

Beyond the Web: Diplomacy, Cognition, and Influence

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Diplomacy is one of the central tools at the disposal of decision makers for advancing their objectives. To a large extent, it involves the attempt to create influence; that is, to lead other actors at the international level to act in a way that serves the interest of the decision maker. However, powerful global social processes – chiefly the internet and the information revolution – have redistributed power in the international political arena. As a result, any party that is interested in influencing the international system needs to focus not only on leaders but also on various kinds of public opinion leaders (“influencers”), who have the attention of decision makers and who have their own constituencies, including on social media.

The development of technology has created new tools of influence and innovative ways of creating social interactions in the digital era, which have also produced a variety of tools for engaging in diplomacy. Diplomacy has important assets in this new era, but it also poses innovative challenges in the field of cognition, to which it must adapt. This article examines how diplomacy copes with or should cope with these new challenges. To this end, it reviews the transformations that the world of diplomacy has undergone in

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the digital era, presents the advantages and disadvantages of diplomacy in the field of cognition and influence efforts, and offers tools for coping with the changes necessary for conducting diplomacy in this era.

Changes in the World of Diplomacy in the Digital Era

While traditional diplomacy was like an exclusive club, the new diplomacy, which has developed during the past few decades, has multiple actors and has a relatively high level of transparency. In the current reality, the standing of professional diplomats – the staff of foreign ministries – is losing ground to new governmental players who have entered the diplomatic arena. It is not only governmental representatives who are active in the modern field of diplomacy; changes in the balance of power have led international companies, businesspeople, members of the media, academics, representatives of non-governmental organizations and international governmental organizations, and in some cases celebrities and even ordinary people to operate in the diplomatic field.²

Moreover, diplomacy today deals not only with conflicts between states but also with a wide range of issues, such as health, the environment, climate change, food security, trade, the stability of the international financial system, migration, crime, and human rights. In addition to changes of the actors and the issues, major shifts have occurred in the modes of operation and methods of diplomacy. For example, the field of multimedia diplomacy has greatly developed, with states and various players taking part, including in the framework of international organizations. At the same time, the importance of public diplomacy has increased,³ especially given the understanding that the modes of operation of traditional diplomacy alone cannot bring about changes in the positions of foreign governments, and it is necessary to try to do this by influencing their publics.

2 For more on the topic of changes in the world of diplomacy, see Andrew F. Cooper, Jorge Heine, and Ramesh Thakur, "Introduction: The Challenges of 21st-Century Diplomacy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*, ed. Andrew F. Cooper, Jorge Heine, and Ramesh Thakur (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 1-35, <https://bit.ly/2IxLsr5>.

3 Public diplomacy aims to influence elites and broad populations in order to advance foreign policy objectives.

Diplomacy has always responded to changes in the international environment, including technological changes (for example, the impact of the invention of the telegraph in the nineteenth century). The technological revolution that we have been experiencing in recent decades has also had an extensive impact on values, procedures, and processes in the international arena. While some argue that digital diplomacy is traditional diplomacy with a system of new tools, others argue that the change is much deeper and that the very DNA of diplomacy is shifting.

In particular, social media receives considerable attention in the age of digital diplomacy. In the past, the traditional media had the main function of mediating information between the government and the public, while today, social media is the main platform where citizens receive information on developments in the political arena. Furthermore, digital technologies have intensified the concept characterizing public diplomacy today, in which interactive discourse and dialogue are at its center (as opposed to the one-way broadcasting that was common in the past). The public with whom the dialogue takes place not only consumes but also produces the content in this dialogue. Digital diplomacy has several clear advantages, including effectiveness – meaning the ability to reach relevant actors – and efficiency, referring to the ability to reach many more players with less effort and fewer resources.

