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Citation for final published version:

Aslan Ozgul, Billur, Nieto Mcavoy, Eva , Gillespie, Marie and O'Loughlin, Ben 2022. Shakespeare Lives on Twitter: cultural diplomacy in the digital age. *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 28 (2) 10.1080/10286632.2021.1901892

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2021.1901892>

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## **Shakespeare Lives on Twitter: Cultural Diplomacy in the Digital Age**

### **Abstract**

This article is based on multilingual research that analyses the British Council Shakespeare Lives programme. Based on a study of the global Twitter campaign to promote the programme, and a manual coding and analysis of 4,722 tweets in five languages, we investigate the key Twitter actors, topics and types of engagement generated by the campaign. We reflect on two topics that still largely remain absent in the field of cultural diplomacy: first, global audience reactions to a cultural diplomacy programme, and second, the potential of cultural relations organisations to generate intercultural dialogue, at the same time as measurable returns both on investment and influence. Our findings demonstrate that audiences like to engage with activities that invite their participation in ways that reflect their knowledge of Shakespeare, allowing them to compare his works with their own national/local literary figures and to share ideas about universal themes. While the Twitter campaign garnered significant positive attention from members of the public around the globe, the ambition to boost ‘Brand Britain’ did not appear to materialise. We conclude that dialogic forms of cultural diplomacy that stress the value of open cultural democracy, even if difficult to achieve in practice, are more likely to succeed.

### **Key Words**

Cultural diplomacy, digital media, Shakespeare, cultural relations, cultural value

## **Introduction**

Shakespeare Lives was a year-long global programme of events and activities celebrating the work of William Shakespeare on the 400th anniversary of his death in 2016. Run by the British Council, it celebrated Shakespeare as a playwright for all people and all nations; more than 140 countries took part in the festivities. There were 3,500 events including film screenings, exhibitions, performances and schools' activities, alongside a programme of online collaborations (Gillespie, Wilding, & Nieto McAvoy 2017, 3). Activities ranged from small local events to large multi-partner and multi-national projects such as Shakespeare Reworked, a series of collaborative productions by UK and international theatre and dance companies.

The digital elements of the programme played an important role in increasing participation by making the content more accessible to a global public, but also in encouraging the audiences to engage as active co-promoters of content. Shakespeare Lives online included broadcasts by the BBC, one of the main partners (the BBC listed this on its website: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/events/ehw2mb>), innovative short films, a digital platform that allowed users to 'remix' the plays, and online educational resources for schools and English language learners of all ages, such as Shakespeare Lives in Schools or a Shakespeare MOOC.

Shakespeare Lives also mounted a social media campaign (mainly using Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) that aimed to promote the diverse elements of the British Council's work simultaneously across the globe. The British Council multilingual teams delivered tweets and posts in many different languages. The #ShakespeareLives hashtag reach was reported as 2,725,435,930, including 1,957,400,000 via Twitter, 421,183,800 via Facebook and 300,754,200

via Instagram and other social media platforms.<sup>i</sup> The Open University was commissioned to undertake evaluation research on the Shakespeare Lives programme, including its social media campaign (for an overview of the project, see <http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/cvp/shakespeare-lives-2016>).

This article analyses the Shakespeare Lives Twitter campaign that sought to promote the Shakespeare Lives cultural programme bringing together insights from cultural studies and cultural sociology to the analysis of international cultural relations by focusing on the active role of the publics (Clarke 2016; Ang, Isar, & Mar 2015; Gillespie & Nieto McAvoy 2016; Crilley, Gillespie & Willis 2019). The Shakespeare Lives programme, we argue, sits at the intersection of two related but distinct concepts and modalities of operation that are held in tension: cultural relations and cultural diplomacy. Cultural relations approaches are driven by a cosmopolitan conception of culture and its capacity to foster intercultural dialogue, mutual cultural exchange and understanding between UK and overseas citizens. In contrast, cultural diplomacy approaches are more openly instrumentalist and assertively driven by clearly defined national and diplomatic interests (Ang, Isar & Mar 2015). There are several reasons for the tensions between these two modalities of operation in theory, policy and practice that expose certain assumptions that we seek to challenge in this article.

First, the porosity and slippery uses of these terms and their, often, obtuse relationship with other concepts (such as soft power and public diplomacy) creates confusion and even obfuscation about the goals of programmes and the best means of achieving them. ‘Cultural relations’ is the term commonly and historically used by the British Council to describe its activities. It divests culture

of political meaning. It is primarily a practitioners' term and therefore under-theorised (Rivera 2015). Yet it is often regarded as synonymous with 'cultural diplomacy', treated as an adjunct to 'public diplomacy' and/or seen as contributing to a country's 'soft power' (Gillespie et al. 2018b).

While these terms and associated practices may share certain features, they differ in significant ways. They differ particularly in terms of the degree of government intervention, funding or management, the focus and objectives of the activities, assumptions about the best way of achieving these goals, the national and overseas institutions and actors involved, and the explicit or implicit theories of change underpinning them. The articulation of these different, competing and collusive elements in Shakespeare Lives cannot be understood without considering contextual and contingent factors. This includes the particular histories and present circumstances of the institutions involved, divergent approaches within and between organisations, and the alignment or otherwise of goals and means to achieving them.

Second, in the digital age, it is often assumed that cultural relations and diplomacy programmes inevitably become more collaborative and dialogic, offering the possibility of engaging with foreign audiences through networked, horizontal, non-hierarchical modes of communication. But such a culturally democratic levelling process may not always occur (Gillespie & Nieto McAvoy 2016). Much depends on how specific programmes are conceived by the cultural organisations, how they are funded and by whom, whether goals are aligned, how audiences respond, and how the messages or values being communicated can be interpreted very differently to those intended, even to the point of opposing or undermining a government's political activities (Crilley, Gillespie & Willis, 2019; Hayden 2012). Indeed, only a few studies have analysed audience reactions to a

cultural diplomacy programme in the digital age (Burchell, O’Loughlin, Gillespie, & Nieto McAvoy, 2015; Sevin and Ingenhoff, 2018; Liu 2018; Jia and Li 2019, Crilley, Gillespie & Willis 2019). This article helps to plug this gap. It is part of a wider set of research projects informed by the Cultural Value model (CVM). Developed at the Open University in collaboration with the British Council, the CVM is a collaborative, multi-disciplinary methodological framework for re-conceiving models of evaluation that take into account the interests and perspectives of a range of people and stakeholders involved in cultural activities. The findings presented in this article emerged during a year-long process of research using the CVM to assess digital user engagement with the social media promotional campaign of [Shakespeare Lives](#). The study reported here also draws on the wider CVM research into the Shakespeare Lives programme involving an evidence-based appraisal of the extent to which it was deemed to have succeeded in achieving its overarching – and often competing – goals as identified by all stakeholders involved, including its funders, deliver teams, partners and audiences (for interested readers, see <http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/cvp/shakespeare-lives-2016>).

