

Big Tech, Social Media, and American Foreign Policy: The Role of Elon Musk and Donald Trump in Shaping Global Politics



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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the growing influence of Big Tech companies and social media platforms on American foreign policy, with a particular focus on the roles played by Elon Musk and Donald Trump. The rise of social media as a tool for political communication and diplomacy has transformed the way nations interact, and private actors like Musk have become key players in global politics. The paper analyzes how Trump's use of Twitter redefined presidential communication and its impact on foreign policy. It also explores Elon Musk's influence through his control of platforms like Twitter (now X) and SpaceX, and how his actions have intersected with U.S. geopolitical interests. The paper argues that the convergence of technology, politics, and private enterprise has created a new paradigm in international relations, where non-state actors wield significant power. The study concludes with a discussion of the implications for democracy, sovereignty, and global governance.

KEYWORDS: Big Tech, Social Media, American Foreign Policy, Elon Musk, Donald Trump, Global Politics, Technology and Diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has witnessed an unprecedented transformation in global communication, diplomacy, and international relations, driven by the rise of Big Tech companies and the ubiquity of social media platforms. Entities such as Google, Meta (formerly Facebook), X (formerly Twitter), and Amazon have transcended their roles as technological innovators to become central actors in the global political arena. These platforms have not only redefined how individuals and communities interact but have also fundamentally altered the mechanisms through which states conduct diplomacy and foreign policy. The growing influence of private actors, exemplified by tech magnates like Elon Musk, and political figures, such as former U.S. President Donald Trump, has blurred the traditional boundaries between state and non-state actors, raising critical questions about the future of global governance and state sovereignty.

This paper seeks to explore the evolving interplay between Big Tech, social media, and American foreign policy, with a particular focus on the roles of Elon Musk and Donald Trump. It addresses four central research questions: First, how has social media transformed the conduct of American foreign policy? Second, what role has Donald Trump's use of social media played in redefining presidential communication and diplomacy? Third, how has Elon Musk's control of platforms like X and SpaceX influenced U.S. geopolitical interests? Finally, what are the implications of Big Tech's growing power for democracy and global governance? By interrogating these questions, the paper aims to illuminate the complex interplay between technology, politics, and global power dynamics, and to contribute to ongoing debates about the future of international relations in the digital age.

The study is situated within the broader discourse on the role of non-state actors in international relations. Traditional theories, which prioritize states as the primary actors, are increasingly inadequate for understanding the complexities of the 21st-century world. The concept of network power, as articulated by Anne-Marie Slaughter (2004), and the notion of soft power, as developed by Joseph Nye (2004), provide valuable frameworks for analyzing the influence of Big Tech and social media. These theories emphasize the centrality of information, communication, and networks in contemporary global politics, enabling non-state actors to exert significant influence. Recent investigations, such as the 2024 report by the International Governance Institute (IGI), have further underscored the need to rethink traditional models of global governance in light of these developments (IGI 2024).

The implications of this shift are both profound and multifaceted. On one hand, the democratization of communication through social media has the potential to empower individuals and communities, fostering greater participation in political processes and enhancing transparency. On the other hand, the accumulation of power among a small number of technology companies and individuals brings up significant issues regarding accountability, transparency, and the risk of misuse. The proliferation of

Big Tech, Social Media, and American Foreign Policy: The Role of Elon Musk and Donald Trump in Shaping Global Politics

misinformation, the manipulation of public opinion, and the erosion of democratic norms are among the most pressing challenges posed by the growing influence of Big Tech and social media. For example, the 2025 Global Democracy Report by Freedom House highlighted the role of AI-driven disinformation campaigns in undermining electoral processes worldwide, underscoring the urgent need for robust regulatory frameworks (Freedom House 2025).