The digital era also poses many challenges for diplomacy in a number of aspects:

- a. *Speed*: The pace of activity in the world of diplomacy has increased immeasurably.
- b. *Transparency*: In the past, diplomacy was largely covert, while today it is mostly overt, public, and open, although it still has a covert dimension.⁴
- c. *Tools*: Digital diplomacy makes extensive use of tools such as social media, infographics, algorithms, and artificial intelligence. Diplomacy, which was verbal in the past, has become more visual. The use of big data, for example, allows for monitoring diplomatic developments,

4 For more on the dimension of transparency, see Craig Hayden, “Social Diplomacy, Public Diplomacy and Network Power,” in *Diplomacy, Development and Security in the Information Age*, ed. Shanthi Kalathil (Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, Georgetown University, 2013), pp. 17-34, <https://bit.ly/2VfejSo>.

identifying influential players, distributing focused messages to segmented populations, and monitoring the content of diplomatic events.

- d. *The changes to the issues on the agenda*: These include the discourse on “fake news,” internet ethics, incitement on the internet, cyber warfare, and so forth.
- e. *The mode of operation of diplomacy*: Modern diplomats must become internet “personas” and need to build up status and connections that move between the physical and the digital world, otherwise their means of influence will remain limited. One of the major challenges is the necessity of going “outside the bubble” and overcoming the phenomenon of the “echo chamber,”⁵ which existed before the social media era but has intensified greatly due to social media and its influence.

Ways Foreign Ministries Have Addressed the Digital Era

In recent years, leaders and diplomats have made increasing use of digital tools to convey diplomatic messages (US President Donald Trump has brought this approach to new heights in his use of Twitter). In addition, public diplomacy makes use of digital tools that are based on interpersonal social connectivity and algorithms that make use of the social networks’ architecture in order to enhance messages and disrupt the messages of adversaries. Furthermore, foreign ministries, corporations, and civil society actors engage in discourse in order to shape the new environment that has been fostered as a result of the technological-social-political developments (for example, cooperation between states and social media corporations on issues of internet regulation).⁶

Foreign ministries around the world are trying to adapt themselves to the digital age, and many of them make use of social media and other digital tools and channels of influence; the level of success, however, of foreign ministries and professional diplomats in adapting to the emerging reality is not uniform.⁷ For example, many diplomats use Twitter only in order to

5 The concept of the “echo chamber” represents a space with a closed system of people with similar worldviews, who are exposed to a uniform type of opinions that are identical to their own.

6 Thank you to Noam Katz for his enlightening comments on this issue.

7 Brian Hocking and Jan Melissen, *Diplomacy in the Digital Age* (Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations, July 2015), p. 45.

obtain information and to report about their activities and do not use the platform as a tool of influence by sharing content. The ability of foreign ministries to change depends in part on supportive internal structures and the recruitment and training of effective “digital leaders.”⁸ There are some foreign ministries that are involved in diplomatic innovation. For example, they hold diplomatic “hackathons,” which integrate their own knowledge and skills with those of social entrepreneurs, tech professionals, journalists, academics, and businesspeople, in order to tackle traditional diplomatic problems.

The Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which today is considered one of the leading foreign ministries in the field of digital diplomacy, operates over 850 accounts on different platforms, such as social media, instant messaging apps, and websites, and does so in fifty languages, including Arabic and Persian. The Ministry works to create a “toolbox” for the modern diplomat by using existing tools on the internet and by developing new ones, together with the major tech companies. This is in order to enhance its messages and slow down the flow of damaging and problematic messages disseminated by Israel’s adversaries. This activity also provides the Ministry with collaboration opportunities with foreign entities that are likewise trying to develop in these areas.

The use of the internet in order to influence provides an advantage over traditional diplomacy when it comes to the viral distribution of messages. The internet enables exposure to be multiplied while it can impair the opposing narratives by disturbing the adversarial media’s image of objectivity and legitimacy, or by upsetting the entire information environment of the target audience.

