Ben Wagner

Agile, engaged, effective diplomacy? Finding the digital in diplomacy[1]

Table of Contents

'Digital diplomacy' has become an increasingly common fad when discussing diplomacy in the last two decades. It's become almost impossible to discuss modern diplomatic practice without mentioning the influence of digital technologies, how they influence and shape both the creation of foreign policy and the work of diplomats alike. While there are doubtless significant changes and challenges brought in through the focus on digital diplomacy, most authors mean very different things when they say digital diplomacy. It thus seems reasonable to ask the question, what is substantively different between the challenges faced by diplomats and diplomacy through digital technologies and the comparable challenges faced by all other employees, sectors and societies, which are struggling with similar challenges around shifts in digital technologies?

To this end, the following paper argues six main points. First, that it is not sufficient to merely identify the differences between 'old' and 'new' diplomacy, but also between diplomats and other public servants, or even more broadly any other line of work which is affected by a shift in digital technologies. Second, building on the work of Jan Melissen[2] this paper argues that a tool-based technology approach currently permeates digital diplomacy debates. It is unhelpful to think of shifts leading to digital diplomacy as providing additional tools; but rather one should see them as changing the context in which diplomacy takes place, as part of socio-technical systems. Third, this paper argues that diplomacy is going through a similar period of self-doubt and introspection as can be observed in other areas heavily affected by digital technologies such as journalism, taxi driving or working in a call centre, just to name a few. Such periods of uncertainty and systemic change can however also be productive in that they enable a clarification of what diplomacy or foreign policy 'is,' could and should be.

Fourth, this also involves mainstreaming a deeper understanding of the role of technology in society across the whole diplomatic corps. Competence in digital diplomacy topics cannot be 'siloed off' within public diplomacy or digital foreign policy units alone. Fifth, all increases in digital diplomacy efforts come with a risk of dependency and vulnerability. This risk can only be adequately countered by strong and well-developed positions in Internet Foreign Policy. This leads to the sixth and final point which is that many of the responses developed have very little to do with technical solutions. Adapting to this new environment requires operational and institutional shifts that take advantage of the environment by changing the role that human beings are able to play in it.

1) Digital diplomacy vs. digital journalism

What challenges are specific to diplomacy that are different to the challenges of digitization in any other industry? It can be argued that diplomacy is just one of the many sectors being disrupted by digital technologies and that – at least in comparison to journalists – diplomats are in a comparatively relaxed position. As diplomats are public sector officials and credible comparative quantitative metrics for the success of diplomats' efforts are hard to define, diplomats are in the comparatively comfortable position of being able to innovate at their own pace. As a comparative example, it would be unlikely for a diplomat to lose their job due to a collapse in advertising revenue streams, which would very much be the case in the context of traditional journalism. Furthermore, massive changes to a diplomat's job description is far more likely to be slow in comparison to that of journalists. However, there are also considerable similarities:

- Both journalists and diplomats are surrounded by numerous 'new' actors who seem to be doing 'their job.'
- Both diplomacy and journalism are seen to be in crisis - a state at least partially created by technology.
- Both journalism and diplomacy are of

[2] Melissen/Caesar-Gordon, »"Digital Diplomacy" and the Securing of Nationals in a Citizen-Centric World«; Hocking/Melissen, *Diplomacy in the Digital Age*.

high importance for the functioning of societies, states and more broadly democracies.

– Effective communication at numerous different levels is at the core of what both journalists and diplomats do.

There are however important distinctions between diplomacy and journalism that can be indicative of areas where diplomacy is particularly affected by shifts in socio-technical environments:

– As public-sector employees, diplomats are embedded within a bureaucracy[3] designed to ensure transparency and accountability of their actions.

– The vast majority of the work that diplomats do is not meant for public consumption.

These differences have important consequences for shifts to digital diplomacy. The first and most important question to ask is not what the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in any given county is doing, but rather how modern the bureaucratic processes within a given state function? How efficient, effective and secure are the governmental file-sharing systems within different government agencies? How often do members of staff avoid using their publicly provided technology and instead use their personal phone or laptop to get the job done? When even German Chancellor Merkel prefers to use her personal phone, it seems apparent that some deficits may exist.

Scholars have long seen bureaucrats as technologically-embedded agents of the state yet diplomats seem to have escaped similar academic scrutiny.[4] While there is a considerable amount of literature on how decisions of public sector officials are being shaped by the technical environments

around them,[5] comparative studies about diplomats as part of bureaucratic structures are typically lacking. Bringing these two debates together could be of considerable value to the study of digital diplomacy and would help acknowledge MFAs as a form of public administration rather than just a 'special' case.

