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Crafting strategic MFA communication policies during times of political crisis: a note to MFA policy makers

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From the power of the hashtag to frame political discourse online, to the use of online messenger services such as Whatsapp to conduct press briefings, the technological revolution has had a substantial impact on the practice of crisis communication. From their extensive reach capabilities to the instant power of connection, popular online platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are demonstrating to their users and observers alike that the age of the *digital* – in particular the age of *social media* – has altered how we now practice and perceive the role (and power) of communication during times of political crisis. However not all has been smooth sailing, with such shifts in communication strategies creating an increasing amount of hyperbolic discourse or "myths" concerning what diplomatic actors are actually doing online. These myths have been informed by the *possible* or *expected* power of online technologies and not by what is actually happening in practice. Therefore if communication strategies are to become truly effective in the digital age, such hyperbolic discourse surrounding the technological revolution needs to be dissected and discussed. We need to separate hype from genuine transformations within the digital crisis communication arena, and move the discussion from that of an online presence focus, to one which is centred around strategic output and effectiveness. Thus situated within these changing technological shifts, this article seeks to explore a number of myths surrounding diplomatic crisis communication practice and provide a number of strategic methods on how ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) may best move past these myths in order to create a crisis communication strategy which is effective, and measurable. At its core, this article provides MFA policy makers and practitioners with a road map for strategic crisis communication success.

Keywords: social media; communication; crisis; diplomacy; ministries of foreign affairs; digital diplomacy

Introduction

From the power of the political hashtag, to the use of social media to announce Russia's expulsion from the G8, the technological revolution has had a substantial impact on the practice of crisis communication. From their extensive reach capabilities, to the instant power of connection, popular online platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and all those residing in between are demonstrating, to their users and observers alike, that the age of the *digital* – in particular the age of *social media* – has substantially altered how we now practice and perceive the role (and power) of communication during times of political crisis.

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While this restructuring of crisis communication – in both its practice and power – has proved itself a *force motrice* of change, perhaps no other organization and its culture has been more affected by the digital (re) evolution than ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) and the diplomats who serve them. In the context of the rise in power of civil society (Causey & Howard, 2013), the globalization of public opinion, and the unprecedented increase in new means of communication (Hayden, 2012), the digital age has forced MFAs to reassess, repackage, and ultimately transform their crisis communication strategies. Within this new ecosystem MFA crisis communication can longer be confined to interacting with elite policy makers and journalists, but instead carried out through digital forums (a large proportion of which are public), crafted by agents of all standing, and directed towards an audience group which is rapidly increasing in its size, delineation and ability to directly react to MFA statements. Furthermore, social media based communication is no longer perceived by MFAs as solely a press issue, but as a major strand of foreign policy through which ministries promote their values and positions on issues and events (Bjola & Jiang, 2015; Hallams, 2010; Natarajan, 2014). Therefore digital diplomats must now seek to absorb and master this very reality, if they wish to represent, negotiate, and inform themselves effectively and efficiently during times of political crisis.

However, despite the power of possibility which social media has brought to the diplomatic realm, one could conclude that not all has been smooth sailing. Such shifts in communication strategies have arguably created amongst MFAs an increasing amount of "myths" concerning what diplomatic actors are actually doing online. The term "myth" in this article is conceptualized first, by its ability to encompass a variety of distinct, but interlocking meanings, particularly when viewed through the lens of digital diplomatic practice. In short, myths are variations on a theme. For example, a myth can be viewed as a widely held but false belief (akin to fiction or lies), or simply a popular misconception, such as the use of an accepted modus operandi by diplomatic agents online during a crisis, or at its most basic, a factual statement which turns out not to be true. Through the "myths" chosen for analysis, this article seeks to debunk such misconceptions for diplomatic agents during times of political crisis, whilst simultaneously illustrating the complexity and variations of the term myth as it exists within the realm of digital diplomacy.

