

Why Diplomacy in a Global World is Shaped by Local Media

Written by Cristina Archetti

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CRISTINA ARCHETTI, NOV 2 2012

We seem to live in a global world. Communication technologies like the internet, mobile phones, and social media such as Twitter or Facebook are regarded by many as drivers of revolutionary changes in our societies. The ubiquity of information, its digital-sharing across platforms, ease of storage, and the possibility of communicating instantly and at very low cost with wide audiences across borders are redesigning the scope and patterns of social interactions.[1]

Considering the impact that technologies like the internet have been having on politics—from the use of social media in political campaigning to e-governance and the conduct of foreign policy—it would be hard even to imagine that these changes are not affecting diplomacy. Indeed, many over the last decade have saluted the rise of a new kind of diplomacy: ‘virtual diplomacy’,[2] ‘cyberdiplomacy’,[3] ‘media diplomacy’[4] are just few of the newly coined terms to emphasize the supposed shift from the past.

The opportunities offered by new media to directly connect governments to worldwide audiences are said to be blurring the distinction between diplomacy—in its strict sense the negotiation among official actors—and public diplomacy—communication between governments and foreign publics.[5] In this sense, Jan Melissen has written about a ‘new public diplomacy’—where governments interact with a variety of state, as well as non-state actors and audiences of citizens.[6] One can also easily find references to ‘public diplomacy 2.0’,[7] and ‘digital diplomacy,’ not least on the websites of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the American State Department.[8]

In this world of global interconnection, where communication technologies allow individuals who might have never met to build communities of interest (like advocacy networks) across national borders,[9] where the line between domestic and international politics is increasingly difficult to identify, one could be forgiven for overlooking, if not forgetting altogether about, what happens not only at a subnational and regional level, but in the very offices and along the corridors of embassies around the world—the daily life of diplomats, the “local.” The “local,” in such a deluge of transnational exchanges, is surely only a fading memory of the old pre-globalization times, right?

Wrong. Examining the “local,” the way in which communication technologies are used and appropriated on a daily basis by social actors (diplomats, journalists, politicians and members of the public) to pursue their own interests in each specific national political and social context is essential to understanding how exactly diplomacy is evolving in an age of interconnectedness. Crucially, by examining the everyday and individual/organisational dimension of diplomatic practices we can learn that, rather than withering and being replaced by a generalized “communication of everybody anywhere anytime,” diplomacy is becoming increasingly multidimensional and, counterintuitively, selective.

Foreign Diplomats: Life at the Edge

How does the specificity of the local context affect the practices of foreign diplomats? Where do advances in communication technologies fit within this picture? To find an answer to these questions, we need to understand the place of foreign diplomats, carrying out their functions of representation, negotiation, information-gathering and reporting back to their respective countries, at the edge between the national and the international dimensions.

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Being able to make sense of what happens in the country they are working in is of paramount importance to diplomats. They need information. And they get it not only by meeting people, but also by consuming the reports provided by the media. Local media, in particular, has always been vital to their daily activities. As Phillips Davison wrote almost four decades ago: 'The [national] press serves as the eyes and ears of diplomacy.'^[10]

Not only this is still very much the case, but through the multiplication of the opportunities for interaction (both face-to-face and mediated by technologies), diplomats have come to operate in what we could call a much broader "information environment" that they did in the past. Such environment is constituted by the networks of contacts spanning both the offline and online dimensions across which information is accessed, gathered, processed and distributed in the official, media, and public domain. Differently from a natural environment, which would be the same for all species living in it—the physical urban space of London, Beijing or Washington, for example—the information space is different for every single actor, as if each diplomat or embassy office inhabited a parallel dimension.

The way each diplomat operates in his/her own information environment, in fact, reflects the specific goals and objectives of the respective embassy office. These goals, in turn, are becoming increasingly differentiated—an outcome of both developing international relations, but importantly also of the ease with which communication takes place among politicians across countries.

