What is Digital Diplomacy, and how is it Practiced around the World? A brief introduction

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Ilan Manor

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Ilan Manor

Department of International Development

University of Oxford

On April of 2015, a devastating earthquake shook Nepal killing more than 8,000 people. Within hours of the deadly quake, India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) launched a dedicated twitter channel through which it coordinated consular aid to Indians stranded in Nepal. Tweets published by the MEA included the emergency contact numbers for the Indian embassy in Kathmandu, information on flights scheduled to transport civilians from Nepal back to India and updates on India's assistance in search and rescue operations. This is but one example of how digitalization has impacted diplomatic institutions and diplomats in a process generally referred to as digital diplomacy.
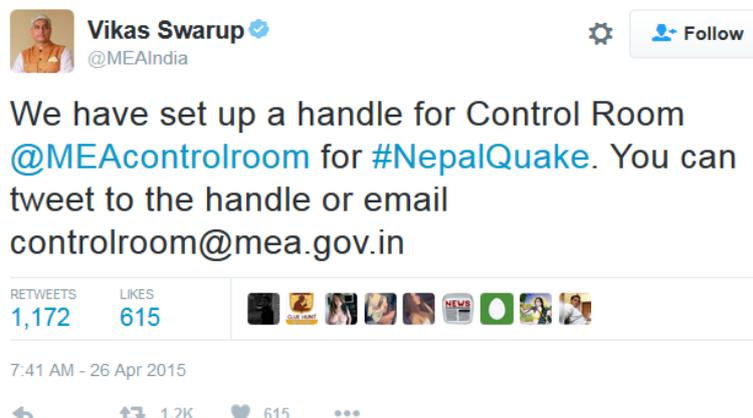
(tweet published on the MEA's twitter channel, 26/04/2016)

Buy what is digital diplomacy? How can it best be defined? This is a vexing question given the myriad of ways in which digitalization has impacted the practice of diplomacy. Arriving at such a definition becomes even more elusive when taking into account that scholars and practitioners also use the terms net diplomacy, social media diplomacy, diplomacy 2.0 and cyber diplomacy[1].

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[1] See Costigan, S. S. (2012). Cyberspaces and Global Affairs. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

This article aims to offer a definition of digital diplomacy. To do so, it first identifies certain events and processes that led to the emergence of digital diplomacy. Next, it demonstrates the manner in which digital diplomacy enables diplomats to overcome many of the limitations of traditional diplomacy. The article also explores the challenges of practicing digital diplomacy before ending with a definition of the term.

So what is Digital Diplomacy?

Before defining digital diplomacy it may be beneficial to identify events and processes that led MFAs (Ministries of Foreign Affairs) to adopt digital tools. One such event was the Arab Spring of 2010. As Professor Phillip Seib of the University of Southern California has argued[2], MFAs were taken by surprise by these democratic Arab revolts as they were not monitoring the environment in which these revolts took shape- that of Facebook. While Facebook did not cause the Arab Spring, it did serve as a modern day town square in which digital citizens came together to openly criticize their governments, an occurrence that could never have happened offline. Following the Arab Spring, MFAs began to migrate online so as to better anticipate events in foreign countries.

The second process that led to the emergence of digital diplomacy was terrorist groups' use of the internet to recruit youths to Jihadi movements[3]. In an attempt to combat such activities, and prevent terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda from gaining online support, the US State Department took to the internet in order to wage a war of ideas and win over the hearts and minds of Muslim internet users.

The third, and final process that led diplomats to adopt digital tools was the fact that these were being used by journalists and news organizations[4]. Diplomats have traditionally sought to influence how the media portrays events, actors and even countries given that the media shapes public opinion. In addition, MFAs rely on journalists and the media for information regarding events in foreign countries. Thus, once the media migrated online, MFAs were soon to follow.

Taken together, these three processes suggest that digital diplomacy is actually social media diplomacy. But this is not entirely the case. Ambassadors now use messaging applications

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[2] See Real Time Diplomacy (2012) by Seib
[3] See Digital Diplomacy: The Internet, The battle for Ideas & US Foreign Policy (2010) by Hallams
[4] See Are We there Yet: Have MFAs Realized the Potential of Digital Diplomacy (2016) by Manor

such as WhatsApp in order to influence UN deliberations as they take place. In addition, MFAs have launched virtual embassies in virtual worlds in order to brand their nation.

Therefore, digital diplomacy includes a variety of digital tools that far exceed that of social media. While digitalization has brought with it many benefits, it is not without its challenges. It may thus be useful to explore such benefits and challenges before arriving at a definition of digital diplomacy.

Digital Diplomacy- Overcoming the Limitations of Traditional Diplomacy

Traditional diplomacy was based on representation. An Ambassador served as one king's representative to the court of another king. This ambassador was also "extraordinary and plenipotentiary" meaning that is was within his purview to negotiate and sign treaties on behalf of his king. Yet in the age of ICTS (information and communication technologies) one sovereign, or Prime Minister, may simply call his counterpart thus rendering the Ambassador not so extraordinary. Likewise, in the age of diplomatic summitry (such as G20 meetings), leaders come together to directly negotiate with one another.