Prior CVM research with British Council found that even within the same organisation there are differences in how concepts, values and goals are framed (Gillespie et al. 2018a; Gillespie et al. 2018b). For example, the British Council’s policy and strategic teams tend to see cultural activities through the lens of cultural diplomacy – and, more recently, soft power – stressing instrumentalist ambitions (economic and/or strategic value) or seeking to balance intrinsic (usually understood as the subjective values attributed to culture by individuals, and therefore difficult to measure), instrumentalist (generally understood as more measurable social or economic impacts of culture) and institutional (the value generated by the cultural organizations) elements of cultural projects

(Holden 2004, 2006). On the other hand, programme delivery teams tend to emphasise the intrinsic value of promoting mutuality and high-quality cultural products and relations (Rivera 2015).

While for the British Council the Shakespeare Lives programme remained rooted in the ethos of cultural relations, expected outcomes of the campaign included return on investment and return on influence under the banner of the UK's government soft power strategy, articulated through the GREAT campaign. In the last decade, the British Council has had to justify its role to the UK government in order to secure an ever diminishing pot of funding with reference to soft power, stressing the importance of cultural relations to boosting the UK's economy. This shift in policy and strategic contexts to a soft power frame and cultural diplomacy as a tool thereof has increased with the dominance of the GREAT campaign (Pamment 2016, Nisbett 2016). Run by the Department for International Trade (DIT), Britain is GREAT launched in 2012 to promote 'every aspect of the UK' abroad (GREAT campaign website: <https://www.greatbritaincampaign.com/about>). A public relations and advertising campaign, with a strong focus on digital marketing, the GREAT campaign is not only a nation branding exercise, but an ambitious economic programme designed to attract investment, businesses, students, and tourists to Britain (DIT 2020, 16). The campaign still underpins the government's trade promotional efforts worldwide. GREAT, the DIT argues, offers measurable outcomes of its success, including a return on investment of billions of pounds to the UK (Marshall 2020).

As part of its soft power strategy, the British Council (2014, 16) conducted international research and found that Shakespeare was still by far the most popular person associated with the UK's contemporary arts and culture. This made the Bard, in the GREAT campaign's view, a great soft

power asset (Bird et al. 2016, 152). This belief is not new. Shakespeare has long been used as a tool of British cultural diplomacy (Taylor 2018, 64), and Shakespeare's proclaimed universality used to promote the UK's national interest (Mancewicz & Joubin 2018).

Shakespeare Lives was co-funded by both the British Council and the GREAT Britain campaign. Hence, in planning Shakespeare Lives, the strategic and delivery teams of the British Council and the GREAT campaign – and other actors along the chain of influence (Brown 2014) – had different objectives in mind. While this is common when planning and delivering a cultural programme, it can have consequences when assessing its success. The GREAT campaign's narrow pursuit of a national agenda which projects Britain as 'the best nation to visit, invest in, trade with and study in' (Bird et al. 2016, 150) appears to stand in tension with universalist or cosmopolitan Shakespeare ideals pronounced by the BC delivery team, as is evidenced by the CVM (Gillespie, Wilding, Nieto McAvoy, 2017). These different understandings of value, and the role of culture in international relations, translate into different objectives and metrics devised to evaluate international cultural programmes like Shakespeare Lives. These tensions also played out on the Shakespeare Lives social media campaign. Its main objective was to connect people with the broader cultural programme, so that 'global audiences can access, appropriate and enjoy Shakespeare Lives' and a 'sense of ownership of Shakespeare is widened internationally' (the British Council 2018, 12). Simultaneously, the Shakespeare Lives social media campaign also had as an objective the promotion of Britain, through the circulation of promotional material designed and delivered by the GREAT campaign reinforcing the notion of 'Brand Britain'.



To explore the extent to which these different objectives were achieved, we investigate three research questions empirically: (1) Who are the actors that engaged with the Shakespeare Lives programme on Twitter? (2) What differential dynamics of engagement can be discerned among Twitter followers with Shakespeare, the British Council, the Shakespeare Lives campaign and/or Brand Britain? (3) What forms of appropriation of Shakespeare are evident through the Twitter analysis? After introducing our methodology for studying the social media campaign of the Shakespeare Lives programme, we present three analysis sections that address these questions. The first presents the actors that engage with the Shakespeare Lives campaign on Twitter and evaluates the relatively low presence of the British Council itself, highlighting the implications of this finding for the Shakespeare Lives campaign. The second presents tensions and trade-offs in the values being projected by Shakespeare Lives and those sought by users. We pay particular attention in the third section to questions of appropriation through three foci: how Shakespeare and this campaign are appropriated through the local-global dynamics that come with live streamed events, through technological innovations, and through the British Council's use of celebrities. This shapes the forms of engagement that resulted, and furthers our discussion of tensions and trade-offs in the realisation of the objectives of the Shakespeare Lives campaign on social media. Finally, we return to this fundamental concern, as it bears upon the implications for and realistic expectations of (digital) cultural diplomacy in the coming decade.

### **Tweeting Shakespeare Lives: A Multilingual, Mixed-Methods Study**

As the Shakespeare Lives campaign was global, our study was multilingual, across five languages in eight regions: Arabic (Gulf States; Iraq), English (South Africa; United States), Mandarin (China), Spanish (Spain and Latin America) and Russian (Russia). The social media monitoring

tool, Sysomos, is used by the British Council to gather quantitative measures of activity, reach and sentiment around keywords and hashtags. We also used this tool to facilitate case selection and data collection from Twitter but we aimed to go beyond quantitative measures to arrive at a deeper understanding of the nature, quality of interactions, and styles of engagement generated by Shakespeare Lives.

If the quantitative analysis gives us measures of when, where and what social media users are engaging with, a qualitative approach enables us to look into who, how and, sometimes, why this engagement takes place. We used Sysomos to identify peaks in activity around the use of #ShakespeareLives and related keywords on Twitter, and conducted qualitative analysis of tweets. Overall, eight researchers proficient in each language analysed 11,218 tweets according to the project's common coding framework and conducted a thematic analysis. As Chinese publics were more active in Sina Weibo than Twitter, researchers also examined all the posts in relation to Shakespeare Lives in the British Council's Weibo account through qualitative thematic analysis. Similarly, in the Russian sample, we examined all the posts in relation to Shakespeare Lives in the BC's VKontakte account through ethnographic research.