A senior German diplomat in London I interviewed,^[11] for example, talked about an increasingly 'ceremonial role' for European embassies in the British capital over the past 30 years at the expense of their traditional hardcore 'messenger' functions. This is both because of the EU's consolidation, particularly the fact that political leaders tend to meet regularly within the EU's institutional structures and bodies, and the technical possibility of communicating directly: 'If Germany had a problem with Paraguay, the foreign ministry would probably ask our ambassador in Ascension to see the foreign minister or to see the president or prime minister [...] and to deliver a strong message [...]. If the German government had a problem with the UK government, [...] the head of the Chancellor's office would call the head of Downing Street, Number 10, and would say "look, Angela [Merkel] has to talk to David [Cameron]. Could we fix a phone call for two o'clock in the afternoon?" And the embassy would perhaps not be even aware of it.' This explains the increase in public outreach activity by European embassies in London: 'we are compensating for the diminishing role of traditional diplomacy by talking about our role in public diplomacy'.

Non-European countries' embassies, instead, tend to retain to a greater extent the diplomat's 'messenger' role. A Syrian diplomat in London, for example, commented that his function consisted mainly in being 'a tool of [official] communication.' An Australian source also confirmed the increase of an 'advocacy function' at the expense of information-gathering and relaying: '...we weren't writing cables predicting who was going to win the last election [...] [Instead] we were saying, you know, if the Conservatives win, this is what foreign policy may look like [...] Once upon a time you would have been sending a cable every couple of days saying "this is the latest" [...] You wouldn't do that now because somebody could just go to *Guardian Online* or *The Times Online* and get that.' The advocacy function consists of agenda-setting and lobbying through official contacts: 'going down to Whitehall, trying to get the UK government to do things that we want them to do.'

Explaining the Outreach Activities of Foreign Diplomats

Whether foreign diplomats want at all to engage with local publics, the extent to which they pursue such activity in case they do, as well as the communication channels used in the process—social media like Facebook, rather than an e-magazine, or a series of lunch receptions for selected guests—is thus the unique outcome of the match between each diplomat/embassy's objectives—'ceremonial' function rather than 'advocacy,' for instance—with the information environment in which the diplomatic actor operates.

A pattern observable in the case of the London environment is that the lower the level of political interest towards a foreign country in the mainstream British media coverage, the greater the effort by the respective embassy office at reaching out through alternative means of communications (social media, for example). The level of local mainstream media attention towards a foreign country—in other words that nation's visibility—is, in the first place, shaped by the host country's foreign policy, international alliances and membership of international organizations, as well as

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historical ties (to former colonies, in the case of the UK). Officials, in fact, tend to prioritize their interactions with foreign country representatives in terms of frequency of exchanges and the level at which negotiations are conducted. In the long term, the level of official interest by UK officials towards foreign countries affects the level of newsworthiness of the latter in the national media agenda.[12]

Countries like Australia or India tend to receive extensive coverage in the British media because of their membership of the Commonwealth, their historical and economic ties to the United Kingdom and their status as former British colonies.[13] Among the countries that tend to attract less attention—mainly because they are, like Britain, all members of the EU and there are virtually no sources of tension among them—are Sweden or Denmark.

Such different levels of attention in the mainstream media translate into equally diverging outreach strategies and choice of communication platforms. The Swedish embassy tends to organize few press conferences. As a Swedish diplomat put it: 'there's too much going on in London and journalism is too fast. So, you know, people [journalists] may pop up for a press conference or they may not.' The most important engagement activity, in this context, is rather targeted networking through face-to-face contacts at seminars and roundtable discussions led by the ambassador. The press office of the Danish embassy, to further illustrate the variety of communication channels adopted, among other initiatives, established in February 2010 the 'Defence News, Danish Embassy in London' Facebook page.[14] The purpose was enabling the Danish embassy to tell the British public about stories that did not normally make the news in the mainstream media: to 'actively tell the British population about Denmark's international engagements; especially explaining the extensive and mutually respectful cooperation between Denmark and the United Kingdom in Afghanistan.'[15]

