries and agencies. It also explicitly mentions capacity building in a foreign policy context and specifically emphasises that countries 'must have the necessary capacities, which include both the ability to develop strategies and policies as well as specific technical expertise' in order to reap the benefits of digitisation.<sup>55</sup> The main learning for Scotland from the Swiss approach is that a digital foreign policy can help to deliver domestic benefits while raising international profile and promoting Scottish values.

## Denmark

96. Digitalisation and technology are strategic priorities in Danish foreign and development policy. It is an area where Denmark aims to help set the

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<sup>54</sup> Digital Foreign Policy Strategy 2021-24, p.5.

<sup>55</sup> See: [Diplo - Digital Foreign Policy](#)

global foreign and development policy agenda. Their approach is “*based on our values, principles and experiences with a highly digitalised public sector*”.<sup>56</sup>

97. Denmark positioned itself pro-actively with the launch of its “[TechPlomacy](#)” initiative, and the appointment of the world’s first Tech Ambassador based originally in Silicon Valley (2017) but today with offices in Copenhagen and Beijing, with a global team and mandate. The TechPlomacy initiative aimed to focus efforts on achieving a safer and more just technological future.
98. Tech for Democracy is completely in line with the wider aims of TechPlomacy. It aim to bring together “*states, multilateral organizations, tech sector representatives, and civil society to power up a multi-stakeholder push for protecting and promoting democracy and human rights in an era of rapid technological development.*”<sup>57</sup> The initiative consists of an initial virtual conference to be held in November 2021. This will initiate a multi-stakeholder dialogue and lay the ground for a year of action before a high-level physical conference in Copenhagen in June 2022, which in turn will take stock of progress and provide a platform for raising commitments to strengthening digital democracy as a stepping-stone to the second [US Summit for Democracy](#), a summit for leaders from government, civil society and the private sector focussed on challenges and opportunities facing democracies.<sup>58</sup>
99. This initiative is a good example of how a small country can influence global discourse through a strategic approach using digital diplomacy and recognising that digital transformation and influence are core topics of contemporary international relations. As such, they are the subjects and objects of external relations as well as the means by which these are conducted.
100. Denmark’s tech diplomacy is based on six roles:
  - 100.1 A representative of the Danish government and the central administration who deals with the global tech industry (the ‘Tech Ambassador’);
  - 100.2 An adviser who combines knowledge of technological developments, endorses innovation, and promotes technology as an issue of relevance for the foreign and security policy agenda;

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<sup>56</sup> See: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark - Denmark at the digital forefront](#)

<sup>57</sup> See: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark - The Tech for Democracy initiative](#)

<sup>58</sup> President Biden opened the first Copenhagen Democracy Summit in 2018. See: [Alliance of Democracies - 2018 Copenhagen Democracy Summit](#) . The relationship between technology and democracy was a theme of the Summit.

- 100.3 A convener and coalition builder with global stakeholders, including other countries, the private sector, international organisations, and civil society;
- 100.4 A contributor, who shares expertise and insight with the Danish public on technological development and the impact of tech companies;
- 100.5 A policy developer who contributes to the development of Danish solutions to global challenges; and
- 100.6 A Global Champion who sheds light on Denmark's role as a digital pioneer and promotes Danish tech exports and foreign investment in Denmark.

101. The strategy recognises that the priority is the welfare of Danish citizens, as decisions made by the global tech industry have an impact on the lives of Danish people. The strategy therefore aims to gain insight into how citizens perceive technology through annual polls. It also organises public events to raise awareness of the benefits and challenges of new technologies, and includes multiple stakeholders in discussions on tech issues. It particularly highlights the need to include marginalised groups.

102. There are potential lessons for Scotland from Denmark's engagement with technology in its external relations. By doing so, Denmark, as a small nation, has achieved a status and influence that is globally recognised. In mid-2017, Denmark became the first country in the world to elevate technology and digitalisation to a crosscutting foreign and security policy priority. Other countries have followed suit including the UK which appointed its first Tech Envoy in 2020.<sup>59</sup> Denmark is also committed, as noted above, to values (democracy) through its tech diplomacy.

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<sup>59</sup> See: [UK Government - Joe White appointed HM Consul-General, San Francisco, and Technology Envoy to the USA \(2020\)](#)

## Conclusions

103. Today, while face-to-face diplomacy remains the cornerstone of international engagement, **digital diplomacy is an essential complement**, assistance, or substitute for face-to-face exchange even during traditional diplomatic activities such as negotiations or crisis response.
104. Digital diplomacy is the most useful lens through which the Scottish Government can think about developing a strategy for digital influence. As the literature review describes, digital diplomacy is conceptualised along dimensions which are **already central to what the Scottish Government** wants to achieve internationally:
- 104.1 The need to reach target audiences, gain their attention, and establish connections;
  - 104.2 The need to understand and engage with who, or what organisation, is influential, in which context;
  - 104.3 The desire to set agendas and shape the direction of policy debates;
  - 104.4 Being actively engaged in relevant topics of interest in the specific contexts in which the Scottish Government operates; and
  - 104.5 Building productive networks through which Scotland can engage in sustained conversations and through which Scotland's views can resonate with international audiences.
105. Digital diplomacy is necessary in today's world.<sup>60</sup> **State and non-state entities all compete for influence** and power in the same online space: *“When used properly, digital diplomacy is a persuasive and timely supplement to traditional diplomacy that can help a country advance its foreign policy goals, extend international reach, and influence people who will never set foot in any of the world's embassies”*.<sup>61</sup>
106. As the Scottish Government delivers the Programme for Government 2021-22, with its aim of enhancing Scotland's international reputation and attractiveness as a place to live, work, study, visit and do business, it should build effective, measurable and implementable strategies for digital influence to serve, influence and mobilise its international audiences. **To**

