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Adapting Diplomacy to the Digital Age: Managing the Organisational Culture of Ministries of Foreign Affairs

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Adapting Diplomacy to the Digital Age¹

Abstract

The paper calls attention to the critical issue of how Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFA) can adapt their organisational cultures to the demands of the digital age. As social media technologies are becoming indispensable tools in the hands of diplomats in pursuit of foreign policy agendas, MFAs find themselves under increasing pressure to reconcile entrenched organisational cultures with the platforms, values and assumptions of digital diplomacy. Drawing on Edgar Schein's theory of organisational behaviour, the paper develops a three-dimensional framework for mapping and assessing potential sources of digital clashes inside MFAs.

Introduction

Social media has turned our existence upside down. It has revolutionized communications across the globe, transformed industries and organisations exponentially, and has, for many, become etched into the very fabric of their daily life. Today, around 40% of the world's population has an Internet connection. In 1995, it stood at less than 1%. The first billion Internet users were reached in 2005, and by 2017, it is expected to reach a record 4 billion.² Indeed such numbers are not surprising when we see companies such as Facebook log 1.65 billion active users, out of which 1.09 billion people log onto Facebook daily³, Google reports 3.5 billion searches every day, 500 million tweets are posted every day and an array of servers play host to over one billion websites around the world.⁴ Similarly, in China, the world's largest social network market, the number of social network users is expected to reach

524.4 million by 2017, the number of microblog users to exceed 280 million and the share of mobile users of social networks to cross 61%.⁵

Pushed by the online migration of the public, most Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) at the beginning of the 21st century have started to take their communications activities online and have sought to adapt their institutions accordingly. Here, the numbers perhaps speak for themselves: as of April 2016, there are 793 Twitter accounts belonging to heads of state and government in 173 countries, representing 90 percent of all UN member states, with a combined audience of 324 million followers. Facebook is the second most popular network among government leaders and it is where they have the biggest audience. The heads of state and government and foreign ministers of 169 countries are present on the platform, representing 88 percent of all UN member states. The 537 Facebook pages have a combined audience of 255 million likes. YouTube is the third-most used network among governments and 151 use it as a video repository, although the median average of subscribers is only 486. The photo-sharing network Instagram is the fourth-most popular social network and 71 percent of all UN member states have set up an account to share behind-the-scenes pictures of their activities.⁶

Thus much has changed for diplomatic organisations in the past ten years and has challenged and continues to challenge, many aspects of diplomacy's internal culture. For the first time, digital tools, in particular social media platforms, have added an important real-time dimension to diplomacy, making communication ultra-fast and, by necessity, often less precise. This has forced many MFAs for instance, to have no other option than to allow diplomats with delegated authority to make mistakes publicly – and to correct such mishaps immediately and preferably repeatedly, a tactic never before seen in the internal diplomatic processes. It has also challenged the nature of diplomatic language itself - a long revered feature of the diplomatic practice -, remov-

¹ The paper has benefited from the research assistance of Jennifer Cassidy.

² Internet Live Stats, »Internet users in the world«

³ Zephoria, »The Top 20 Valuable Facebook Statistics«

⁴ Internet Live Stats, »Internet users in the world«

⁵ Statista, »Facts on Social Networks in China«
⁶ Twiplomacy, »Twiplomacy Study 2016«

ing the once held dear structures of formality and secrecy, with diplomats instead today, being expected to engage in highly public conversations, with their messages informal and short in tone. All together, these transformations have turned social media platforms into indispensable tools of diplomatic engagement. As a serving High Commissioner recently argued, “if a diplomat wants to be a player (however small) then the answer to the controversial and debated question ‘To tweet or not to tweet is ... (you guessed it): to tweet!’”⁷