Furthermore, the majority of the conversation and practice surrounding online crisis communication strategies has primarily focused on *presence* rather than *strategy*; meaning that MFAs are arguably more concerned with whether or not they are being *seen* to use their online accounts, as opposed to whether or not they are actually using them to attain diplomatic goals. Following Riordan (2016) we define strategic digital diplomacy as the use of digital tools to achieve pre-defined and measurable goals. Thus with the constant discussion surrounding the potential of digital diplomacy, MFAs may be prone to being swept up in the hyperbolic discourse surrounding the "power of the digital" and are failing to translate this hype into effective communicative practice. Therefore if communication strategies are to become truly effective in the digital age, such hyperbolic discourse needs to be dissected and discussed. It is furthermore imperative that we begin to separate hype from genuine transformations within the digital crisis communication arena, and move the discussion from that of an online presence focus, to one which is centred on strategic output and effectiveness.

Thus, stemming from the acknowledgment of a disparity between belief and reality, this article aims to debunk four core but varied myths surrounding current diplomatic crisis communication practice and provide a number of methods on how MFAs may best move past these myths in order to create an effective and measurable crisis communication strategy. In short, this article provides MFA policy makers and practitioners with a road map for strategic crisis communication.

To achieve this aim, this article takes the form of three distinct parts. First, we provide a brief background analysis on the changing nature of diplomatic crisis communication during times of political crisis. Here we highlight the changing methods of communication tools, the speed of

communication itself and comment on the altered and increased levels of engagement MFAs now experience online. Second, we outline four core myths or digital practices which MFAs believe to be true during a crisis, namely the relationship between MFAs and the Press, the crafting of online dialogue (or lack therefore) between government to peer (G-2-P) and government to government (G-2-G), the creation of unique social media campaigns and the centrality of headquarters (HQ). Using empirical case studies we seek to de-bunk these varied myths, thus demonstrating the fine line between hype and reality. Third, within each crisis communication myth, we provide remedies on how MFAs may best achieve effective crisis communication strategies and work towards creating consistent and workable communication practices for both their central HQ and embassies alike. This article therefore contributes to the increasing policy literature on crisis communication and work towards professionalizing digital diplomacy crisis communication among diplomats and their institutions. The article concludes with suggesting avenues for further exploration and possible limitations of this research.

This article is not the first to call for a strategic approach to MFA communication which focuses on achieving pre-defined goals. Ben D. Mor (2012) has analysed the manner in which governments can strategically narrate their actions to avert potential damage to a nation's image and credibility. Mor's conceptualization of strategic public diplomacy focuses on the creation of narratives that may distance a country from a negative event or portray a negative event in a more positive light (e.g. accidental deaths of civilians during military operations). Similarly, Natarajan (2014) views public diplomacy as the use of strategic narratives that demonstrate the manner in which a nation conforms to values and norms deemed as desirable by the international community. Like other scholars, Natarajan and Mor link strategic public diplomacy with strategic soft power as both focus on positive national images (Hayden, 2012; Melissen, 2005; Nye, 2008; Seib, 2012) While exploring the Danish government's response to the Prophet Muhamad cartons, Olsson (2013) conceptualizes strategic public diplomacy as the creation of messages that resonate with the values and norms of cultural and geographically distant populations (e.g. Muslim communities both in Denmark and abroad). Finally, Zhang (2006) argues that national images hold strategic value as they facilitate the goal of fostering relations with foreign populations.

It is our contention that the strategic approach to public diplomacy must also be implemented in digital diplomacy. Indeed, for too long digital diplomacy has been reduced to the counting of Facebook followers and re-tweets. In this article, we focus on several strategies that may be employed by MFAs to effectively manage communication during political crises. We regard digital diplomacy during a crisis as a subset of public diplomacy given that during crises MFAs aim to narrate their policies and actions thus influencing the world view of foreign populations, the media and other diplomatic institutions. As such, our endeavour is akin to that taken by Nye in the early 1990s – understanding fundamental change in the international system and asking: What are the best methods to influence international affairs? We narrow this question to focus on the best methods to influence the most salient actors during a crisis, and seek to provide concrete recommendations on how best to achieve this.

Press and MFAs – a unique relationship

The first myth we aim to debunk relates to the online interaction between diplomatic institutions and official media sources. In this case, the myth is a factual statement which turns out not to be true when pressed.