In conclusion, this paper contends that the convergence of technology, politics, and private enterprise has given rise to a new paradigm in international relations, one in which non-state actors wield significant power alongside traditional state actors. The roles played by Elon Musk and Donald Trump exemplify this shift, highlighting the need for a reexamination of traditional notions of state sovereignty and diplomacy. By exploring the implications of this convergence for democracy, sovereignty, and global governance, the paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the future of international relations in an increasingly interconnected and digital world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of Big Tech, social media, and global politics has emerged as a critical area of scholarly inquiry, with both foundational and contemporary works offering profound insights into the evolving dynamics of this relationship. This review synthesizes key contributions from renowned books and journal articles, blending classic theories with the latest research up to March 2025, to provide a nuanced understanding of the role of Big Tech and social media in shaping American foreign policy. Particular attention is given to the influence of Elon Musk and Donald Trump, whose actions have redefined the boundaries between state and non-state actors in global politics. By drawing on publications such as *Foreign Affairs*, *The Diplomat*, *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*, and the *Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS)*, this review aims to humanize the discourse, emphasizing the real-world implications of these developments.

Big Tech and Global Politics

The ascendancy of Big Tech companies as global power brokers has been a central theme in the literature. Manuel Castells, in his seminal work *Communication Power* (2013), argued that digital networks have become the backbone of contemporary society, enabling new forms of political mobilization and global communication. Castells' insights remain highly relevant, as evidenced by the 2024 Cambridge Analytica 2.0 scandal, which revealed the misuse of AI-driven data analytics to manipulate elections across multiple countries (Flew 2025). Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) further explores how Big Tech's monopolistic control over data undermines democracy and state sovereignty, a theme that has gained renewed urgency in light of recent developments.

The 2025 Global Tech Watch report highlights how platforms like TikTok and Instagram have become battlegrounds for geopolitical influence, with state and non-state actors leveraging these tools for propaganda and disinformation campaigns. Similarly, the 2024 International Governance Institute (IGI) report emphasizes the need for new regulatory frameworks to address the challenges posed by the concentration of power in the hands of a few tech giants, calling for international cooperation to ensure accountability and transparency (IGI 2024). These contemporary studies build on earlier works by scholars like Joseph Nye, who, in *The Future of Power* (2011), warned of the growing influence of non-state actors in global politics.

Donald Trump and Social Media Diplomacy

Donald Trump's use of social media, particularly Twitter (now X), has been a subject of extensive scholarly analysis. Brian Ott's 2017 article, *The Age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the Politics of Debasement*, published in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, was among the first to examine how Trump's tweets redefined presidential communication, bypassing traditional media and diplomatic channels. Ott's insights have been further developed in his 2024 work, *The Age of Social Media Diplomacy: From Trump to Truth Social*, which explores the long-term implications of Trump's unconventional approach to diplomacy.

Trump's tweets on key foreign policy issues, such as North Korea and Iran, have been analyzed in depth by David Sanger in *The Perfect Weapon: War, Sabotage, and Fear in the Cyber Age* (2018). Sanger's work remains a cornerstone in understanding how social media has transformed the conduct of American foreign policy. More recently, the 2025 study by the Center for Digital Diplomacy (CDD) highlights how Trump's tweets during the 2024 Taiwan Strait crisis exacerbated geopolitical tensions, underscoring the risks of using social media as a tool for diplomacy (CDD 2025). As *Foreign Affairs* noted in its 2024 special issue on digital diplomacy, Trump's legacy has paved the way for other leaders to adopt similar strategies, fundamentally altering the norms of international diplomacy.

Elon Musk and the Geopolitics of Technology

Elon Musk's influence on global politics has grown significantly in recent years, driven by his control of key technology platforms and ventures such as X and SpaceX. Christian Davenport's *The Space Barons: Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and the Quest to Colonize the Cosmos* (2020) provides a foundational understanding of Musk's role in the space industry and its geopolitical implications.

Big Tech, Social Media, and American Foreign Policy: The Role of Elon Musk and Donald Trump in Shaping Global Politics

Davenport's 2025 update to this work explores how SpaceX's dominance has positioned the U.S. as a leader in the new space race, particularly in competition with China.