The Relative Advantages of Foreign Ministries in Creating Influence

Despite the decline in the standing of professional diplomats and foreign ministries, they still have relative advantages when attempting to create diplomatic influence. These advantages depend mainly on the unique assets at the disposal of professional diplomats, namely state authority, the reliance on

8 Tom Fletcher, *The Naked Diplomat: Understanding Power and Politics in the Digital Age* (HarperCollins, 2017).

unique state information, and above all, the network of diplomatic missions. These advantages include:

- a. *Direct and legitimate access to decision makers*: Diplomats enjoy personal connections and access to decision makers, which even in the modern world are irreplaceable, as well as connections with actors that can influence public opinion and policy, such as legislators, research institutes, members of the media, senior figures in the private sector, and more.
- b. *The development of local knowledge*: Diplomats on the ground have the ability to create “local” knowledge thanks to their familiarity of the place, political culture, decision making processes, trends in public opinion, the zeitgeist, and cultural and interpersonal sensitivities. Local knowledge is vital, because in order to create influence, one must understand the perspectives of the local population, such as the ability to answer the questions of what motivates and frightens it.
- c. *Connection between physical communities and virtual communities*: In the age of public diplomacy, being present in a place is still important. Diplomatic missions operate within “physical” communities, which today can also be influenced via the internet. A local physical presence also enables creating new networks in the virtual world, through connections created locally. Diplomatic activity needs to be able to move from one arena to another, for example, by transforming support expressed on social media into being present at demonstrations.
- d. *Understanding relationships*: Due to their worldwide deployment, foreign ministries have a better ability of understanding relationships and assessing how activities vis-à-vis one party can cause reactions in another place (“the butterfly effect”).
- e. *Identifying emerging agendas*: Global deployment enables diplomats to be active in diverse arenas – some that are information crossroads (such as the UN missions) – and to identify new issues that are emerging on the global agenda at an early stage.
- f. *Integration*: Expanding diplomacy’s areas of activity incorporates various professional figures (such as experts on health and the environment). Diplomats, working in the dimension between the professional sphere and the political-diplomatic one, serve as integrators of the different areas of activity, and thus they have the ability – sometimes unique – to formulate a comprehensive and meaningful picture.

As a rule, the relative advantage of foreign ministries appears to be in creating content on diplomatic issues, forging personal connections for the purpose of influencing the decision making, forming narratives and media strategy, and engaging in public diplomacy. As a result of the broad, worldwide deployment and constant contact with civilian and political figures, foreign ministries have a considerable ability to formulate messages that are tailored to the target audience. One characteristic of the foreign ministries is that the representatives who are stationed in other states are replaced after a while. While this has the advantage of renewal, it also has the disadvantage in that the representative needs to recreate personal connections and refresh digital communities. This situation differs from other civil society actors, who maintain a permanent ongoing presence in their places of residence.

The Challenges of Foreign Ministries in the Field of Influence

While foreign ministries and professional diplomats enjoy unique assets, the changing character of threats has caused challenges and obstacles today that prevent them from fulfilling the potential inherent in the digital world. Noteworthy among these challenges and obstacles are:

- a. *Inherent asymmetry*: Today state and non-state adversaries operate in an internet arena and have access to cheap and accessible technological tools with which they can threaten stronger actors and influence the general public. The ability especially of non-state actors to disseminate information via social media, with the intention of waging struggles for diplomatic objectives or recognition of their activities, provides them with greater public exposure than in the past. For example, both state and non-state actors create social media campaigns that disseminate true and/or false information, as well as campaigns on content-sharing sites, in order to influence the cognition of the other side. The current response to this is mainly attempts at getting social media platforms to cooperate and remove content. States are fettered by the extent to which social media corporations will cooperate with them, while the ability to implement state regulation on this issue is meager compared to the scope of the phenomenon.
- b. *The characteristics of the internet*: The internet environment enables non-state actors to advance their interests without risk of exposure. This is especially true in cyberspace, in which there are no clear boundaries,

and technological tools can be used to enable anonymity and activity that leaves a small footprint.