Diplomats have traditionally regarded journalists as an important target audience during times of political crisis, given that the media has long been seen as one of the primary crafters of public discourse. This central role has shown to shape not only public opinion, but also policy makers – an undeniably powerful avenue to allow diplomatic agents to achieve their aims during times of

crisis (or otherwise) (Bloch-Elkon, 2007; Brewer, 2006; Entman, 2004; Jacobs & Page, 2005). Indeed, it was this very recognition of the media's powerful role and their migration online which motivated MFAs to turn their attention online and to adopt the use of social media platforms for official diplomatic use (Seib, 2012).

However, despite this motivation, it seems journalists and media organizations have yet to flock to digital diplomatic channels. Which leads us to our first myth: *that news outlets follow diplomats online*. To validate this argument we created a sample consisting of 538 Twitter accounts of news organizations throughout the world. The sample included global news outlets (e.g. CNN, BBC, Al-Jazeera), local newspapers (Financial Times, Kyiv Post, The Jordan Times) and diplomatic correspondents and editors. Next, we evaluated the extent to which these news outlets and journalists follow the Twitter accounts of 69 MFAs from Europe, North America, South America, Latin America, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania (See Appendix 1).

As can be seen in Table 1, our analysis revealed that the average MFA's Twitter channel is followed by a mere seven news outlets and journalists. Indeed 59% of the MFAs in our sample attracted less than five news outlets while even global powers are only able to attract a small number of news outlets, as is the case with the US State Department (109 followers out of a possible 538), the UK Foreign Office (69 followers), the Russian MFA (37 followers) and the EU External Action Service (34 followers).

Based on these results we argue that if MFAs seek to influence global coverage of crisis, and to frame their governments' actions – which most are certainly looking to do – they need to actively reach out to journalists and news outlets, and not rely on the myth that the media will simply follow them with no prior prompt.

One method of attracting journalist and news organizations is to invite them to an online Q&A session with MFAs policy makers or spokespersons. This can be done during the crisis itself, and or even pre-emptively, so diplomats can establish relationships with the media before the crisis begins. To date, most MFAs use online Q&A sessions to interact with foreign populations. A similar technique could also be applied to journalists who would receive an online invitation to a Twitter press briefing to be followed by an online press news conference. Such a use of social media may also enable MFAs to target specific journalists or newspapers. For instance, the US State Department could brief journalists and bloggers in Ukraine regarding its stance on the Crimean referendum. Such briefings hold further value, as they can help facilitate the formation of relationships between MFAs and influential journalists at the national level.

Alongside this strategy, an additional, more private, approach might be considered, with the use of the WhatsApp messaging service. As a Business Insider Intelligence report recently found, messaging apps such as WhatsApp have now surpassed social media in monthly active users (McKitterick, 2016). MFAs could capitalize on this shift by creating dedicated WhatsApp groups, which could include journalists, bloggers and news outlets alongside the MFA's spokespersons. More concretely, these groups could have the potential to serve as a platform for digital press briefings, before being dissolved. In some instances, politicians have already realized the potential of WhatsApp. During the 2015 elections in Israel, Israeli candidates partook in virtual town hall meetings by conversing digitally with large WhatsApp groups (Stern, 2015).

The second element of this myth is that MFAs routinely follow one another on social media, thereby enabling countries to signal to one another during the crisis itself. By signalling we refer

Table 1. Number of news outlets and journalists following MFAs on Twitter.

Average	Median	Minimum	Maximum
7.75	3	0	109

to the practice of directly or indirectly illustrating your foreign policy positions online, and doing so strategically, that is sending online signals which portray to some degree foreign policy interests, with the goal that others may see it and take it into account when formulating their own policy. While network analyses have demonstrated that MFAs and UN embassies do indeed follow one another in large numbers (Manor, 2016b), other studies suggest that digital diplomacy content does not influence policy makers to the extent that the hyperbolic discourse surrounding digital diplomacy would have us believe. Indeed, while analysing the social media models of four MFAs, Manor (2016a) found that digital diplomacy units seldom analyse content published by other ministries. Moreover, digital diplomacy units do not regularly transmit social media content published by other MFAs to relevant desks and policy makers. Thus, these findings suggest that the use of social media for diplomatic signalling may actually be limited in its current state.