Part of the reason for this is the extent to which diplomats engage in informal practices based on networking, relationship building and informal diplomacy, which are harder to streamline and systematise than comparable actions by other government agencies. However, the example of frequent coordination and debate by large groups of diplomats over WhatsApp clearly indicates even informal practices require some degree of technological mediation in order to function effectively.

2) Digital technologies vs. digital human beings

It's not that Whatsapp is some kind of ‚killer app for diplomacy' or that effective diplomacy has somehow become impossible without it, but rather that the levels of diplomatic engagement shift naturally into the available spaces for them, especially those, which provide additional communication channels, respective of privacy, discretion, and convenience. Particularly after the Arab uprisings and overblown debates about the role of Facebook within it, there has been an increasingly vocal search for the next 'killer app,' or the next 'big thing' in technology.[6] This approach does not necessarily provide an accurate understanding of diplomacy, and unnecessarily focuses on a technical artefact as opposed to the relationship between diplomats, technology and society. This interrelationship is a far more complex case of human computer interaction than

---

[3] Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It.*

[4] Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services.*

[5] Fountain, *Building the Virtual State ,* »Challenges to Organizational Change«, »Information, Institutions and Governance«, »Paradoxes of Public Sector Customer Service«, »Toward a Theory of Federal Bureaucracy for the Twenty-First Century«.

[6] Wagner, »The New Media and Social Networks: Pointers from the Arab Uprisings«.

any one piece of technology can meaningfully change.

There seems to be a general suggestion that MFAs in smaller countries are better at dealing with the challenges of digital technologies than large ones. This is likely because they have simpler bureaucratic structures which are easier to adapt to new technological environments and due to resource constraints they are more easily accustomed to giving their staff greater levels of personal agency. For example, 'laptop embassies' in a country with only one staff member are becoming increasingly common among smaller countries' foreign representations. This institutional agility and willingness to embrace and adapt to new technical environments may thus be easier with less rather than more resources and staff. It also suggests that it is less large budgets and complex IT solutions that may be critical but rather MFAs taking a more agile and flexible perspective on existing bureaucratic arrangements.

3) So what is diplomacy?

Beyond responding flexibly, there is a broader on-going debate about what diplomacy 'is' or could be. This debate is helpful insofar as to reflect and expand the possibilities within the context of diplomacy. Defining what it is that makes diplomacy good diplomacy, what types of people need to be involved and what sort of support they need is an inherently valuable task.

It should however be noted that there is no need to 'overcome' this existential crisis of diplomacy, or for any political figure to proclaim all of these issues can be resolved. If anything, such statements are more likely to be politically motivated and counterproductive to the very nature of diplomacy. Engineering digital transformations remain a high profile political issue. Due to the considerable political attention and hype around this topic, it is also likely to lead to changes in institutional structures.[7] Such short-term oriented initiatives not only un-

dermine long-term trust in issues related to digital technologies as a whole, they also typically suggest that one technology or one initiative can solve all related issues. Instead it would be far more helpful to acknowledge that the entire context of diplomacy is changing in a way that does not allow for tick-box solutions. As difficult and uncomfortable as it may be, introspection and slow systematic change is exactly the right response to a difficult and rather fundamental challenge.

4) Mainstreaming vs. silos

In acknowledging that the challenges associated with digital diplomacy cannot be resolved overnight also lies an opportunity that allows for a different institutional perspective on the topic. A considerable number of MFAs have 'siloed off' this topic, with only two or three departments such as a press office, public diplomacy or technology policy department seen as competent and legitimate actors in this area. This means that at best the few dozen diplomats who are working in these silos are deluged with requests, while the rest of the organisation cannot engage with these challenges.

While the silos are certainly necessary, they are in no way sufficient to respond to the challenges of digital diplomacy. At worst they can even become a distraction from wider engagement in this area by considering themselves the only competent actors within the MFA. Given the current state of development of digital technologies and their likely trajectory in the future, every desk office and every ambassador needs to have at least a basic understanding of the issue and how this applies to their specific context. This is not a question of age or better training, but rather of a willingness to systematically mainstream certain issues. In a similar way to the manner in which some MFAs consider the aspect of gender in all areas of their work, policy issues and initiatives also need to be considered in the context of their digital dimensions. Simply passing on requests on these topics to the 'competent individual' are a fundamentally insufficient response to the scale and depth of

---

[7] Mortensen/Green-Pedersen, »Institutional Effects of Changes in Political Attention«.

the challenges associated with digital diplomacy. Technological developments are not merely a separate thematic category within a ministry's competencies, but rather a necessary component of their daily activities in today's world.