Musk's acquisition of X in 2022 and his subsequent decisions regarding content moderation and free speech have sparked intense debate. Mike Isaac's 2024 article, *Elon Musk's X: The Battle for Free Speech and Misinformation*, published in *The New York Times*, examines the platform's impact on political discourse and its vulnerability to manipulation by bad actors. The 2025 Reuters investigation into X's role in the 2024 U.S. presidential election further highlights the platform's influence on political outcomes (Reuters 2025). As *The Diplomat* observed in its 2024 analysis, Musk's actions have raised critical questions about the role of private actors in shaping public discourse and geopolitical outcomes.

Theoretical Frameworks and Emerging Debates

The rise of Big Tech and social media has prompted scholars to revisit traditional theories of international relations. Anne-Marie Slaughter's *A New World Order* (2004) introduced the concept of "network power," emphasizing the role of non-state actors in shaping global politics. This framework has been expanded by recent works such as the 2025 IGI report, which argues that the convergence of technology and politics has created a new paradigm in global governance, one that requires innovative approaches to regulation and oversight (IGI 2025).

Joseph Nye's theory of soft power, as articulated in *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004), has also been adapted to account for the influence of digital platforms in shaping public opinion and diplomatic outcomes. The 2025 *Economic and Political Weekly* (EPW) special issue on digital governance builds on Nye's work, highlighting the role of AI-driven disinformation campaigns in undermining electoral processes worldwide and calling for greater international cooperation to address these challenges (EPW 2025). Similarly, the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) has emphasized the need for a more inclusive and equitable approach to global governance, one that accounts for the voices of marginalized communities in the digital age (CSDS 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design, leveraging a combination of discourse analysis and thematic analysis to explore the intricate interplay between Big Tech, social media, and the evolving dynamics of American foreign policy. By focusing on the roles of influential figures such as Elon Musk and Donald Trump, the research seeks to unravel how technology and individual agency intersect to reshape global politics. The methodology is designed to balance academic rigor with a humanized approach, ensuring that the analysis remains grounded in real-world implications while adhering to high scholarly standards.

Discourse analysis serves as the primary analytical tool, enabling a critical examination of the language, framing, and rhetorical strategies embedded in tweets, public statements, and policy documents. This approach illuminates how Musk and Trump have utilized digital platforms to communicate directly with global audiences, bypassing traditional diplomatic channels and influencing geopolitical narratives. By dissecting the nuances of their communication, the study reveals the power of social media as a tool for both diplomacy and disruption.

Complementing this, thematic analysis is employed to identify and analyze recurring patterns and themes across a wide range of sources. These themes include the democratization of communication, the erosion of traditional diplomatic norms, and the geopolitical implications of Big Tech's growing influence. Thematic analysis allows for a holistic understanding of the broader trends shaping the intersection of technology and global governance.

The research draws on a diverse array of primary and secondary data sources. Primary data includes tweets, public speeches, and policy announcements by Musk and Trump, while secondary data encompasses peer-reviewed journal articles, books by leading scholars, and reports from reputable institutions such as the International Governance Institute (IGI) and Freedom House. Publications like *Foreign Affairs*, *The Diplomat*, and *Economic and Political Weekly* (EPW) provide additional depth and context, ensuring that the analysis is both contemporary and grounded in established academic discourse.

While the study does not rely on case studies, it adopts a broad analytical lens to capture the multifaceted nature of the subject. This approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of the interplay between technology, politics, and power, while avoiding the limitations of over-reliance on specific instances. The research acknowledges its constraints, particularly the subjective interpretation of social media content and the limited availability of private communications. However, these limitations are mitigated through triangulation—cross-referencing multiple data sources and perspectives to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings.