As was the case with news organizations, we argue that MFAs must gain their peers' attention on social media. One way to achieve this aim is to actually tag other diplomatic institutions when using images in tweets. For instance, in the tweet below, Russia's Ambassador to the UK quoted a statement by President Putin regarding relations between Russia and the UK. The Ambassador also uploaded an image and tagged the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (see lower part of image). This method ensures that not only the tagged account will see the message, but also the public itself. Such a public link between accounts also creates additional pressure on the tagged account to respond. While MFAs need not follow this example in every instance, such practices may be applied to selected tweets, which are meant for, or have the direct intention of, signalling foreign policy positions between diplomatic institutions during crises.

G-2-P and G-2-G dialogue

Myth number two concerns the belief that social media platforms have created, or at least paved the way for, increasingly open and direct dialogue between official agents and their publics during times of political crisis (or otherwise). In this instance, the myth relates to popular misconceptions, or expectations, surrounding the "powers" and ability of social media, and it speaks not just to the nature of technology but the role of government and the agency of individuals within a particular government structure.

Indeed, the core belief held is that social media has brought with it the power for diplomatic agents to speak directly to both their national citizens and their wider international audience, respond to their questions and address their concerns (Hayden, 2012; Kampf, Manor & Segev, 2015; Metzgar, 2012). As both academics and practitioners we often hear about the power of online platforms to allow for direct and open communication between all those who hold, and engage with the digital device. However, it is important to note that digital environments are now heavily contested networks in which numerous actors offer their interpretations of events and bide over audience attention. Thus, one MFA's narrative may immediately be contrasted by another MFA active on the same network. Conversely, one MFA may also choose to support and strengthen another's narrative through shares and re-tweets. This use of network power is particularly useful for MFAs during times of political crises, where one of the primary aims of a ministry is to have its positions heard amongst an array of competing voices, and also be shown to do so. Indeed many MFAs speak out about this power and herald it as a way in which digital diplomacy has substantially altered diplomatic crisis communication.

But in practice what we are witnessing is a very different reality. Online embassies do not regularly engage in G-2-P dialogue, and are not harnessing the full potential of the online platforms they use. Manor (2016b) recently found that some MFAs still regard online audiences as volatile and unpredictable and thus fear online attacks and loss of control over the communication process itself. However, we argue that it is exactly during times of political crisis that two-way exchanges of information between diplomats and online publics are at their most crucial and carry the greatest strategic values. This stems from the realization that online publics are well informed, opinionated and clamouring to be heard (Hayden, 2012; Haynal, 2011) and that during times of crisis, such publics constitute a vocal public sphere in which issues are debated, framed and understood. Indeed such debates may also impact the manner in which crises are interpreted by the press, as journalists now routinely canvass the "tweetosphere" to understand public sentiment (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). Thus, given their strategic goal of shaping the public's understanding of events, and narrating their nations' actions and policies, MFAs cannot afford to be absent from online conversations. Moreover, two-way exchanges of information during times of crisis may demonstrate a country's confidence in its policies and actions, given a willingness to openly exchange views with volatile online publics, as well as signalling their country's commitment to diplomacy, given the practice of engagement and dialogue.

One variable that may limit online embassy engagement during crises is fear of backlash from social media users. Indeed, online publics are vocal and opinionated and during times of uncertainty they may use social media engagement to attack countries and their policies. However, we argue that there is an important distinction between comments posted by social media users and questions. Unlike statements of opinion, questions may be seen as the starting point for an exchange of opinions. Previous studies have demonstrated that when social media users ask questions online they are opening channels of dialogue and signalling a willingness to openly evaluate the answers they receive (Efron & Winget, 2010; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Morris, Teevan, & Panovich, 2010; Theunissen & Wan Noordin 2012). As such, online questions should be regarded by

diplomats as opportunities for two-way interaction and influence as opposed to statements of opinion which are one sided and therefore do not demand an answer.