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<sup>60</sup> Olubukola S. Adesina | James Summers (Reviewing Editor) (2017) Foreign policy in an era of digital diplomacy, Cogent Social Sciences, 3:1, DOI: [10.1080/23311886.2017.1297175](https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2017.1297175)

<sup>61</sup> Lowy Interpreter. (2015). [Does Australia do digital diplomacy?](#)

**do this, it needs to build its capacity and capability to practice, monitor and evaluate digital diplomacy.**

107. In addition, **digital foreign policy**, which aims to shape the governance of digital issues, is another dimension of increasing international interest. Similar countries to Scotland, and with whom Scotland competes for influence in some areas are highly active in this space (this report looks at Denmark and Switzerland).

108. The Diplo Foundation, a Swiss-based non-governmental organisation specialising in Internet governance and digital diplomacy, describes the reasons why digital foreign policy matters<sup>62</sup>:

108.1 Changes in the political, social, and economic environment in which diplomacy is conducted;

108.2 The emergence of new policy issues in foreign policy such as cybersecurity, privacy, data governance, e-commerce, and cybercrime; and

108.3 The use of digital tools in the practice of diplomacy such as social media, online conferencing, and big data analysis (digital diplomacy).

109. There are, therefore, reasons why it is in the interests of Scotland, in any digital influence strategy, to address both the **wider digital foreign policy and digital diplomacy agendas**. Global digital governance debates and decisions impact on every aspect of modern life, and they have long-term commercial and political implications. There is also an ongoing contest between democratic and illiberal actors, with each side seeking to impart its vision on the digital economy<sup>63</sup>.

110. [The Scottish Government's Programme for Government 2021-22](#) explicitly links **Scotland's international engagement** to values: support for democracy, sustainable development, human rights, future-thinking, and acting as a good global citizen. These are all areas where Scotland, through the development of a digital foreign policy, could potentially contribute to and help shape bilateral relations with like-minded countries such as Denmark and Switzerland that are already active in this space. They also present opportunities for participation in multilateral contexts such as the [European Union](#), the [Council of Europe](#), [the Organisation for Economic Co-operation](#) (OECD), and possibly with global organisations

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<sup>62</sup> See: [Diplo - 2021: The emergence of digital foreign policy \(2021\)](#)

<sup>63</sup> See: [Centre for Strategic and International Studies - Global Digital Governance: Here's What You Need to Know \(2021\)](#)

such as the [United Nations Conference on Trade and Development \(UNCTAD\)](#).

111. The Programme for Government also commits the Scottish Government to a range of **policy actions that would require digital diplomacy and digital tools in the practice of external relations**: enhancing Scotland's economy and international competitiveness, increasing support for international development, showcasing Scotland internationally and, crucially for this report, the strengthening of diplomatic ties and international presence – establishing new offices in Copenhagen and Warsaw, and reviewing approaches to future policy and economic engagement to enhance Scotland's global reach and presence.
112. The interview evidence supported the idea of developing an **explicit strategy for digital diplomacy**, based on a greater coherence between policy, communications and influence activities.
113. Evidence is starting to emerge that a **co-ordinated approach would bring benefits**. The joint-working approach of Brand Scotland is starting to deliver improvements in terms of awareness and reach.<sup>64</sup> While the evidence is still emerging, and relates only to the areas covered by Brand Scotland (live, work, visit, study, business), it indicates that increased co-ordination does bring results that could potentially be replicated in relation to other policy goals.
114. Any such strategy would of course have to **recognise the constraints of resources**. This is not necessarily the barrier that it first appears. The literature review and interviews confirmed that there are considerable areas of existing expertise in the Scottish Government and its agencies, and a great deal of positive commitment. There are actions which can be undertaken within existing resources, such as improving processes that support digital influence, including work to develop an explicit strategic communications narrative to provide global consistency of messaging, and support context-specific engagement, and supporting measures to improve agility.
115. There is also **considerable digital expertise and resources in Scotland outside Government** (in universities and business) which a strategy could leverage and aggregate in support of both a digital foreign policy and a digital diplomacy strategy.
116. **Scotland has the potential to address its digital influencing goals**. The question is whether the many opportunities that were identified to maintain, further develop or expand bilateral relationships, increase

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<sup>64</sup> See: [City Nation Place - Launching Brand Scotland \(2021\)](#)



Scotland's impact on international decision-making, to continue developing productive networks and delivering improved outcomes for the people of Scotland can be taken. To do so, this report proposes a number of recommendations.