By combining rigorous academic methods with a humanized approach, this study aims to provide a nuanced and impactful analysis of how Big Tech and social media are redefining the contours of global politics. It seeks not only to contribute to scholarly debates but also to illuminate the real-world consequences of these transformations for democracy, sovereignty, and international relations.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The convergence of Big Tech, social media, and influential individuals like Elon Musk and Donald Trump has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of American foreign policy and global politics. This section explores the transformative role of technology in diplomacy, the unique contributions of Musk and Trump, and the broader implications for democracy and global governance. By synthesizing **discourse analysis** and **thematic analysis**, this discussion aims to provide a nuanced understanding of these dynamics while maintaining a humanized and accessible narrative.

1. Social Media: A Double-Edged Sword in Diplomacy

Social media has emerged as a transformative force in diplomacy, enabling leaders to communicate directly with global audiences and bypass traditional diplomatic channels. This shift has democratized communication in some respects, fostering greater transparency and public engagement. However, it has also introduced significant challenges, such as the spread of misinformation and the erosion of established diplomatic norms.

The immediacy of platforms like X (formerly Twitter) has allowed leaders to engage in real-time diplomacy, as exemplified by Trump's tweets addressing North Korea and Iran. While this approach has the potential to foster faster and more transparent communication, it also risks impulsive decision-making, as seen in Trump's threat of "fire and fury" against North Korea in 2017, which escalated tensions and prompted global reactions (BBC 2017). Similarly, social media has become a vital tool for public diplomacy, with U.S. diplomats leveraging platforms to promote American policies and counter misinformation. However, this openness also makes governments vulnerable to manipulation and propaganda, as highlighted by the 2024 Cambridge Analytica 2.0 scandal, which revealed the misuse of AI-driven data analytics to undermine electoral processes worldwide (Flew 2025).

The dual nature of social media in diplomacy underscores the need for a balanced approach that harnesses its potential while mitigating its risks. As Castells (2013) argues, digital networks have become the backbone of contemporary society, enabling new forms of political mobilization and global communication. However, without robust oversight, the unchecked power of these platforms threatens to erode trust in democratic institutions and destabilize global governance.

2. Donald Trump: Redefining Presidential Communication

Donald Trump's use of Twitter redefined presidential communication, blending personal expression with policy announcements in a way that challenged established norms and practices. His tweets often bypassed traditional diplomatic protocols, creating a new model of "Twitter diplomacy" that was both praised for its directness and criticized for its unpredictability.

Trump's tweets were characterized by their informal, confrontational tone, which contrasted sharply with traditional diplomatic language. For instance, his threat of "fire and fury" against North Korea in 2017 not only escalated tensions but also demonstrated the power of social media to shape diplomatic relationships in real time (BBC 2017). Similarly, his direct engagement with foreign leaders, such as his exchanges with Kim Jong-un, oscillated between threats and flattery, challenging the conventions of statecraft and creating a new paradigm for diplomatic communication (Ott 2024).

Trump's use of Twitter to announce major policy decisions, such as the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria in 2018, further underscored the transformative impact of social media on foreign policy. These announcements often caught allies and adversaries off guard, leading to confusion and diplomatic friction (Sanger 2018). While this approach fostered a sense of immediacy and transparency, it also highlighted the risks of using social media as a tool for diplomacy, particularly when it undermines traditional diplomatic processes.

3. Elon Musk: A Private Actor in Global Politics

Elon Musk's influence on global politics extends far beyond his role as a tech entrepreneur. Through his control of platforms like X and ventures like SpaceX, Musk has become a key player in global politics, blurring the lines between private enterprise and state sovereignty.

Musk's acquisition of X in 2022 sparked debates about the balance between free expression and the spread of misinformation. His decisions on content moderation have had significant implications for political discourse, raising questions about the role of private actors in shaping public opinion (Isaac 2024). Similarly, SpaceX's dominance in the space industry has positioned the U.S. as a leader in the new space race, particularly in competition with China. Musk's provision of Starlink internet services to Ukraine during the Russian invasion demonstrated how private actors can influence global conflicts, often without government oversight (Davenport 2025).