To demonstrate the importance of two-way exchanges of information during crises we evaluated a Twitter Q&A with Israel's Ambassador to the USA held during the 2014 Gaza War. Here Ambassador Ron Dermer took to Twitter in order to answer questions regarding Israel's military operation in the Gaza strip. What soon followed was a mélange of harsh statements of opinion criticizing Israel and its policies alongside open exchange of opinions (Manor, 2016b). While some social media users used the Q&A as an opportunity to refer to Israeli leaders as war criminals, blame the Israeli army of killing innocent civilians and publish images of wounded Palestinians, other users asked the Ambassador about Israel's alleged bombing of hospitals in the Gaza strip, its attempts to warn the civilian population of impending aerial attacks, Hamas' violation of ceasefires and question Israel's lack of regard for Palestinian suffering.

Each of these issues was addressed by the Ambassador, thus enabling him to narrate his country's policies and actions, illustrate a roadmap for resolution of the crisis and articulate the Israeli government's objectives. Therefore, while not all users who monitored the Q&A session were convinced by the Ambassador's answers, it is possible that those posing questions did listen to the answers offered by the Ambassador, or the least had the opportunity to. Notably, studies have suggested that Q&A sessions may also have an impact on lurkers, social media users who monitor online conversation without partaking in them (Khatib, Dutton & Thelwall, 2012.) In addition, two-way exchanges of information may have exponential impacts as social media users "like", "share" and "re-tweet" diplomat statements among their own social networks.

As such, Q&A sessions during crises should be viewed as a strategic tool enabling diplomats to influence the world view of large and diverse audiences while managing their national image.

With that said, one of the main limitations of such Q&A sessions is that the media may tend to focus on any negative attention received, in this case the verbal attacks against diplomats and MFAs. For instance, Russia Today (2014) branded Dermer's Twitter Q&A as an epic failure, while Business Insider referred to it as a complete disaster, citing many of the graphic images hurled at the Israeli diplomat (LoGiurato, 2014). We maintain that such negative coverage may actually be worthwhile, as two-way exchanges of information could enable diplomats to partake and shape the online discourse during a crisis whilst also laying the foundations for the creation of relationships with foreign populations.

The creation of unique social media campaigns

The third myth we seek to debunk is that if MFAs wish to be seen as the most innovative and effective online during times of crises, they should launch unique social media campaigns consisting of images, logos and hashtags. This myth concerns the creation of online content during a crisis, and what content should be created, by whom and when. It is a myth of misconception. Such was the case with the US State Department's @TheIranDeal twitter channel (see tweet below) which aimed to market the nuclear agreement with Iran among domestic and international sceptics critics (Toosi, 2015). The main limitation of dedicated social media accounts is that an MFA must work hard to attract social networking sites users, journalists and the diplomatic milieu to such accounts. Moreover, dedicated accounts may draw attention away from an MFA's main Twitter account that already has an established following. Therefore if social media is to be used strategically in order to achieve well-defined and measurable goals, MFAs may simply have to join the choir.

But what does joining the choir entail? Well this would depend on an MFA's goals. If the goal is simply to increase the potential reach of social media content, an MFA may choose to "piggy-

back" on trending hashtags. Such an approach requires that MFAs identify, and adopt, trending hashtags that are already used by online publics. By "piggy-backing" on popular hashtags, MFAs may become part of the online conversation while also reaching a larger, more diverse, audience which far exceeds its number of followers. This is due to the fact that hashtags are tools for organized online discussions around specific topics (Wang, Wei, Liu, Zhou, & Zhang, 2011) and for expressing partnership in an online community (Yang, Sun, Zhang & Mei, 2012). Many MFAs already employ such strategies during consular crises. For example, following the 2014 earthquake in Nepal, the US, UK and Canadian MFAs all used the hashtag #NepalQuake which was already trending on Twitter, thus increasing their ability to reach citizens in need of aid. A similar approach may apply to political crises.

However, if an MFA's goal is to use social media in order to narrate its policies, and portray another country in a certain light, it may use dedicated hashtags. For instance, the hashtag #UnitedForUkraine, used by the US State Department during the Crimea crisis, was meant to illustrate that the USA and its allies were committed to Ukrainian territorial integrity while portraying Russia as isolated from the international community. The limitation of dedicated hashtags is that their popularity is much smaller than that of hashtags used by online publics, causing MFA tweets to fall on deaf ears.

