

DIGITAL DIPLOMACY: THE STATE OF THE ART

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When Barack Obama and Hassan Rouhani held the first direct talks between American and Iranian leaders since the 1979 Islamic revolution, news about the conversation reached the public not through a press report or a TV channel, but through social media, the new information medium of the 21st century. Minutes after the phone call, President Hassan Rouhani sent a series of tweets that signalled a remarkably swift rapprochement between the two countries: ‘In phone convo, President #Rouhani and President @BarackObama expressed their mutual political #will to rapidly solve the #nuclear issue’ (Pfeiffer 2013).



The digital engagement initiated by President Rohani is a fascinating example of the influence that social media increasingly has in managing diplomatic relations. Gone, is the image of the diplomat as a person of secrecy, luxury, exclusivity, and privilege – an image perfectly captured in the rich symbolism of the famous painting “The Ambassadors”, created by Hans Holbein the Younger in 1533, at the dawn of modern diplomacy. This picture has now been refreshed, with digital communication technology altering not only the methods of diplomacy, but also its very meaning. By going “digital,” the once secretive and exclusive domain of the elite has also gone public, requiring diplomats to regularly look outside their once closed doors, and perhaps more importantly, for the first time, allowing citizens to look in (Bjola and Cassidy 2015, 10).

A large proportion of digital diplomacy that is, the use of digital technologies (social media networks, mobile devices, multimedia) for diplomatic purposes, resides in the field of public diplomacy, but consular services, policy management and international negotiations are increasingly seen by Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFA) as suitable areas for digitisation. As a result, the very DNA of diplomacy that is, the processes and structures by which it operates may undergo significant changes (Hocking and Melissen 2015, 27). That being said, questions persist about the extent to which digital diplomacy makes a significant difference for how states pursue their foreign policy objectives and how they manage the relationships between them. The intriguing aspect of Rohani’s tweet, for example, was the phone call, which at the end of the day remained private, a fact that arguably highlights the limits of digital diplomacy with respect to transparency and openness. In the

same vein, one could argue the tweet could be interpreted more like a public relations gesture rather than as a confirmation of a substantial and enduring transformation of the US-Iran diplomatic relations.

In an attempt to contribute to this debate, the forum seeks to provide the state of the art of the evolving practice of digital diplomacy by focusing on five key areas of interest: the shifting power balances in the international system induced by digital technology, the relationship between digital diplomacy and soft power, the “digital shift” in consular assistance to nationals abroad, the myths surrounding diplomatic crisis communication, and the pathways for maximising the impact and effectiveness of digital diplomacy. These carefully selected areas of diplomatic research aim to shed light on two inter-connected aspects of digital diplomacy: the macro-level context in which digital diplomacy takes place (networked and soft power) and the micro-level contributions that digital technologies make to the practice of diplomacy (consular services, crisis communication, impact). By better understanding how these two dimensions operate and influence each other, we can get a better grasp of the structural conditions informing digital diplomacy and of the direction it is heading.

Commenting on how digital technology is shifting power balances in the international system from hierarchical state-based structures to decentralized networks, *Taylor Owen* argues that the practice of diplomacy as currently constructed faces an existential challenge in the digital space. This is so because digital technologies both empower a new layer of actors in the global system and threaten existing organizations and states. As a result, the practice of digital diplomacy can be seen as one of two things. An addition to the toolkit through which the state seeks to influence other states. Or, more radically, a strategic extension of the objectives of diplomacy to seek to influence digital actors themselves, rather than just states. Both of these options nevertheless face significant challenges.

Building on this, *Jonathan McClory and Olivia Harvey* examine how the digital revolution is accelerating the diffusion of power, enabling citizens to come together within, and beyond, countries in a way that has never been possible. The result is a world in which the use of soft power is increasingly important to the shaping of global outcomes – whether they be driven by state or non-state actors. To illustrate this, their paper provides an overview of the research undertaken as part of the Soft Power 30 study in 2015 and 2016, including the methodology used in the research, the key findings and results so far, and the growing implications of digital diplomacy for soft power.

Calling attention to the rising importance of consular digital services, *Jan Melissen and Matthew Caesar-Gordon* explore the way in which MFAs assisting nationals abroad are adapting to the demands of the digital age, how their established work processes are being questioned, and what is the significance of newly emerging communication patterns in the context of one of the principal MFA functions. The authors find that MFA effectiveness and legitimacy in consular assistance is becoming more dependent on citizen participation, and that achieving policy objectives has become more underpinned by understanding trends in people’s online behaviour.

Taking note of how the age of the digital – in particular the age of social media - has fundamentally altered how diplomats now practice and perceive the role of communication during times of political crisis, *Jennifer Cassidy and Ilan Manor* critically seek to confront the hyperbolic discourse that sometimes arises concerning what diplomatic actors are actually doing online. Their article thus explores a number of myths surrounding diplomatic crisis communication practice and provides a number of strategic methods on how MFAs may best move past these myths in order to create a crisis communication strategy which is effective and measurable.

Pointing out the fact that the question of getting digital diplomacy “right” has become a priority of many MFAs, *Corneliu Bjola* critically examines the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying the concept of digital diplomatic impact. He argues that the nature of the impact and the method of measuring it are very much linked to each other to the extent that the very act of measuring shapes the type of impact we may seek to capture. As a way of dealing with this challenge, the paper develops a model of impact assessment based on five principles of digital conduct: listening, prioritisation, hybridisation, engagement and adaptation.

To conclude, digital diplomacy is here to stay and its influence is likely to grow in the coming years as the process of digitalisation of MFAs gradually expands into more areas of diplomatic activity. While transitioning from a pioneering to a more mature stage of development, digital diplomacy will have to grapple with some difficult questions regarding its strategic agenda, the capacity to influence foreign audiences, the evolving format of service delivery for nationals, the communication limits in times of crises and the overall effectiveness and impact of its actions. By shedding some light on these questions, the contributions in this forum seek to provide a sober analysis of the promises and challenges to be faced by digital diplomacy in the near future.

References:

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