However with said, there has been no immediate consensus among MFAs on how to adapt their cultures successfully to the digital age. And while some diplomatic organisations have been shown to embrace such change as an opportunity to reform their profession, to others it represents a challenge to established conventions and simply proves ‘dangerous’ to tried and tested forms of conducting international relations – or to their own self-interest (Murray 2015). Therefore, it perhaps comes as no surprise that the impact of the Internet and the rise of social media, has generated a wealth of reactions amongst academics and practitioners alike, and has sparked heated debate within MFAs themselves on how they should adapt their internal cultures to embrace these digital technologies in order to achieve the most effective and efficient results. Thus situated within these debates is the question of how digital tools affect MFA organisational culture, or rather how the MFA’s adaption to digital tools affects its own internal process and structures. While such debate is relevant for all organisations in the 21st century, it is particularly so for an organisation with a history so rich, and traditions so engrained, as the diplomatic craft.

Indeed this debate is not surprising, due to the sheer extent that information technologies have wrought fundamental change throughout societal culture - and by consequence organisational culture - driving it forward from the industrial age to the networked era. So yes, the social media frees us from geographic fetters and brings us together in topic-based communities that are

not tied down to any specific place. Yes, it has created a better networked, globalized society and provided us with a speed of connection and resources never before seen, but accordingly it poses new challenges for those organisations which have long held their traditions and culture. Thus framed by such reflection, the goal of this paper is to delve into and explore some of these challenges. In particular, the paper poses a central question: under what conditions can MFA’s digital adaptation lead to organisational clashes? Drawing on Edgar Schein’s theory of organisational behaviour, the paper develops a three-dimensional framework for mapping and assessing potential sources of digital clashes inside MFAs. The article thus seeks to examine how digital adaption opens the door for internal cultural clashes with a view to developing policy recommendations for managing these organisational clashes when they do occur.

Analytical Framework: Artifacts, Espoused Values, Basic Assumptions

Set in amongst competing definitional frameworks and conceptual modes of analysis of organizational behaviour, is the work of Edgar Schein who produced his seminal piece on Organisational Culture and Leadership, setting precedent for many researchers to begin to regard culture as a multilevel concept of great analytical value of explaining organizational behaviour and decision-making. It is for this reason that Schein’s model is the best positioned framework, from the perspective of this study, to elucidate the sources of potential conflict to be induced by digital tools within MFAs. Schein’s work is significant in the field of organizational behaviour because he is one of the few writers in the field who have engaged in critical analysis of the term and of the attempts to theorize organizational culture. He is well known, for instance, for his criticism of ‘the simplistic and cavalier statements about culture’⁸ and the tendency to link culture with virtually everything. Through a discussion of his theory and mul-

⁷ Evriviades, »#Shakespeare400«

⁸ Schein, »Organizational Culture and Leadership«, p. 5

ti-level framework used for mapping and assessing organizational processes, the paper seeks to bring together insights from the above discussion of various conceptions of organizational culture in order to uncover the conditions under which cultural clashes may emerge within MFAs as a direct result of digital adaption, and how best to deal with these clashes when they do appear.

According to Schein, at the most basic level, culture is a coherent system of assumptions and values, which distinguishes one group or organisation from another and orient its choices. Organisational culture therefore implies 'a pattern of basic assumptions – invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration – that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems'.⁹ Furthermore, according to Schein there are direct and indirect mechanisms within organizations: direct mechanisms, which include at their core exemplary behaviour, opinions, status and appointments are thought to directly influence the organizational culture model, while indirect mechanisms, which include for example, the mission of a company, formal guidelines, corporate identity, rituals and design are not seen to influence the organizational culture directly, however they are determinative.¹⁰ In the instance of MFAs, direct mechanisms would therefore include anything from foreign policy strategies which underpin all direction and motives of diplomatic agents (or should do), Ambassadorial appointments and the power of status attached to them, to organisational structures such as governing Embassy and Headquarters relationships. Indirect mechanisms have a more subtle role in cultural creation and range, in a manner akin to Sharp's micro-view of diplomatic culture¹¹, from anything from how diplomatic agents

are expected to dress, to what type of language and tone is deemed appropriate within the MFA and how agents are expected to speak, to how meetings are structured both with internal and external actors.