Our initial searches using Sysomos MAP were deliberately broad, searching for 'Shakespeare' or equivalents in our languages of interest between 1 January 2016 and 9 May 2016 (see table 1 below).<sup>ii</sup>







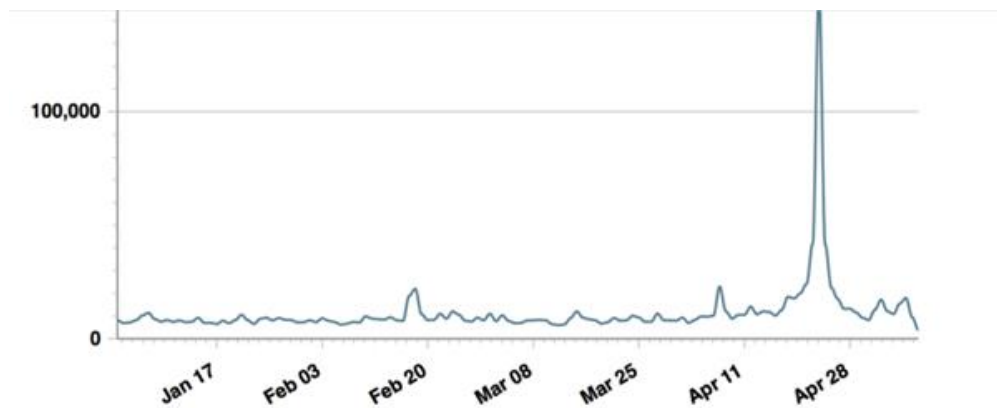
Social media platform	Language	Number of tweets captured	Number of tweets coded	Keywords used
	Arabic	4,125	1,000	(شكسبير ليفز" OR شكسبير OR شكسبير" OR "شكسبير ليفز" OR shakespeare OR shakespearelives OR "shakespeare Lives") AND NOT RT
	English	8,571	1,000	#shakespearelives AND NOT RT
	Mandarin	742	722	(莎士比亚OR莎翁OR永恒的莎士比亚OR莎士比亚逝世400周年纪念日OR莎翁逝世400周年纪念日OR莎士比亚逝世400周年 OR莎翁逝世400周年OR莎士比亚400周年OR莎翁400周年OR莎士比亚逝世400周年纪念晚会OR莎翁庆典OR永恒的莎士比亚OR英国文化教育协会) AND NOT RT.
	Russian	7,258	1,000	Шекспир OR Шекспира OR Шекспиру OR Шекспире OR Шекспиром OR Шекспириада OR "Shakespeare Lives" OR Shakespearelives OR ("годовщина памяти" AND 400).
	Spanish	4,030	1,000	#shakespearelives OR #shakespeare400 AND NOT RT
	Mandarin	111	111	#永恒的莎士比亚 (#Shakespeare Lives)

Figure 1: keywords used, number of tweets captured by query and number of coded tweets.

The Sysomos MAP popularity graph function helped us to pinpoint the trends, peaks and troughs in Twitter flows. We observed a common ‘peak’ across our five languages during the period around 23 April 2016, Shakespeare Day, the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s death.



*Figure 2: Results for Sysmos MAP search for English tweets including ‘Shakespeare’. 1 January - 9 May 2016.*

This period included Shakespeare Day Live (the BBC listed on its website: <https://bbc.in/3kJLFpM>) a day of live Shakespeare Lives broadcasts streamed around the world through a digital pop-up channel co-curated by the BBC and the British Council. We selected the days around this peak, 22 – 25 April, as the period for analysis of tweets in all of our languages. From each set of tweets returned by the query, a similar-sized random sample was selected for interpretative coding and thematic analysis.

Our data collection and analysis went through several phases throughout the year-long programme.<sup>iii</sup> For the purpose of this article, we focus primarily on the findings from the analysis of Twitter data during Phase 1: the days around 23 April. There are several reasons for this. First, this period registered a clear peak in engagement in terms of hashtag reach, which we did not find in any of the subsequent phases. Second, this corpus of data allows us to compare and contrast across languages, minimising some variables: versions of #shakespearelives were used to gather the data; the same coding framework was followed across all languages on a similar number of

tweets for each; the time frame was limited but a very large number of events took place during that period. Finally, the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare's death was considered by the British Council staff to be the centre of the year-long programme.<sup>iv</sup>

We manually coded 4,722 tweets in the first phase. Project leads and researchers collaborated to develop a single coding framework for analysing tweets that also allowed for a thematic analysis of the data in each language, with inter-coder reliability and initial pilot coding tested. This enabled researchers to code for a range of factors including the type of actor publishing the tweet, location of the user, and the focus and type of reaction of the tweets, while allowing for broader themes to emerge from the data.<sup>v</sup> The categories coded were therefore a combination of a deductive process of top-down questions set out by the research objectives and the issues that arose from the corpus itself through the inductive and iterative process of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Researchers liaised during the development and application of the coding frameworks regarding how best to code for subjective indicators such as tone and values.<sup>vi</sup> As themes started to emerge, interim reports helped researchers compare and contrast across languages in order to decide on the main categories of analysis.

During this first phase, we also conducted qualitative analysis of a sample of Facebook, Weibo and VKontakte data, as well as Twitter data, across the months that followed. This data also informs our analysis of the dynamics of engagement and the attributions of value that concern our second and third question. It is important to note that, as this analysis was conducted within the broader Cultural Value Model, the initial codes were already the result of previous thematic analysis of policy documents, interviews and workshops with all stakeholders involved in the

Shakespeare Lives programme, as well as prior research conducted within this framework into other British Council activities. This iterative process allows for a multi-perspective valuation and analysis of the data that responds to different stakeholders' understandings of value, from government to funders, but also researchers. The findings discussed here are therefore a snapshot of part of the broader research into the Shakespeare Lives programme. They offer an analysis of the promotional campaign on Twitter, whose findings are further informed and evidenced by the CVM research into the broader Shakespeare Lives programme of events and activities on and off-line.

We focus in the next section on our findings in relation to the actors, topics and types of engagement. We reflect on the common elements across languages, but also on the main differences. This top-level overview of the Twitter data is followed by qualitative analysis for the second and third questions.

### *Patterns of Engagement with Shakespeare Lives*

One of the Shakespeare Lives social media campaign's main objectives was to achieve global reach but also engagement with the programme. The British Council encouraged a sense of 'ownership' of Shakespeare by providing opportunities to engage with, interpret and appropriate his works, while using the hashtags #ShakespeareLives and #Shakespeare400. By the end of the programme, the British Council considered Shakespeare Lives successful in terms of hashtag reach. However, our qualitative analysis will offer a more nuanced picture of the actors and their composition, providing insights on the role of cultural relations institutions in generating and sustaining engagement on social media. This section then reflects on the extent to which, through

this strategy, the British Council achieved its dual objective of creating ‘a global conversation’ about Shakespeare while promoting the national brand through partnering with the Britain is GREAT campaign.