We suggest that overcoming the aforementioned limitations may be achieved by collaboration with additional diplomatic institutions. One example of such a collaboration is the interplay between the State Department's @ThinkAgainTurnAway Twitter channel and the UK Foreign Office's @UKAgainstDaesh channel. Essentially, both channels are used to highlight the progress the coalition against Daesh (ISIS/ISIL) has made over 2016. What is unique is that both channels routinely re-tweet one another's content. Moreover, they both use the same hashtags: #DefeatingDaesh and #CoalitionProgress. By re-tweeting one another's content, the British and US MFAs are able to increase the reach of their content as they are not followed by the same social media users. This also means that each MFA's content reaches more diverse audiences. Moreover, we argue that by using the same hashtags, two or more MFAs may increase a hashtag's "trendiness" as well as its association with other hashtags used in relation to a crisis (i.e. association between #DefeatingDaesh and #Daesh hashtag).

To validate our argument we used the hashtagify application to measure the correlation between the hashtag #Daesh and three other hashtags. The first was #LifeUnderDaesh, used solely by the US State Department on its @ThinkAgainTurnAway channel. This hashtag had no correlation with the hashtag Daesh. However, the hashtag #DefeatingDaesh, used jointly by the US and UK MFAs, had a 19.7% correlation with the Daesh hashtag. Similarly, the #CoalitionProgress hashtag, used on both Twitter channels, had an 8.7% correlation with the Daesh hashtag. It is therefore possible that by using joint hashtags MFAs can increase the association between their hashtags and those used by online publics, thus shaping the online discourse while narrating their foreign policy goals and achievements during crises.

The centrality of HQ

From embassies on the ground to central ministries back home, the essence of communicative uniformity has long been heralded as a core belief within MFA organizations and has been strongly reinforced throughout practices of diplomatic communication. Indeed, during a time of crisis, nothing is seen as more damaging than having different representatives stating contradictory positions, particularly for organizations whose sole purpose is to present a uniform presence on national and foreign policies. However, this fear of contradictory opinions, while worthy in itself, has arguably contributed to the creation of a "culture of communication hesitation" amongst embassies on the ground during times of crisis – meaning that embassies may not

wish to speak until their central ministry has been seen to do so publicly. Or in some more extreme cases, created a complete culture of silence amongst embassies on the ground, with serving diplomats choosing consciously or not to give over their power of communication to the MFA itself.

In essence, the prevailing belief or modus operandi here (in this case the myth this article is seeking to debunk) is that HQ should have total real-time communicative control over all digital platforms, even whilst events are happening in real-time on the ground. However, this article believes that this modus operandi should be strongly reconsidered, and argues that if social media platforms are to be used strategically during times of political crisis, and with the best effect, the relationship between the embassy and its HQ must be restructured in a manner which is more relevant for the digital age. Although each actor will continue to play an important role within the crisis communication process, their functions will be altered, or at least more defined.

First, HQ should continue to remain the primary site of intelligence gathering, and policy analysis. This is due to the fact that HQ has the greatest access to a wide variety of intelligence sources, a strong network of actors with whom they regularly engage with, and the tools and skills necessary to carry out in-depth analysis on the information provided. Moreover, HQ are the ones that coordinate policy and action with other government ministries and agencies, an important role given the "whole of government" approached to diplomacy (Golberg & Kaduck, 2011). Yet it is the embassy on the ground that should take primary control of *disseminating* the MFA's crisis messages online. This emerges from the argument that MFA social media accounts attract diverse audiences, which include the domestic population, foreign populations and other diplomatic institutions. As such, these channels target a wide audience, with a focus on numerous global issues. But it is embassies on the ground that hold the coveted market of the local population in which the crisis is being played out, the local press and local policy makers. Thus, embassies have the ability to tailor social media with regard to their follower's local culture, history, language, norms as well as their desires and preferences. In times of crisis, embassies may therefore leverage social media to narrate their nation's policies and actions in a manner that resonates with local audiences and gains their support (Olsson, 2013). In addition, embassies are arguably more familiar with local influential opinion makers (e.g. journalists and bloggers) and thus may target such individuals during crises in order to shape the local coverage of events. Such influence may also impact the global coverage of a crisis, as global news outlets (e.g. CNN and Al-Jazeera) now routinely supplement their coverage of crises with content authored by local citizen journalists and bloggers (Seib, 2012; Xiguang & Jing, 2010).