But while ICTs have reduced an ambassador's agency opposite a foreign leader, they have increased his agency opposite foreign populations. SNS (social networking sites) such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram enable diplomats and embassies to converse online with foreign populations and create relationships with them. Thus, digital diplomacy enables one to overcome the limitations of traditional diplomacy and continuously engage with a large and diverse audience. Notably, it is the two-way communicative nature of social media that represents the fundamental difference between digital diplomacy and 20th century diplomacy practiced via radio or television[5].

Another limitation of traditional diplomacy was lack of representation. Consider for example that the Emperor of Ethiopia had decided to banish the Swedish Ambassador from his court. Not only would there be no communication between the two countries, but the Swedish Ambassador would also be unable to communicate with Ethiopian citizens be it in order to stimulate trade between both countries, strengthen political ties or even narrate his countries policies in Africa.

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[5] See Digital Diplomacy: Theory & Practice (2015) by Bjola & Holms; Diplomacy in the Digital Age (2015) by Hocking & Melissen

Nowadays, however, lack of representation does not necessarily infer lack of communication as MFAs can create virtual embassies instead of physical ones. Such was the case with Virtual Embassy Teheran, a web based embassy launched by the US state Department in December of 2011[6]. Through this website, the US State Department hoped to converse online with Iranian citizens, an occurrence that could not happen offline as both nations do not have diplomatic ties. Similarly, in 2007, the Swedish MFA launched a virtual embassy in the virtual world of Second Life. As Dr. James Pamment of Lund University explains[7], the embassy was meant to serve as a cultural hub that would showcase Swedish art through gallery exhibitions, lectures and concerts. Given that Second Life attracts millions of users from all over the world, this virtual embassy was actually the world's first global embassy.

If we return to the court of the Ethiopian Emperor, we may also consider that the Swedish Ambassador was the very embodiment of Sweden to all those at court. It was the Ambassador's duty to personify Swedish values, Swedish culture and even publicize Swedish accomplishments. To paraphrase Louis XIV, *the Ambassador was the State*. Yet such activities were usually limited to the court and thus failed to influence how the national citizenry viewed another country.

In modern diplomacy the art of shaping and promoting a country's image abroad is often referred to as nation branding. And digital tools have proven themselves a powerful medium for nation branding. One interesting example is Finland's national emoji application now available on the App Store. The application enables users to use a variety of emoji's, or images that are representative of Finland's culture and history. Through this project, which attracted mass media attention, Finland was able to brand itself as a vibrant, technologically oriented and humoristic nation challenging the common perception of Finland as a dark and desolate country.

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[6] See Is it the Medium or the Message? Social Media, American Public Relations & Iran (2012) by Metzgar
[7] See New Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century (2013) by Pamment

(Image of Finland Emoji Application in the iTunes Store)

Other MFAs employ social media to brand their nation. Given that self-portraits in the age of social media are known as Selfies, social media based branding may be conceptualized as Selfie diplomacy[8]. The Kenyan foreign ministry, for instance, has been using its SNS accounts to brand Kenya as the financial gateway to Africa and an emerging technological powerhouse. Poland, on the other hand, has been crafting a different Selfie labelling itself the Heart of Europe.

Lastly, as was the case with extraordinary Ambassadors, diplomats have been using digital tools in order to create trans-national networks. At times, such networks may include MFAs and NGOs who collaborate on advocacy campaigns. Such was the case with UK Foreign Office's campaign to End Sexual Violence in Conflicts[9]. Through a global network of civil society organizations, individuals and diplomats, the Foreign Office aimed to influence policy and prevent sexual violence which is rampant during times of armed conflict.

Other foreign ministries aim to foster networks with their Diasporas[10]. One example of these activities is the Indian MEA's Know India programme that targets second generation Diaspora (i.e., children of immigrants). The Know India programme website offers a range of activities for second generation Diasporas so that these retain their cultural heritage and a link to their country of origin.

The Challenges of Digital Diplomacy

One of the greatest challenges of digital diplomacy lies in its conversational nature. Following their migration online, diplomats and diplomatic institutions have been forced to

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[8] See America's Selfie: How the US Portrays itself on its Social Media Accounts (2015) by Manor & Segev
[9] See Digital Diplomacy as Transmedia Engagement (2015) by Pamment
[10] See Practicing Digital Diaspora Diplomacy (2016) by Bjola

contend with a vocal and unpredictable online public[11]. Indeed, verbal attacks and hate speech against diplomats are an inseparable part of digital diplomacy.

Additionally, MFAs' online activities may soon cause online controversy. Such was the case with the Selfie below published by the US First Lady Michele Obama. In the selfie, Obama holds a sign with the hashtag "Bring Back Our Girls", referencing the abduction of some 250 Nigerian school girls by the Islamist Boko Haram group. The Selfie was meant to raise media attention to this abduction and indicate that the release of the girls was a US foreign policy priority.