As the British Council hoped, the social media campaign was global in scope and almost half of all the tweets came from members of the public, showing the democratisation of diplomacy (2,281 out of a sample of n=4,706).<sup>vii</sup> The Internet not only enhances the communication power of the diplomacy actors but also encourages the participation of the public in evaluating diplomatic strategies. It opens ‘many to many’ communication channels (Grant 2004). Alternative media, bloggers and citizen journalists were the second largest group of users (553 of n=4,706), followed by mainstream media accounts (315 of n=4,706).<sup>viii</sup> Diplomacy thus operated as a multi-agent endeavour. The low number of tweets from government accounts shows they played a minor role in the campaign. This can be an advantage as online publics can be extremely sceptical if they feel they are being manipulated by states (Manor 2018). This distribution of social media actors suggests the campaign was indeed successful in stimulating the public imagination, fostering ‘horizontally arranged networks of exchange rather than the vertically arranged networks of distribution down which information cascaded in the 1.0 era’ (Cull 2013, 4).

## Main Actors

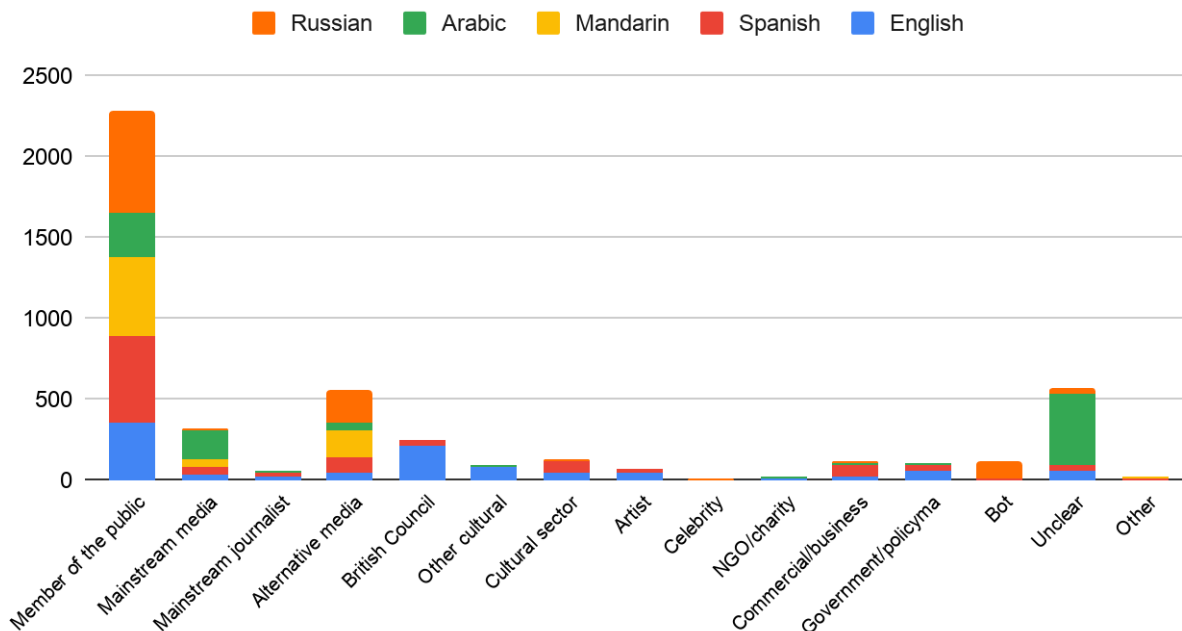


Figure 3: Main actors across languages (n=4706)

Tweets from the British Council itself were very uneven during this period in our sample. While accounting for 212 Tweets in English and 32 in Spanish, there was not a single tweet by the British Council in the Mandarin, Arabic or Russian samples.<sup>ix</sup> The main issue at stake here is whether the low profile of the British Council had a negative impact on the campaign. Our study found that tweets related to Shakespeare Lives diminished over time in the languages in which the British Council was less active, becoming increasingly hard to find. Only 24 tweets in Arabic and 46 in Russian with #ShakespeareLives were captured between 1 May and 1 September 2016. The British Council played a tangential role in conversations on Shakespeare that were otherwise very popular in these languages – Shakespeare was mentioned in 87,000 tweets in Arabic between May and September 2016. This raises questions about the role of cultural institutions in initiating, but also



sustaining, the engagement with members of the public in ways that allows audiences to take ownership of the conversation but also enables the institution to remain relevant behind the scenes.

The social media campaign did not generate high engagement with British Council itself as a cultural institution, despite efforts to spark conversations with its global audiences by inviting direct participation. For example, to launch the programme, a video on Twitter by Sir Patrick Stewart (Stewart listed this video on the Twitter account: <https://bit.ly/2TBfFIn>) encouraged users to recite their favourite passages of the Bard's prose and poetry, and the video was shared 1,101 times and liked by 2,848 users. In the English-speaking sample, around a quarter of the British Council's tweets (28%) consisted of questions to the public asking users to share their favourite words or plays by Shakespeare. These 'personalised' messages from the British Council opened space for some, albeit limited, direct audience engagement with it, but only 3% of the English-language tweets tagged the British Council, while most Shakespeare quote sharers did not. Even when the British Council was active in initiating the conversation, there is little evidence of direct responses from members of the public, who instead bypassed the British Council in promoting Shakespeare Lives news themselves, in their own style. These 'authentic' messages from members of the public contribute to reinforcing the credibility of the campaign for a media savvy audience (Liu 2018), but then it becomes difficult to assess whether the interaction is a result of the cultural diplomacy campaign or love of Shakespeare.

Evaluating the impact of cultural diplomacy initiatives is always problematic (Goff 2013; Nisbett 2016; Pamment 2016). It is not easy or even possible to establish cause-consequence (Nye 2011, 95; Pamment 2014, 2016; Nisbett 2013, 2016; Gillespie et al. 2018a, 2018b). Practitioners are

often left to design programmes based on an act of faith whereby cultural relations ‘plants a seed’ that might ‘take root over time’ but might equally not (Goff 2013, 419, 432). Whether it is possible simply to ‘transmit’ values or esteem or respect or a vision of Britain via Shakespeare as diplomatic vehicle is highly questionable. Over the long term, organisations like the British Council by virtue of sustained engagement with local citizens can have significant impact, but robust evidence is lacking about who benefits, how, where and when. For UK government, return on investment and return on influence are part of the calculative logic of success – quantitative evidencing of impact becomes *de rigueur*. This raises questions beyond the scope of this project but that further collaborative research might address.