Schein notes that these direct and indirect mechanisms have had a powerful role in sculpting, creating and perpetuating diplomatic culture but have also proved relatively malleable to shifts in the technological realm. This malleability however has not only always been fluid, and has brought with it internal struggles and conflict. Throughout his research he observed that when an organisation tries to change the behaviour of its workers, it is bound to encounter 'resistance to change' and quite often at a level which is beyond reason.¹² Indeed many departments in organisations seemed to be more interested in fighting the change itself, rather than getting the job done. He writes 'as leaders who are trying to get our organisations to become more effective in the face of sever environmental pressures, we are sometimes amazed at the degree in which individuals and groups in the organisation will continue to behave in obviously ineffective ways, often threatening the very survival of the organisation itself'.¹³

According to Schein, the culture of an organization can be empirically examined at three levels - artifacts, espoused values and underlying assumptions -, each reflecting a distinct layer of cultural manifestations that guide the actions of the members of the organisation. The first dimension refers to artifacts, which includes all the phenomena that one would see, hear, and feel when one encounters a new group with an unfamiliar culture, such as technology, language, style, architecture etc.¹⁴ Artifacts consist of visible and easily observable organisational structures, facilities, actions and procedures. Applied to MFAs, this dimension of diplomatic culture would see itself emerging in anything range from the languages an MFA adopts as its working tongue, to the style of dress it demands of its employees, to the

⁹ Schein, »Organizational Culture and Leadership«, p. 9

¹⁰ Boonstra, »Cultural Change and Leadership in Organizations: A Practical Guide to Successful Organizational Change«, p. 22-23

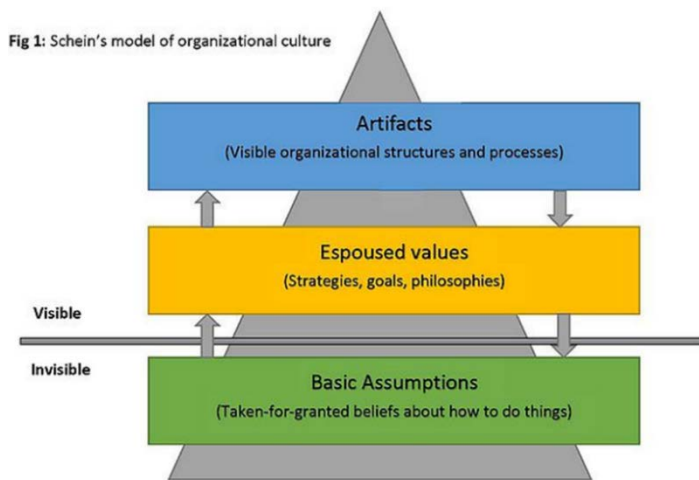
¹¹ Sharp, »The idea of diplomatic culture and its sources«

¹² Schein, »Coming to a New Awareness of Organizational Culture«, p. 14

¹³ Schein, »The Concept of Organizational Culture: Why Bother?«, p. 304

¹⁴ Schein, »Organizational culture and leadership«, p. 25

buildings it resides in and the aesthetic vibe this gives out. In the case of digital diplomacy in particular, this layer would refer for instance, to the social media platforms used for online engagement and the style of digital communication itself. For example, the impressive global social media presence of the U.S. State Department, UK Foreign Office and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development stay clearly in contrast with that of many other MFAs¹⁵, a fact that speaks well in favour of their resourceful digital cultures.