- c. *The lack of activity of foreign ministries in black and gray areas:* Institutional parties, including foreign ministries, must cope with attempts by undemocratic entities to influence information by using propaganda as well as to undermine international institutions by damaging the effectiveness of laws, inciting terrorism, increasing insecurity, and more. The activity of foreign ministries, which is usually transparent, sometimes makes it difficult for them to respond to actors who operate with a small footprint and on covert levels (for example, by hiding their identity to not reveal who is behind a campaign). One partial response to this challenge exists in the ability of the foreign ministries to cooperate with tech companies, which also have an interest in removing harmful campaigns from the internet. Another obstacle is that some governments prefer to use military force or covert actions instead of public diplomacy, which can be referred to as “smart power.”⁹ In most cases, there is only partial synergy between foreign ministries and the covert organizations that operate in a parallel realm, and this creates asymmetry, which enables adversaries to use non-military means, without the foreign ministry being able to respond effectively.
- d. *The age of false information:* The lack of control of the political-strategic narrative can influence the understanding of events and issues, such as who is responsible for an international crisis or conflict. Therefore, a successful disinformation campaign can convince the public in a certain country that its state is at fault in a crisis, even if the campaign contradicts the facts.¹⁰ Foreign ministries sometimes have difficulty coping with these kinds of campaigns and prefer to focus on promoting the country’s narrative.
- e. *Technological challenge:* The ability of foreign ministries to cope with technological developments is limited compared to the private sector and the intelligence community. This is partly due to budgetary limitations and because foreign ministries are not considered a natural place for research and development. However, foreign ministries have made achievements

9 Joseph S. Nye, “Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power,” *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 4 (July/August 2009): 160-63.

10 In light of the difficulty in measuring the influence of such campaigns, there are doubts regarding their level of effectiveness in disrupting the political order.

in the field of developing technological tools and even at an advantage in developing tools that the business sector is not interested in, because they are not necessarily profitable.

- f. *Human capital*: The diplomatic system today is coping with the modern world of employment and needs to recruit and train personnel with the skills for social media activity.
- g. *Slow response capability due to excessive bureaucracy and unwieldiness*: Foreign ministries have difficulty implementing long term systemic initiatives and even short term projects, due to being sometimes overly bureaucratic in making the decisions and providing the necessary approvals. As a result, they have difficulty creating partnerships, and delays even occur in approving work plans and timetables necessary for operating in the internet era.
- h. *Limitations on the internet*: One of the main limitations that foreign ministries face is legislation, such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which creates obstacles and restrictions on internet activity and, in effect, prevents foreign ministries from engaging in certain internet activities (for example, impairing their ability to operate vis-à-vis a target audience in a focused manner, by collecting the personal information of social media users).

Conclusion: How Must Diplomacy Change in the Digital Era?

A foreign ministry that aspires to achieve goals and objectives in the field of cognition and to influence its adversaries in the networked digital era must develop qualities that will enable it to be flexible and change quickly, while adapting its messages to the relevant target audience and cooperating with additional parties. In order to meet these objectives, foreign ministries need to develop a range of capabilities, which include developing designated technological means of influence that are adapted to the internet world in general and social media in particular. The desired result can be achieved by:

- a. Developing platforms for cooperation that enable a governmental body, such as a foreign ministry, to cooperate with a variety of governmental and private entities, as well as with civil society groups that are involved in diplomacy in a broad sense. Each has relative advantages, such as research, intelligence gathering, operating with a small footprint, technology and cyberspace, activity in traditional and new media, and marketing. It is

important to ensure coordination with these bodies in order to create an effective cognitive campaign vis-à-vis internet challenges, both on the tactical and strategic levels.

- b. Coordinating efforts on influence issues vis-à-vis a wide circle of defense and diplomacy organizations improves the state's ability to utilize its smart power. For example, responsibility for coordinating and integrating the efforts in a diplomatic campaign should be placed on foreign ministries, in order to ensure that activities are carried out in an ongoing and synchronized manner. In this respect, it is important to remember that a central advantage of foreign ministries is the legitimacy to pursue opportunities and not just to focus on the world of threats.
- c. Preparing for the impact of tools such as artificial intelligence on human-machine relations and other areas that will influence the diplomatic arena.

The ability of foreign ministries today to maximize cooperation both within and outside the system is limited, despite the tools and relative advantages at their disposal for influence efforts. In order to meet objectives, it is necessary to conduct campaigns that integrate proactive activity that is both overt (through foreign ministries and civilian actors) and covert (through defense agencies). The way to achieve this is fostering a range of capabilities, which includes developing designated means of influence that are adapted to the networked world in general and to social media in particular, and operating them through a cooperative integrated mechanism. This should be done through a leading body that serves as a center of knowledge, synchronizes the campaign's tools, and translates systemic goals and vision into measurable and feasible objectives.