### ***Tensions and Trade-offs in Value: The Dynamics of Engagement***

Successive Cultural Value studies we have carried out of the British Council’s international programmes have consistently shown that there are always significant trade-offs in cultural diplomacy projects between, for example, the visibility and invisibility of the organisation, between extensive global reach and genuine engagement, and between organic intercultural dialogue and top-down messaging (Gillespie et al. 2018b). In the case of Shakespeare Lives, the trade-offs were intensively felt between the British Council’s visibility and ownership of the programme, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) funding the programme to promote Brand Britain, and the public’s love of Shakespeare and/or their appropriation of the campaign.

Across all languages, most tweets (60%) engaged with Shakespeare and his work directly and separately from the Shakespeare Lives campaign, even when using the ‘official’ hashtags #ShakespeareLives or #Shakespeare400.<sup>x</sup> Sharing information about Shakespeare's life and works,

celebrating his anniversary, tweeting quotes, and comparing Shakespeare to other writers are the main themes that relate to Shakespeare in our samples, not the specific events or activities of the British Council programme. While a success in terms of reach, there was little visibility for the British Council and its global partners and *their* role in the events and activities that they promoted online.

Qualitative analysis of the tweets also allowed us to explore whether, through this engagement with Shakespeare, there is any indication of user engagement with Britain and the positive image the British Council and a key funder of Shakespeare Lives, the Britain is GREAT campaign, sought to promote. The most frequent purpose of tweets was promoting or providing information about Shakespeare (his life and achievements) and the Shakespeare Lives campaign (70.2%), often by sharing a quotation from his works (18%). Twitter users tend to share information, links and opinions, but do not tend to engage in larger, in-depth discussions on topics related to Shakespeare or the campaign. Earlier studies show that, to foster discussion on social media, creating an environment where the fans can assemble and discuss a topic is essential (Muniz Jr and Schau 2011). To make it easy for the Shakespeare Lives followers to find each other, the British Council could create a Twitter page specifically on Shakespeare Lives where users would feel comfortable interacting and sharing their experiences, and develop a sense of community.

More frequent interactive questions about Shakespeare Lives might also be helpful to motivate users to share their positive experiences about the campaign. Except in the English language (23%) in which the British Council engages more, Twitter users hardly expressed opinions (9%), reported engagement with the Shakespeare Lives activities (6.5%), or expressed emotions (5.4%). As Figure 5 below shows, expressing emotion was more frequent in Spanish, accounting for 18.2%

of the sample, close to making comparisons (19.6%) – in this case, with Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes, whose 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death on 22 April 1616 was celebrated across the Spanish-speaking world. Similarly, the Spanish cohort, some Russian users connected Shakespeare to Pushkin and compared both authors. In Mandarin, Shakespeare was celebrated alongside Tang Xianzu, a master playwright from the Ming dynasty. Such expressions of a shared sense of cultural kinship, respect and pride in one’s own and other national literary ‘masters’ who have received global recognition is a way of accommodating the national and global with ease.

### Main Reaction

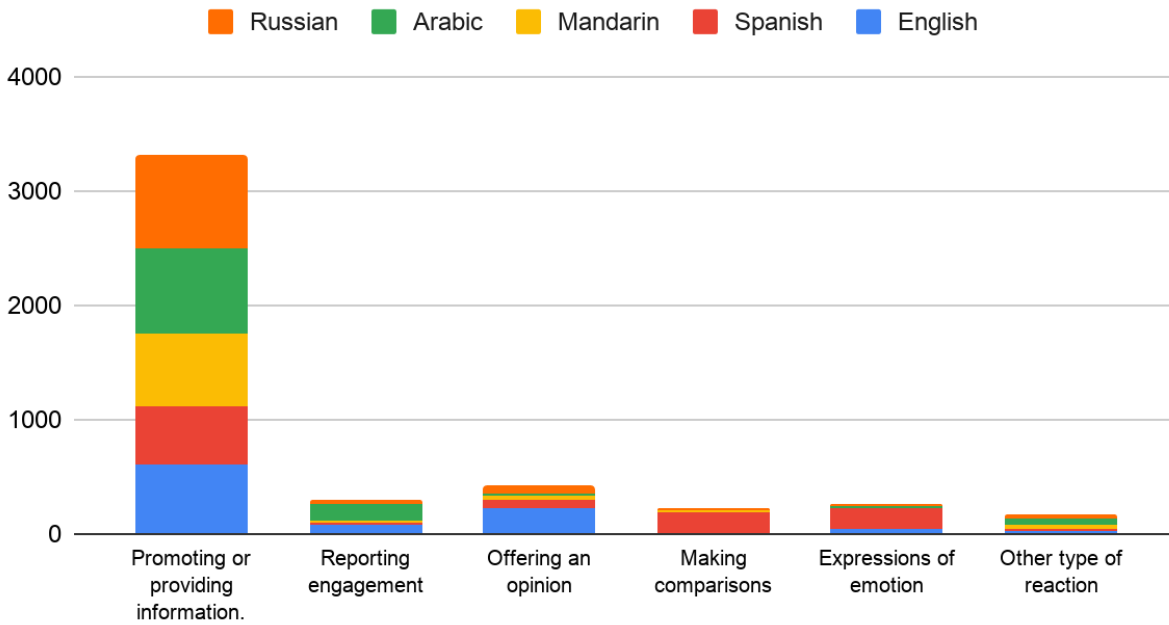


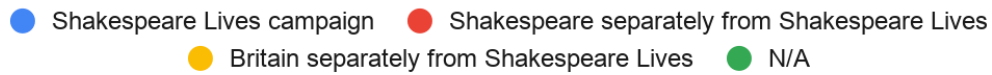
Figure 4: Main reaction of tweets (n=4,712)

Appreciation of Shakespeare as straddling the national/global divide did not translate into appreciation for Britain. Users tweeting about Shakespeare and Shakespeare Lives rarely mentioned Britain (13% across all languages).<sup>xi</sup> Most of these tweets also referenced the

Shakespeare Lives programme. Only 1% of tweets made references to the UK separately from the Shakespeare Lives campaign, as seen in Figure 6 below. It could be that the communication of Brand Britain is still taking place even if audiences do not explicitly acknowledge it. Nevertheless, the campaign's promotion of Global Shakespeare to engage with foreign publics is held in tension with Shakespeare as belonging to Britain and as a vehicle for promoting Britain as diverse, creative, and innovative.