5) Integrating Digital Foreign Policy

The scale and depth of the challenge is also relevant in regards to the policy positions developed by MFAs beyond their own organisation. If an MFA recognises the speed and scale of digital transformation, it also needs to consider its ability to contribute to and shape its policies to respond to the associated challenges, in areas as diverse as trade policy, human rights and global governance.

Thus, issues of global governance around technologies, the export of surveillance technologies or the role that large private companies play cannot be ignored by an MFA that takes digital diplomacy seriously. To provide just a few examples:

– Just as MFAs encourage or allow for their staff to create WhatsApp groups to communicate with each other, MFAs should also consider the potential consequences of a large private corporation like Facebook which owns WhatsApp and has access to parts of their communications.
– If MFAs wish to debate the transformative powers of digital technologies within their own organisations they also need to consider the transformative effects of providing mass surveillance technologies to countries around the world.
– If MFAs wish to adapt to a shifting technological world as an organisation, they should also contribute to ensuring that basic global norms are developed at an international level, for example by supporting and engaging with the work of the UN Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on Cyber.

MFAs would need to have a well-developed position on these topics in order to ensure they are credible actors. Engaging in digital diplomacy inherently entails both dependency on technology and vulnerability to a wider set of attacks. Unless steps are taken to credibly respond to these problems, digital diplomacy is likely to fall flat on its face.

6) Conclusion: (digital) diplomacy is about human beings

Despite these caveats, MFAs need to engage far more in digital diplomacy than most have done so far. In a more modern technological environment this is crucial to safeguard the role of diplomacy in the future. This is not to say however that the focus of these efforts needs to be on technological solutions, apps or algorithms. The core of the challenge facing MFAs is instead to update their existing institutional and organisational structures to take advantage of the opportunities provided by new technologies.

This can ideally lead to more agile, more engaged and more effective diplomats with the agency and ability to credibly represent their countries. While this may mean getting away from traditional communication channels and organisational models, it also provides an enormous opportunity to rethink what it means to be a diplomat. As markets for attention and venues of diplomacy shift, it has become much harder to engage in traditional diplomacy and simply revert to business as usual.

However, the response by MFAs does not mean capitulating to technological change. If anything, their internal shifts involve better understanding technological change in their societies and evolving their institutional practices accordingly. By ensuring that the technologies employed actually fit to the mandate of the MFA and are actually enabling diplomats to do their jobs, MFAs can contribute to effective and engaging diplomacy, regardless of whether it is digitally mediated or not.

Bibliography

Fountain, Jane E. *Building the Virtual State: Information Technology and Institutional Change*, Brookings Institution Press, 2001

—— »Paradoxes of Public Sector Customer Service«, in: *Governance* 14 (2001) 1, pp. 55–73

—— »Toward a Theory of Federal Bureaucracy for the Twenty-First Century«, in: *Governance. Com: Democracy in the Information Age*, 2002, pp. 117–140

—— »Information, Institutions and Governance: Advancing a Basic Social Science Research Program for Digital Government«, January 2003 (KSG Working Papers Series No. RWP03-004), <https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=430521> (accessed on 4.9.2017)

—— »Challenges to Organizational Change: Multi-Level Integrated Information Structures (MIIS)« in: *Governance and Information Technology: From Electronic Government to Information Government*, 2007, pp. 1–29

Hocking, Brian/Melissen, Jan, *Diplomacy in the Digital Age*, Clingendael, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2015, <https://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/DigiDtal_Diplomacy_in_the_Digital%20Age_Clingendael_July2015.pdf> (accessed on 4.9.2017)

Lipsky, Michael, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* (30th anniversary expanded edition), New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2010

Melissen, Jan/Caesar-Gordon, M. »"Digital Diplomacy" and the Securing of Nationals in a Citizen-Centric World« in: *Global Affairs* 2 (2016) 3, pp. 321–330

Mortensen, Peter B./Green-Pedersen, Christoffer, »Institutional Effects of Changes in Political Attention: Explaining Organizational Changes in the Top Bureaucracy 1«, in: *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 2014, pp.1–25, <doi:10.1093/jopart/muu030>

Wagner, Ben, »The New Media and Social Networks: Pointers from the Arab Uprisings«, in: Volpi, Frédéric/Gillespie, Richard (eds.), *Routledge Handbook on Mediterranean Politics*, London: Routledge, 2016

Wilson, James Q. *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It*. Basic Books, 1989