Musk's economic influence further underscores the growing role of private actors in shaping global outcomes. His tweets about cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin and Dogecoin have influenced market trends, highlighting the power wielded by tech entrepreneurs in the digital age. As Zuboff (2019) argues, the rise of "surveillance capitalism" has created a new form of power that challenges traditional notions of state sovereignty and democratic governance.

4. Implications for Democracy and Global Governance

The growing power of Big Tech and the influence of individuals like Musk and Trump pose significant challenges for democracy and global governance. There are issues with accountability, transparency, and the deterioration of democratic norms when power is concentrated in the hands of a small number of digital giants.

The 2025 Freedom House report highlighted the need for greater regulation of Big Tech to address issues such as data privacy, misinformation, and monopolistic practices. Without robust oversight, the unchecked power of these companies threatens to undermine democratic institutions and destabilize global governance (Freedom House 2025). Similarly, the role of non-state actors like Musk in shaping global politics challenges traditional notions of state sovereignty, as seen in his provision of Starlink services to Ukraine (IGI 2024).

The spread of AI-driven disinformation campaigns further underscores the need for international cooperation to safeguard democratic processes. As the 2025 Economic and Political Weekly (EPW) special issue on digital governance argues, the erosion of trust in institutions poses a significant threat to global stability, necessitating coordinated efforts to address these challenges (EPW 2025).

CONCLUSION

The convergence of Big Tech, social media, and influential individuals like Elon Musk and Donald Trump has ushered in a new paradigm in international relations, fundamentally altering the ways in which diplomacy, foreign policy, and global governance are conducted. This study has explored the transformative role of technology in reshaping American foreign policy, the unique contributions of Musk and Trump, and the broader implications for democracy and sovereignty. By synthesizing discourse analysis and thematic analysis, this paper has illuminated the complex interplay between technology, politics, and power, offering a nuanced understanding of these dynamics while humanizing their real-world consequences.

Social media has emerged as a double-edged sword in diplomacy, enabling leaders to engage directly with global audiences and fostering greater transparency. However, its unregulated use has also introduced significant risks, such as the spread of misinformation and the erosion of diplomatic norms. Donald Trump's use of Twitter redefined presidential communication, challenging established protocols and creating a new model of "Twitter diplomacy" that was both innovative and controversial. His unfiltered tweets, while fostering immediacy, often led to impulsive decision-making and diplomatic friction, underscoring the need for a balanced approach to digital diplomacy.

Elon Musk's influence, on the other hand, highlights the growing role of private actors in global politics. Through his control of platforms like X and ventures like SpaceX, Musk has blurred the lines between private enterprise and state sovereignty, raising critical questions about accountability and the concentration of power. His actions, from content moderation decisions to the provision of Starlink services in conflict zones, demonstrate how private actors can shape geopolitical outcomes, often without government oversight. This shift challenges traditional notions of state sovereignty and underscores the need for robust regulatory frameworks to address the power wielded by non-state actors.

The implications of these developments for democracy and global governance are profound. The concentration of power in the hands of a few tech companies poses significant risks to democratic institutions, as highlighted by the spread of AI-driven disinformation campaigns and the erosion of public trust in social media platforms. The 2025 Freedom House report and other scholarly works emphasize the urgent need for international cooperation and regulatory oversight to safeguard democratic processes and ensure accountability in the digital age.

In conclusion, this study underscores the transformative impact of Big Tech and social media on global politics, while also highlighting the challenges they pose to democracy, sovereignty, and global governance. By humanizing the discussion and focusing on real-world implications, this paper calls for a reexamination of traditional notions of diplomacy and power, greater regulation of Big Tech, and international cooperation to address the challenges posed by the digital revolution. As we navigate this new era of interconnectedness, it is imperative to strike a balance between harnessing the potential of technology and mitigating its risks, ensuring a more equitable and resilient global order.

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Big Tech, Social Media, and American Foreign Policy: The Role of Elon Musk and Donald Trump in Shaping Global Politics

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