While British Council research argued that Shakespeare was considered as an icon of British culture (Donaldson 2016; Bird et al. 2016), Shakespeare went global in a process that already started in his lifetime. Since Bohannon's *Shakespeare in the Bush* (1966), few scholars would explain Shakespeare's global appeal simply in terms of the literary qualities of his work. The emphasis placed by Twitter users is squarely on a global Shakespeare whose work embodies universal values and themes about the human condition that reach across place and time.

## Focus of reaction



*Figure 5: direction of tweets: either about the Shakespeare Lives campaign (37%), Shakespeare separately from the campaign (60%), or Britain separately from the campaign (5%).*

This points to a tension in how cultural diplomacy initiatives are supposed to operate – a tension between the national interests and the universal themes. Indeed, can a national asset like Shakespeare, seen by many to embody universal values, be deployed for cultural diplomacy purposes to promote Britain as a nation to foreign publics? The British Council’s strategy of stepping back and assuming a certain invisibility might have strengthened the credibility of the Shakespeare Lives programme. However, our findings challenge assumptions that there is automatically a translation of one kind of value into another. The cultural value of Shakespeare does not translate into enhancing Britain’s national or economic value for overseas publics as is assumed by the ‘complex interdependence’ interpretation of soft power (Holland & Chaban 2011,

Cross & Melissen 2013, Pamment 2016, 238). Messages about how ‘Britain is GREAT’ exist in tension with and/or conflict with the dialogic cosmopolitan aspirations of the British Council delivery teams in promoting global Shakespeare. The universality attributed to Shakespeare and comparisons user make with other national and regional literary figures like Cervantes, Pushkin, or Tang Xianzu allow users to express and demonstrate their global cultural capital. This kind of appropriation of Shakespeare does not produce an affirmation of the DTI’s ‘Britain is GREAT’ slogan or generate any expressed attachment to the British Council for staging it.

Of the tweets referring to the Shakespeare Lives programme (37% of total number of tweets in our sample), nearly half (40%) conveyed information about events and activities. The public recycled news stories from the British Council and its partners, often with a positive tone, becoming co-promoters of the Shakespeare Lives campaign messages, which then spread among users via horizontal social media networks. In this sense the retweets of information about the Shakespeare Lives campaign mediated and softened the effect of top-down communications between organisations and users – creating an organic feel.

Our analysis found that three types of content drove the conversations on Twitter and attracted a notable amount of interest in the Shakespeare Lives programme: first, streamed live events; second, technological innovation; and third, celebrities. Each allowed a form of local appropriation of Shakespeare’s work and for users to attribute value to that. We explore these in turn in the final analysis section, arguing that the Shakespeare Lives programme is most successful when being a cultural diplomacy initiative that operates ‘beyond the national interest’ (Ang et al. 2016, 366).

### *Local Appropriation through Streamed Live Events, Technology, and Celebrity*

The British Council commemorated Shakespeare's day in different ways on-line and off-line across the globe, often using streamed live events. The remit on social media was to connect people with Shakespeare Lives performances in the UK, like those in London and Stratford Upon Avon, Shakespeare sketches on BBC2, and events with partners, collaborating artists, educators and high-profile individuals. This included Sir Patrick Stewart, who supported Shakespeare Lives around the 23 April anniversary weekend. The social media campaign also promoted events taking place in other parts of the world in collaboration with international cultural partners.

Two thirds of English-speaking 'members of the public' shared a tweet directly focusing on Shakespeare Lives activities in the days around 23 April.<sup>xii</sup> Any notion of a global Shakespeare is at the same time locally rooted. One of the ways in which these localisations take place is through local performances of Shakespeare, whether in the UK, or abroad, and we can see this in our qualitative analyses. Among Shakespeare plays, the Hamlet sketch at the Shakespeare Live! (The BBC listed it on its website <https://bbc.in/3egDMFS>) received the most praise from the public. Set on the stage of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, it was broadcast on BBC2 with well-known actors participating – David Tennant, Catherine Tate, Benedict Cumberbatch and many more. Live broadcasts of Shakespeare Lives performances taking place in the UK also generated engagement among the non-English-speaking sample. On the Twitter sample in Mandarin, broadcasts from The Globe were among the most popular events (14% of tweets). Users also valued being able to watch these events streamed live from the UK via Periscope in the



Spanish cohort: ‘...Qué cosa más bonita esta haciendo la BBC2 con el #RSCLive... #Shakespeare400’ [what a beautiful thing BBC2 is doing with #RSCLive].

The popularity of Shakespeare performances was not limited to the offer from Britain. Local celebrations in other parts of the world also drew traffic in their respective languages, such as the performance of *Charlie III* by the National Theatre Company of China, and the co-celebration of Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu. The events in the Alexandrina Bibliotheca (the Library of Alexandria) which celebrated the work of Shakespeare received attention in the Arab Twittersphere.<sup>xiii</sup> Seeing locals from Basra engage with a Shakespeare Lives event elicited very positive sentiments on Arabic Twitter. In Moscow, a special thematic metro car dedicated to Shakespeare was launched on 24 May 2016, eliciting a small conversation with very positive sentiments and interactive conversations on the popular Russian social network VKontakte.

While the promotion of plays performed in the UK was a “global” phenomenon, reaching audiences in different parts of the world, ‘local’ performances did not have the same reach beyond their language group, despite using the same hashtags. This points to the fact that Shakespeare, despite being reappropriated by publics across the globe, is still primarily of the Anglophone world. Global Shakespeare may come in different shapes and from different places, but it would seem that those originating in Britain are more mobile and marketable. This apparent preference for a British Shakespeare can be understood as an outcome of the dominance of the English language on the world’s cultural stage that has only strengthened with globalisation (Demont-Heinrich 2011). Even so, since 1939, the British Council as well as the BBC World Service (both foundational to UK’s diplomatic infrastructure) have deployed Shakespeare to attract and influence

overseas publics (Joubin 2017; 2019). British Shakespeare has been studied by half of the world's schoolchildren, and his works have been translated into more than 80 languages worldwide (Bird et al. 2016, 152). In fact, some argue that Shakespeare is best understood as a global cultural field (Massai, 2007: 6) Through world-wide appropriations, Shakespeare has become part of global audiences' cultural capital – to also put it in Bourdesian terms.