At the broadest level, this aspect of the diplomatic culture is very open or susceptible to cultural clashes, as by its very nature, it potentially alters major aspects of the organisation's tools, resources, and modus operandi, i.e., how it expects its workforce to use them. From a digital angle, clashes could appear for instance, with MFA telling diplomats to now communicate not only in a different format, i.e., from private to public, but to do so with tools which they may not feel comfortable using. This particularly applies to senior diplomats who might lack the digital skills necessary to use these tools effectively and appropriately, a situation that inevitably creates varying levels of tensions within MFAs internal organisations. New digital artifacts are likely to challenge basic procedures of MFA communication, creating new (in) direct ones which are more in line with the updated tools and resources. If not communicated correctly to diplomats,

¹⁵ DiplomacyLive, »Digital Diplomacy Rating 2016«

these new artifacts will invariably cause internal clashes or levels of conflict. As pointed out by Schein, "strong subcultures form around different assumptions, the organization will find itself in serious conflict that can potentially undermine its ability to cope with its external environment".¹⁶ The fast-paced rhythm of digital innovation only adds additional pressure to MFAs to streamline the process of adaptation and incorporation of digital artifacts into their engrained diplomatic culture.

However, as Schein insists, it would be a mistake for us, the outsiders, to make generalizing assumptions from artifacts alone because such interpretations are inevitably projections of our own feelings and reactions to the case.¹⁷ The alternative is to move down to the second level of cultural analysis, which examines the espoused values, norms, and rules on the basis of which solutions to day-to-day problems are being devised. While not as visible as the artifacts present in the first level, these values can be ascertained by norms, are often embodied in the organizational philosophy, serving the normative function of guiding members of the group in how to deal with certain key situations, and in training new members in how to behave.¹⁸ In the case of diplomatic practice, this dimension is extensive and is seen as deep-rooted in the fabric of MFA institutions. At the most basic level, we see this in the form of the foreign policy, which guides the states interest, and in what manner the state would wish to carry these aims out. As Sharp noted, diplomatic agents are 'aware of each other as servants of the national interest of their respective states as this is interpreted by their respective political leaders', with the components of a diplomatic culture going beyond 'a sense of sympathy with colleagues who, nevertheless, remain on the other side of the boundary, to a sense of being involved with them

¹⁶ Schein, »Organizational culture and leadership«, p. 104

¹⁷ Schein, »Organizational culture and leadership«, p. 25

¹⁸ Schein, »Organizational culture and leadership«, p. 27

on common projects or possibly a common grand project'.¹⁹

As this level consists of espoused values manifested in the public images of organisations, such as strategies, goals, and philosophies, it can be regarded as relatively malleable to cultural shifts, particularly so for an organisation such as an MFA whose strategies and goals are based around reigning cultural beliefs, what the public expects of them, and they expect them to act in their interest. This malleability however does not equate to fluidity of change, and can almost inevitably create some form of organisational cultural clash. Amongst other factors, this can be seen within the aspect of leadership, where leaders of the organisation may send contradictory messages relating to how the environment is to operate and with that causing varying degrees of culture conflict and organisational pathology.²⁰ Schein has found, for instance, in his research that organisations are considerably weakened by leaders' struggles to reconcile a philosophy of delegation and decentralization with a powerful need to retain tight centralised control. In the case of MFAs, this is too often seen with headquarters reluctant to let go of authority of communication and to transfer power to the embassies on the ground. Although maintaining control of the MFAs communication and their message is appropriate to some degree, in the case of the digital, embassies on the ground now need the sanctioned authority to operate in real-time and to do so with confidence.

In an effort to pre-empt digital challenges to MFA's espoused values, norms, and rules to spiral out of control, many MFAs have started to develop and implement codes of digital practice and social media guides ranging from strictly regulated forms of digital engagement to more liberal versions. The Swiss Federal Department for Foreign Affairs (SFDFA) has identified, for instance, ten conditions for the initiation of a social media presence by representations abroad, ranging from the use of social media on a

long-term basis as a supplementary channel of traditional communications, to the implementation of the concept for quality assurance and statistical measurement of success.²¹ The British FCO appears to favour a more hands-off approach, by encouraging diplomats to use social media, but without "contradicting HMG policy or being politically partial, bringing the office into disrepute, divulging classified information, taking part in illegal or inappropriate behaviour, or breaching the Civil Service Code or the terms of employment in any other way".²² By highlighting possible points of tension between espoused values and digital artifacts, the second layer of organisational cultural analysis thus offers a deeper understanding of the emerging digital cultures in MFAs.