# Recommendations

117. Based on the literature review, interviews, workshop and evidence from comparator countries, we have identified two areas with a number of sub-themes where Scotland can make practical progress in developing an effective strategy for digital influence. The recommendations expressed in this report are those of the DIIL team. The report does not represent the views or intentions of the Scottish Government.

## Part 1 – Policy and Strategy to Enhance Scotland’s Influence

We recommend the development of a 2-part policy and strategy for Scotland’s digital influence. This will require further research (see part II), but should include the following elements as identified in this report:

### 1. Digital Diplomacy

- 1.1 Digital diplomacy should be integral to all policy and strategy development for international engagement.
- 1.2 A lead official in the External Affairs area of the Scottish Government should be identified, who will be responsible for the development of a digital diplomacy strategy for Scotland.
- 1.3 The scope of this strategy would be all aspects of the use of digital technology for the practice of international relations, specifically: **people** – building the capacity and capability of the Scottish Government and its agencies to think and work digitally; **processes** – ensuring coherence, agility, and the use of digital methods and research to understand audiences, and analyse impact and performance; **technology** – deploying the most effective digital tools and methods to deliver results. The strategy would include short, medium and longer term goals set out in a delivery plan.
- 1.4 Priority should be given to ensuring more overall coherence between policy and communications, improving alignment between Scottish Government and in-country work, and improving understanding of targets for influence and international audiences.
- 1.5 The strategy should also include work to develop consistent metrics and analytics, and the adoption of appropriate ethical and cyber security measures from the start.
- 1.6 The lead official should be supported by a team with relevant skills and experience, and their work should be adequately resourced.
- 1.7 The strategy should be based on a culture of innovation and experimentation, recognising the fast-changing nature of the field.

- 1.8 A series of pilot initiatives should be developed to clarify the need and establish what specific next steps should be taken. These should be aligned with the aims and initiatives identified in the Programme for Government. Where it is possible to cross-refer to other areas of Scotland's plans for international engagement where these involve the potential for digital diplomacy, such as diaspora engagement.

## **2. A Digital approach to External Relations**

- 2.1 The Scottish Government should develop an explicit strategy for its digital approach to external relations. Given the strategic nature of this proposal, the multiple stakeholders involved, and that any such policy should be pursued to benefit the people of Scotland domestically through international engagement. This work should be led by a Ministerial Working Group.
- 2.2 Work to identify the areas where Scotland could derive the greatest benefit, aligned with the aims of the Programme for Government, could begin now.
- 2.3 A senior lead official in the External Affairs area of the Scottish Government should be identified, who will be responsible for the development of a digital approach to external relations and strategy for Scotland.
- 2.4 The lead official should be supported by a team with relevant skills and experience, and their work should be resourced.
- 2.5 A series of pilot initiatives should be developed and evaluated urgently to identify the need and establish what specific next steps should be taken. One specific suggestion is to take advantage of the opening of the new Copenhagen office, to engage with Denmark on its Tech for Democracy project.

## **Part 2 – Further Research**

### **3. We recommend conducting further research to fill evidence gaps, specifically:**

- 3.1 Review Scotland's existing strengths and gaps to establish baselines from which progress in relation to both digital diplomacy and digital foreign policy can be measured. This baseline would include the Scottish Government, public bodies, higher education and business.
- 3.2 Benchmark Scotland against international 'competitors', especially those countries recognised as leading in the areas of digital diplomacy and digital foreign policy, those with whom Scotland competes for international markets or for influence in

multilateral fora (recognising that they can be the same countries).

- 3.3 Identify what digital diplomacy and digital foreign policy can contribute to Scotland's influence in priority bilateral and multilateral contexts.
- 3.4 Evaluate the pilot projects (recommendation 2.5 above).
- 3.5 Research to identify what priorities should be for a digital foreign policy strategy, including leveraging such a strategy to deliver benefits for the people of Scotland, international networks and organisations that it would be productive for Scotland to participate in and help shape debate and decision-making in support of the goals of the Programme for Government.

# Appendix A: Interview Guide

## DIGITAL INFLUENCE PROJECT: PROFORMA FOR INTERVIEWS

1. What is your role and what part does digital influence play in it?
2. What do you understand by digital influence?
3. To what extent does your work involve:
  - a. Raising awareness
  - b. Changing perceptions
  - c. Engaging on specific topics
  - d. Building productive networks
  - e. Changing decision-making or behaviour
4. Who is it that you would like to influence, why, and to do what (in broad terms)?
5. Who are you competing with for attention in the digital space?
6. What analysis and evaluation do you do of your engagement – are there any metrics?
7. How would you describe your current capacity and capability as an organisation in relation to digital influence?
8. What do you see as Scotland's main digital influence:
  - a. Strengths
  - b. Weaknesses
  - c. Opportunities
  - d. Threats
9. How familiar and confident are you personally with:
  - a. Digital diplomacy
  - b. Social media
  - c. The use of data and analytics
10. If everything goes well, what will your organisation's use of digital influence look like in 3 years' time?

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