On our second focus in this section, Twitter users responded actively and positively to technological and creative innovation related to the Shakespeare Lives programme.<sup>xiv</sup> Users expressed their appreciation of the Shakespeare Google doodle,<sup>xv</sup> the Shakespeare emoji created by Twitter and Periscope, the ability to access content on BBC iPlayer, the use of Periscope to livestream Shakespeare Lives events, and Mix the Play application which let users 'direct' their own versions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet* (the BBC listed it on its website: <https://bit.ly/2TCGdsE> ).<sup>xvi</sup>

The most popular tech-driven initiative was the doodle. Google marked the 400th anniversary of William Shakespeare's death with a doodle (As of 23 April 2016, Google listed it on its website: <https://bit.ly/2Je8G65>), which featured some of his most well-known works. Google doodles are drawings that represent events like holidays, anniversaries, or current events. This was a very popular feature on Twitter in Arabic and Russian.<sup>xvii</sup> Although less popular, another technological surprise was Shakespeare's emoji. Actor Sir Patrick Stewart officially launched the emoji which appeared on Twitter when #ShakespeareLives or #Shakespeare400 was typed. In contrast with the Google doodle, the emoji was popular only in the Spanish and English Twitterspheres.<sup>xviii</sup>

Expressions of excitement when referring to the emoji were frequent among members of the public.

The success of these aspects of the campaign can be compared with the popularity of live, situated local performances and events, even if streamed online. Goggle and Twitter are both transnational media platforms, arguably de-territorialised and post-national. Many users emphasise these same elements in their reappropriation of Shakespeare and that, in light of our findings, audiences across the globe engaged with the doodle and emojis in these terms. Other strategies, like the use of celebrities, had a similar effect.

Third and finally, the programme often made use of celebrities to engage publics, due to celebrities' ability to gain attention, even if the audience reactions they provoke are unpredictable (Couldry 2004, Driessens 2012). In line with the arguments of celebrity diplomacy studies, our data show that celebrities' fame enabled to promote the programme (Cooper, 2008, Wheeler 2011). Twitter users responded with excitement to celebrities, for example, an unexpected celebrity in a play, like Prince Charles showing up in the BBC2 Hamlet sketch (commented by 2.8% of English-speaking Twitter users): '@pulchritudeusa *CHARLES I CAN'T BELIEVE #ShakespeareLives*'. Prince Charles was particularly successful in the Russian sample with 19.5% of tweets on the Shakespeare Lives campaign devoted to this event.

Other celebrity events drew different engagement in different languages. For example, Barack Obama visited the Globe Theatre on 23 April 2016 to see a performance of scenes from Hamlet

Tweets on Obama were the largest group of tweets referring to the Shakespeare Lives Campaign in the Mandarin sample (32%), while it accounted for only 1.3% in the Spanish cohort.<sup>xix</sup>

Despite these differences, two types of celebrity drove the highest levels of engagement across all languages. First were those who tweeted directly about Shakespeare Lives. Second were ‘localised’ celebrities: either ‘national’ celebrities in different countries, or British cultural ‘ambassadors’ who travelled to promote the campaign. A tweet by Sir Patrick Stewart (2,217,803 followers) wishing Shakespeare a happy birthday in Spanish while seen sipping a margarita was the single most popular tweet in this study (711 retweets and 3,646 likes) and had many replies from members of the public. British Council posts *about* celebrities, while popular, created a distance between the audience and the celebrity, who is effectively put on display rather than seeming approachable.

Another way to overcome this is by localising celebrities. This strategy suggests, once again, the importance of the interplay between the global and the local as well as between online and offline engagement. A good example of this was the participation of Sir Ian McKellen in the Midsummer Night Festival in Moscow, St Petersburg and Ekaterinburg in June. McKellen was the ambassador of the Shakespeare Touring Film Collection, in partnership with the British Film Institute, which toured 18 classic British Shakespeare films. He presented the films in Russia, China and India, and his visit created a buzz on Weibo in China and on VK in Russia.<sup>xx</sup>

Mandarin-speaking Weibo users in mainland China showed greater engagement with the Shakespeare Lives programme than Twitter users (only 30% of these focused on the Shakespeare

Lives programme specifically).<sup>xxi</sup> A main reason is the absence of an official British Council Twitter account in Mandarin despite large numbers of Chinese diaspora able to access Twitter around the world. The Weibo page titled #永恒的莎士比亚# (#Shakespeare Lives#) shows that the page has 250 followers (fans), received 290 million visits, and 74,000 discussions.<sup>xxii</sup>

On 8 June, the British Council released three posts in relation to the #Shakespeare Lives Programme# on Weibo. Two concerned the visit of Gandalf (McKellen) to the Great Wall in Beijing, while the other post was about Shakespeare on Film (#莎翁影史#) (the British Council listed it on its website <https://bit.ly/37U0LoM>) during the 2016 Shanghai International Film Festival in collaboration with the British Film Institute. The posts about Gandalf's visit were forwarded 2,264 times (785 and 1,479 respectively), liked by 1,206 users (671 and 535 respectively), and received 197 comments (90 and 107 respectively). By contrast, the post about 'Shakespeare on Film' received only 13 reposts, 19 likes and one comment. Most of the posts from 9 June to 21 June related to Gandalf. McKellen's visit to Shanghai People's Park on 11 June constituted the peak of Weibo users' engagement with the Shakespeare Lives Programme. It received 38,766 reposts, 37,414 likes and 5,942 comments (see Image below).



*Image 1: British Council Weibo post about Sir Ian McKellen's visit to Shanghai*

Global success of *The Lord of the Rings* films and books allowed Shakespeare Lives to use the fame of its celebrities. It is clear however that this worked effectively to stimulate engagement when the celebrity was not on display but positioned as embedded within, and enjoying, a local culture. This enables a focus on the shared value of characters or phrases across and within cultures, without open acknowledgement of the UK or British Council.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the growing number of cultural diplomacy campaigns on social media, little research has yet examined who engages with these programmes and how. This article plugs a gap in research. It analyses the promotion of the British Council's Shakespeare Lives programme on Twitter and its relationship to its main funders, the British Council and the DTI's 'Britain is GREAT'

campaign. But it goes a step further to highlight key aspects of user engagement in different parts of the world in Arabic, Spanish, Russian and Mandarin as well as English.

We found first that, globally, members of the public were the largest group providing and sharing information about the campaign and promoting it in each language. This is a mark of success because it shows the content was relevant and engaging. Whether it was influential in boosting Brand Britain for the Great Campaign and DTI is another matter.

We highlighted the many challenges of producing a multilingual, multiplatform cultural diplomacy campaign. For instance, the British Council did not have a Twitter account in Mandarin and showed no or low level of Twitter activity in Russian and Arabic. This curbed the engagement of those audiences with the programme. We also found the audience bypassed the British Council in promoting Shakespeare Lives news and did often not mention the British Council. Yet, this may well have worked to the British Council's advantage in stressing the intrinsic cultural value of Shakespeare's works and in so doing affording higher levels of engagement. This brings us to our second question exploring the dynamics of engagement occurring between the actors.