Linked to this dimension, emerges the final aspect of Schein's framework and is one which deals with the basic assumptions that guide behaviour in a taken-for-granted, non-debatable manner and tell group members how to perceive, think about, and feel about things. At its core, it consists of basic assumptions, or unconscious beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. These determine both behaviour norms (the way people should behave) and organisational values (the things that are highly valued). They are likely the result of repeated and successful testing of espoused values and play a critical role in defining the character and identity of the group.²³ This is arguably a critical cultural layer as it conditions the members of the organization to unconsciously follow well-tested rules, norms and procedures. This dimension thus speaks to the deeper changes that digital diplomacy may induce in the organizational culture of MFAs. As Stuart Murray insightfully notes in his examination of the digital divide between the U.S. State Dept. and the Australian DFAT, a 'fecund diplomatic culture where diplomacy is valued as a key strategic asset and not a marginalized, backwater antique is important, as is a history of innovation, reform

¹⁹ Scharp, »The idea of diplomatic culture and its sources«, p.369

²⁰ Kets de Vries/Miller, »Interpreting, Organizational Texts«. Goldman, »A company on the couch: unveiling toxic behaviour in dysfunctional organisations«

²¹ Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (SFDFA), »Use of Social Media in the FDFA«, p.7

²² UK FCO, »Context: why social media matters«

²³ Schein, » Organizational culture and leadership«

and openness to technological change'.²⁴ Consequently, it is this dimension, this cultural backbone which is likely to make a big difference to whether MFAs will perceive digital technologies as a threat or an opportunity for diplomacy.

If "culture as a set of basic assumptions defines for us what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally to what is going on, and what actions to take in various kinds of situations"²⁵, it then stands to reasons that artifacts or values that challenge these assumptions would be met with great resistance. For example, if one assumes, based on past experience and education, that diplomacy is fundamentally an "art", in the Callières' sense of a special skill developed and honed through continuous practice via a combination of "knowledge, foresight and dextrous action"²⁶, then the technical know-how and data-oriented profile of digital diplomacy could be seen as a useless distraction if not a critical threat to the future of the profession. If, on the other hand, one sees diplomacy like George Kennan did more like a "science" that is, an intellectual task "to effect the communication between one's own government and other governments or individuals abroad" drawing on "scientific analysis and creative thought"²⁷, then digital diplomacy could be perceived as a welcome addition, if not an extension to the organizational culture of the MFA as opposed to a potential source of cultural clash to be contained or eliminated.

While the three dimensions discussed above are valuable lens for analysing diplomatic cultures and their adaptation to digital tools in their own right, it is the overall framework or the integration of all three dimensions which proves the most valuable method by which to theorize the organisational behaviour of MFAs. The integrated framework leaves no dimension of MFA organisational culture untouched, and takes

²⁴ Murray, »Evolution, not revolution: the digital divide in American and Australian contexts«, p. 129

²⁵ Schein, »Organizational culture and leadership«, p. 32

²⁶ Berridge et al., »Diplomatic theory from Machiavelli to Kissinger, Studies in diplomacy«, p. 117

²⁷ AFSA, »George Kennan On Diplomacy As a Profession«

account of the effects of digital adaption in every sense, from shared artifacts (first dimension), to shared values, norms and rules (second dimension), and to shared basic assumptions (third dimension). Consequently, it is these dimensions that highlight the complexity of both the analysis of means and the issues surrounding efforts to change how an organisation accomplishes its goals.²⁸ Thus, as digital tools have the potential to affect every dimension of MFAs' structures and processes, it is logical to conclude that we cannot view one without the other, and must therefore take into account every dimension of Schein's multi-faceted framework to fully appreciate how and under what conditions cultural clashes may occur. With that said, we also need to translate the three dimensions into an operational template for mapping and assessing potential culture conflicts induced by digital tools. The assessment matrix below does exactly this and allows us to investigate the extent to which digital adaptation may challenge the organisational culture of MFAs.