Finally, during a crisis itself, embassies also have the advantage of being present on the ground and having more information at their disposal than MFAs, a crucial advantage given that political crises are characterized by rapidly changing circumstances and uncertainty. Embassies' informational advantage may therefore enable them to be more effective online as they can comment on events in real-time as they take place. Such a practice is known as real-time diplomacy (Seib, 2012). However, the information gathered by the embassy on the ground must also be transmitted back to HQ in order to ensure effective crisis management.

To achieve this strategic use of social media embassies require three things. First, digital diplomacy managers at the embassy level must be trained in social media based crisis communication including the manner in which each platform should be used, rules for engaging with online critics, techniques for assessing online impact and the ability to identify online influencers and influential online forums. MFAs may empower embassy social media managers in two ways: training or simulations and emergency guidelines. Norway's MFA, for instance, has specific social media guidelines that are used by embassies during consular crises. Similar guides could be developed for political crises.

Secondly, during crises, social media managers need easy and immediate access to other high ranking diplomats at the embassy who may be called on to authorize or aid in formulating digital diplomacy content. This again can be achieved by goal oriented groups on messaging apps. Finally, embassies and HQ should seek to support each other in their dual but defined roles. Here MFAs can support embassies by gathering and providing the most up to date intelligence regarding it, creating attractive online content (i.e. videos, infographics and images), making officials available for online Q&A sessions, monitoring the online activity of other diplomatic institutions, and conducting network analyses and sentiment analysis to evaluate the local online discourse and to fine-tune online communication. Embassies, on the other hand, can provide HQ with on the ground intelligence which can help them better support their policies, maintain open and frequent communication with HQ during the crisis itself, and work towards disseminating effectively and swiftly the message required. It is therefore our contention that during crises, embassies and HQ must continually exchange information, thereby creating a feedback loop that enables message resonance and impact.

Conclusion

The digital revolution has altered the practice of crisis communication. While both state and non-state actors alike have been affected by the digital (re) evolution, perhaps no other organization and its culture has been more so than MFAs and the agents who serve them. Indeed, some have argued that MFAs are in the midst of a culture clash given their institutional affinity to information guarding as opposed to the Web's culture of information sharing (Copeland, 2013; Wichowski, 2015). Subsequently, MFAs have become swept up in the hyperbolic discourse surrounding the "power of the digital" and are therefore failing to translate this hype into effective communicative practice. Thus what emerges is an increasing disparity between what MFAs currently believe to be a workable crisis communication strategy during times of political crisis versus what they are actually committing to in practice.

Riordan (2016) argues that strategic digital diplomacy aims to achieve pre-defined and measurable goals. Stemming from the acknowledgment of belief versus reality, this article has sought to debunk four core myths surrounding current diplomatic crisis communication practice: a factual statement, which turned out not to be true (MFA–press relationships), a myth based on popular misconceptions surrounding the "powers" and ability of social media (G-2-P and G-2-G dialogue), a myth concerning the creation of content (the creation of unique social media campaigns) and finally an accepted modus operandi within the crisis communication toolbox (the centrality of HQ). By debunking these varied, but prevalent myths, this article provided a number of recommendations that may enable MFAs to improve strategic communication during crisis. These include reaching out to journalists and media outlets in order to effectively narrate government action, the use of online engagement, joint social media campaigns to reach large and diverse social media users and a re-distribution of digital tasks between the embassy and HQ so as to improve message resonance. Each of these recommendations aims to enable MFAs to transition conceptually and operationally from online presence to impact. Thus, this article serves as a roadmap for diplomats seeking to realize the full potential of crisis communication.

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