The British Council had two different objectives: first, mutually productive intercultural dialogue with audiences and, second, a measurable return on investment and a measurable return on influence. We tested to what extent a cultural diplomacy actor like BC could reach these objectives via a social media promotional campaign – the proxy used as a measure of success was the recognition by users of the values Brand Britain sought to communicate: that the UK was innovative, welcoming, creative and diverse. The British Council deployed interactive

conversation strategies to elicit audience reactions to/with Shakespeare. It deliberately put itself and Brand Britain in the background and so that could well be a key reason why no evidence could be found to support any tangible engagement with either Britain or the British Council. Invitations to share quotes and content fostered digital connectivity and helped the British Council to achieve one of its cultural diplomacy goals, creating a degree of intercultural dialogue – but not a particularly mutual dialogue or cultural exchange.

By emphasising Shakespeare rather than Britain, the British Council followed the logic of a cultural diplomacy strategy that assumes a transfer of value (cultural value translates to prestige or diplomatic values) from one culture to another via cultural products. Yet, our findings show that merely promoting a cultural asset, particularly one marketed as ‘global’, does not necessarily transfer or translate into appreciation of certain value as attributed to a nation – at least in the short term. Our findings make clear that the structure of social media can support cosmopolitan ideals. However, attempts to project Brand Britain are more challenging in a digital age. They are doomed to fail in a context where dialogic diplomacy focuses on the value of culture underpinned by the values of open cultural democracy. This makes the decision by the British Council to remain backgrounded sensible for a flourishing of the attribution of cultural value to Shakespeare, even when not having met government goals of tangible benefits for the national interest.

Finally, as we demonstrate what makes the audience engage with a campaign in the digital age, this study has the potential to develop the strategies to be adopted by cultural diplomacy actors. Our findings showed that audiences engaged with activities that required their participation. The top three activities were watching and commenting on streamed live events, using transnational



technological innovations such as the Shakespeare doodle, and commenting on celebrities' visits and performances. While this may not be surprising, what was particularly appreciated in these activities was local appropriation. Despite its global dimension, Shakespeare was appreciated for being understandable in the terms of audiences' local contexts.

Informed and critical conversations occurred in our sample when users compared local and global assets and brought the national and global into dialogue around the perceived intrinsic values of Shakespeare. Efforts to brand nations and promote culture as a tool for reaping economic benefits are becoming popular within soft power strategies, supported by the attractiveness and cost-effectiveness of digital marketing campaigns like the GREAT campaign. However, cultural diplomacy programmes require a more nuanced and complex approach to digitally engage global audiences. In the case of Shakespeare Lives, the tensions and trade-offs between the different objectives of the programme – and even the social media campaign – were intensively felt between the British Council's visibility and ownership of the programme, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) funding the programme to promote Brand Britain, and the public's love of Shakespeare and/or their appropriation of the campaign. The Shakespeare Lives programme might not have been successful in some measures, like return on investment, and to some stakeholders, but it was very rich in terms of audience engagement, and not only in quantifiable measure like reach.

Through a multi-language, multimethod qualitative study we investigated the complexities and nuances of audience engagement on Twitter, highlighting some important implications for digital cultural diplomatic campaigns. As was the case with analogue cultural relations, by using culture

to create bridges between the local, national and global, international cultural organisations can build mutually productive relations if they take a collaborative approach and involve global and local actors on an equal basis.

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<sup>i</sup> This is not a count of people reached but a sum of the number of followers of all Twitter, Facebook and Instagram users who produced content with the Shakespeare Lives hashtag (Gillespie, Wilding, & Nieto McAvoy, 2017, p. 13).

<sup>ii</sup> We divided the data collection and analysis into three phases.

<sup>iii</sup> Our second phase of data collection and analysis took place in September-October 2016 and our third and final phase of data collection and analysis took place in January 2017, following the conclusion of the Shakespeare Lives campaign.

<sup>iv</sup> Data from qualitative interviews with programme staff.

<sup>v</sup> We also coded for any expressions of the values the British Council sought to promote through the Shakespeare Lives programme: diversity, innovative, welcoming, creative, mutuality. The findings were slim in this regard. We have left them out of this article, focusing instead on those findings for which we had more and better data in terms of consistency and relevance for digital diplomacy.

<sup>vii</sup> This varied by country: with more than half of the sample in (624 of n=1,000), but only a quarter of tweets in the Arabic sample (277 of n=1,000) belonging to this group.

<sup>viii</sup> The Russian sample includes a comparatively high number of bots, while in the Arabic sample the type of actor was unclear in greater proportion than in other languages.

<sup>ix</sup> n=1,000 in each language analysed.

<sup>x</sup> 24% in English, 65% in Russian, 76% in Spanish, 68% in Mandarin and Arabic. Russian-speaking users rarely use the hashtag associated with the Shakespeare Lives programme, #ShakespeareLives.

<sup>xi</sup> 6.4% in English, 7.5% in Spanish, 0.6% in Mandarin, 24.7% in Arabic and 22.1% in Russian.

<sup>xii</sup> 73% in English, 31% in Russian, 23% in Spanish, 30% in Mandarin and 26% in Arabic.

<sup>xiii</sup> 20% of the examined tweets in the Arabic sample made direct reference to events that were part of the Shakespeare Lives programme. The vast majority of those tweets referred to the events in Alexandria and Stratford-Upon-Avon.

<sup>xiv</sup> An exception to this interest in technology is the sample of tweets in Mandarin.

<sup>xv</sup> <https://www.google.com/doodles/celebrating-william-shakespeare-and-st-georges-day-2016>

<sup>xvi</sup> An interactive video platform where users could recreate a scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* staged at The Old Vic Theatre or *Romeo and Juliet's* famous balcony scene, set in India.

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<sup>xvii</sup> In Arabic, the doodle featured in 16% of tweets from members of the public. In the Russian sample, 15% of the tweets from the members of the public tweeting about the Shakespeare Lives campaign informed others about the doodle.

<sup>xviii</sup> 17.5% of tweets from members of the public tweeting about the Shakespeare Lives campaign mentioned the emoji in the Spanish sample, and 4.5% in the English one.

<sup>xix</sup> 9.8% and 0.5% of the overall sample, respectively. In the Arabic sample, 10% of all tweets referred to Obama's and Prince Charles's visits.

<sup>xx</sup> Although not part of the Shakespeare Lives weekend, they fall into the first phase of our analysis for VKontakte and Weibo. They are included here as they are a clear example of the possibilities of driving social media engagement through localizing celebrities.

<sup>xxi</sup> The investigation into the Weibo users' engagement rests upon the numbers of shares, comments and likes.

**Word count: 8, 377**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, [BO]. The data are not publicly available due to [restrictions e.g. their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants].

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