(tweet published by First Lady, 8/05/2014)

Yet what followed was a social media campaign by Twitter users denouncing the First Lady. Users soon uploaded their own Selfies baring the hashtag "Bring Back You Drones", referencing the Obama administrations affinity to drone strikes against suspected terrorists. Thus, Obama's Selfie reignited the online conversation regarding US morality in its War on Terror.

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[11] See Corporate Diplomacy in the Information Age: Catching Up to the Dispersal of Power (2011) by Haynal

(image source: http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/michelle-obama-s-bringbackourgirls-sign)

An additional challenge lies in MFAs' need to maintain their online diplomatic empires. In order to attract social media users to their accounts, MFAs must create attractive social media content. In order to brand their nation, MFAs must converse with online publics and respond to questions and comments. In order to influence news coverage MFAs must follow journalists online and in order to predict events in foreign countries they must follow other diplomatic institutions. These all demand substantial resources. This challenge becomes evident when one realizes the size of MFAs' digital diplomacy apparatuses. The US State Department, for instance, manages an empire of some 1,000 social media accounts[12].

It is also worth noting that digital diplomacy is not practiced in a vacuum. Indeed one MFA's online content may immediately be contrasted by another. For instance, the Hamas group that controls the Gaza strip recently published a new YouTube video depicting life in Gaza. This video was part of Hamas' election campaign and it therefore portrayed Gaza as a bustling city with an emerging economy, beautiful beaches and large communal parks.

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[12] See Social Media at State: Power, Practice and Conceptual Limits for US Public Diplomacy (2012) by Hayden

(images from Hamas election video)

But immediately after this video was released, Israeli diplomats used it to infer that Hamas had been lying in recent years by depicting Gaza as the victim of a brutal Israeli military siege. It is this example that demonstrates that digital diplomacy is a competitive arena in which MFAs and diplomats bide over audience and media attention while attempting to discredit one another.

Digital diplomacy also presents certain technical difficulties. The first of these is Bots which are computer programs that are meant to imitate Internet users and post certain comments and opinions on SNS and websites. By using Bots, one nation can impact the social media discourse in another. For instance, it has been alleged that Russia uses Bots in order to create a swarm of online criticism against German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Regular internet users, that visit social media sites or even online newspapers, will therefore get the impression that many in Germany oppose the Chancellor and her migration polices. In this manner, Bots warp online discourse and people's perception of reality.

Algorithms present an additional difficulty. Social networking sites are all based on algorithms that are meant to tailor our online experience. For instance, an algorithm may detect our political affiliation, world view and even sexual orientation. The algorithms than exposes us primarily to content that confers with our opinions and beliefs. As such, algorithms are actually bubbles that limit what we know about the world. This is a major challenge for MFAs and diplomats looking to alter the manner in which their nation is perceived. If, for instance, a social media user is inclined to support Palestinian statehood, it is unlikely that he will be exposed to content posted online by the Israeli MFA. Likewise, a social media user who is critical of the US is unlikely to be offered articles on US aid to Syria

in his Facebook feed. It is therefore incumbent on diplomats to attempt and crack these algorithmic bubbles, a task which to date has proven most problematic.

A Definition of Digital Diplomacy

This article aimed to offer but a glimpse into the emerging world of digital diplomacy. Through a series of examples, it also aimed to demonstrate that digital diplomacy is a global phenomenon. From Nairobi to Delhi, and Lima to Ottawa, MFAs and diplomats are embracing digital tools. This process offers both great rewards, and great challenges. Finally, the article illustrates the fact that digital diplomacy is more than just tweeting. It is a conceptual shift in diplomatic practice that places and emphasis on conversing with foreign populations. It is a cultural shift which requires that MFA share information rather than guard it. And it is a technological shift that necessitates that diplomats develop digital skills spanning from knowledge of social media algorithms to the writing of computer programs and smartphone applications.

For some diplomats it is a time of innovation and experimentation. For others, it is a culture shock.

It is this realization that demands a definition of digital diplomacy that is both inclusive and particular, that is both optimistic and cautious. Thus, this article ends with the following definition of digital diplomacy-

The positive and negative impact digitalization has had on the practice of diplomacy at both the institutional and personal level

Author Bio:

Ilan Manor is PhD student at the University of Oxford. His research focuses on the manner in which foreign ministries use social media during times of geo-political crises. His book *Are We There Yet: Have MFAs Realized the Potential of Digital Diplomacy* was recently published as part of Brill's Research Perspectives in Diplomacy and Foreign Policy. His analysis of America's Selfie (with Elad Segev) was recently published in *Digital Diplomacy: Theory & Practice* (Routledge). He has contributed to the *Hague Journal of Diplomacy* and *Global Affairs.* He blogs on the issue of digital diplomacy at www.digdipblog.com