Fig 2: Evaluation Matrix of Digital Cultural Adaptation

Digital culture	MFA Adaptation Reaction		
	Positive	Medium	Negative
Artifacts (digital assets):			
- Digital presence			
- Digital brands			
- Digital leaders			
- Digital networks			
Espoused Values & Norms			
- Digital Communication			
- Digital Engagement			
- Digital Adaptation			
Basic Assumptions			
- Digital Tactics			
- Digital Strategy			

The evaluation matrix covers the main features underpinning the culture of digital diplomacy along the three dimensions: the degree of support for developing the MFA's digital capacity (artifacts), the level of organisational acceptance of digital norms of communication, engagement and adaptation (espoused valued & norms) and the

²⁸ Schein, »Organizational culture and leadership«, p. 83

depth of new expectations about the role and place of digital tools within the broader context of foreign policy (basic assumptions). Developing a strong digital capacity is generally costly as it involves the creation of a dedicated social media presence on various platforms, the design and implementation of digital campaigns and brands, the formation of digital leaders at the level of the headquarters and embassies, as well as the establishment of integrated digital networks connecting MFA units with their peers, with international organisations and with relevant communities. Digital tools also inform and shape the norms of communication, engagement and adaptation on the basis of which digital diplomats conduct their work. Transparency, decentralization, informality, interactivity, real-time management are critical norms for ensuring the effectiveness of digital activity, but they may not necessarily sit culturally well with MFAs' institutionally entrenched preferences for confidentiality, hierarchy and top-down decision-making. Finally, assumptions about the role of digital tools in the broader context of foreign policy are of critical importance for understanding the possibilities and limitations of digital diplomacy. If digital instruments are viewed as one of the tactical tools by which to advance traditional foreign policy (FP) objectives, then they are more likely to be culturally accepted by the MFA. If, on the other hand, digital technology is recognized as a new and distinct environment of diplomacy, then institutional resistance is likely to be stronger, at least in the early stages, as the "digital turn" would call into question well-established principles of diplomatic strategy.

Conclusion

The recent adoption of digital tools by MFAs has raised the question of whether this online migration would only amend the way in which diplomacy is practiced or it would actually challenge its very DNA. The paper has suggested that one way to address this question is by examining the extent to which the "digital turn" may lead to cultural clashes inside MFAs. Drawing on Edgar

Schein's theory of organisational behaviour, the paper has proposed a three-dimensional framework for mapping and assessing potential sources of digital clashes inside MFAs. It has been thus argued that MFA's organisational culture is made of three layers (artifacts, espoused norms and values, and basic assumptions), which reflect the instruments, norms and taken-for-granted beliefs on the basis of which MFAs conduct themselves. By challenging the way in which MFAs operates at these three levels, digital technologies prompt concerns about the scope and depth of cultural adaptation, which may affect, in turn, the effectiveness of digital diplomatic activities.

Three scenarios may follow from this. First, support for diplomatic integration of digital artifacts coupled with organisational resistance to digital values and basic assumptions would signal the rise of an emergent digital culture within the MFA. Digital diplomacy is considered in this case a possible useful tool to advance foreign policy goals but its contributions are not yet fully proven and embraced. Second, support for digital platforms and for the norms associated with their use would point to the development of an advanced digital culture in which digital activities are considered essential for advancing the foreign policy agenda, but reservations persist about their scope of application. Third, support for all three dimensions would reveal a mature digital culture in which digital operations have not only been mainstreamed across all MFA institutional levels, but have also added new objectives and methods of diplomatic engagement to MFAs' repertoires.

The evaluation matrix of digital cultural adaptation could be thus used as a guide in three ways: a) for better understanding the limits of grafting digital technologies onto MFAs' institutional structure and diplomatic objectives, and b) for taking note of the weaknesses of the digital cultures inside MFAs and addressing them pro-actively; c) for maximising the impact of digital activities by tailoring them to the relevant components of the MFAs' digital cultures.

About the Author

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