Countries that tend to receive a great deal of official attention and, as a consequence, extensive media coverage, instead, are under less pressure to raise their visibility. This is confirmed, among the rest, by the fact that the websites of countries like the previously mentioned India, or Russia or Egypt (all identified as public diplomacy 'geographical priorities'),[16] are rather basic when compared to those of less influential counterparts. The only exception is represented by the United States: despite receiving more coverage than any other country because of its 'special relationship' with the United Kingdom and its superpower status, it also uses alternative communication channels: a sophisticated website, a Facebook page, a Twitter feed and a YouTube channel.

Where Next?

There is no one-size-fits-all policy when it comes to identifying an effective communication strategy in diplomacy, whether it is in its narrow sense of official negotiation or understood as public diplomacy. It is all very well to say that Facebook and Twitter are useful tools in supporting a new kind of public diplomacy that is characterized by dialogue with foreign audiences. And indeed these platforms—in the right conditions and when used by certain actors in specific environments—will support the achievement of such a result. The outcome, however, cannot be a simple extrapolation from the characteristics of a medium. It is, instead, a social product that is shaped by the contingent interplay of macro structural factors (international relations) and the local initiatives of social agents. In order fully to understand these overlapping social geometries, it is necessary to combine the insights of different fields of study: international relations, politics, communication. It is also necessary to gain a better view of the micro-interactions of the social actors—the diplomats, officials, journalists and audiences with whom embassies and governments aim to communicate. Examining these actors' actual practices involves a greater use of ethnographic methods. Becoming sensitive to the variation of practices and the causes of such variation also requires international comparative research designs. As most current research is about the United States which, in whichever way one might want to look at it is an outlier case, and as the number of actors in the domain of twenty-first century international relations steadily increases, we also urgently need to engage with the question: how does this all work for the other 150 plus nations?

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and *Understanding Terrorism in the Age of Global Media: A Communication Approach* (Palgrave, 2012).

[1] Manuel Castells (1996) *The Rise of the Network Society* (vol. I) (Oxford: Blackwell).

[2] For instance, Gordon S. Smith, 'Reinventing Diplomacy: A Virtual Necessity', United States Institute

of Peace Virtual Diplomacy Report (Washington, DC: USIP, 2000); and Sheryl J. Brown and Margarita S. Studemeister, 'Virtual Diplomacy: Rethinking Foreign Policy Practice in the Information Age', *Information and Security*, vol. 7, 2001, pp. 28-44.

[3] Evans H. Potter (ed.), *Cyber-Diplomacy: Managing Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

[4] For example, see Patricia A. Karl, 'Media Diplomacy', *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science*, vol. 34, no. 4, 1982, pp. 143-152; Eytan Gilboa, 'Media Diplomacy: Conceptual Divergence and Applications', *The Harvard Journal of Press Politics*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1998, pp. 56-75; and Eytan Gilboa, 'Media Diplomacy in the Arab-Israeli Conflict', in E. Gilboa (ed.), *Media and Conflict: Framing Issues, Making Policy, Shaping Opinions* (Ardsley NY: Transnational Publishers, 2002), pp. 193-211.

[5] Harold Nicholson, for example, defined diplomacy as 'the management of international relations by negotiation; the method by which these relations are adjusted and managed by ambassadors and envoys'; see Harold Nicholson, *The Evolution of the Diplomatic Method* (London: Constable, 1954)pp. 15-16. For a review of the evolution of the meaning of public diplomacy, see Nicholas Cull, 'Public Diplomacy before Gullion: The Evolution of a Phrase', Public Diplomacy Blog, 18 April 2006, USC Center on Public Diplomacy, available online at <http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/pdfs/gullion.pdf>.

[6] Jan Melissen (ed.), *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations* (Basingstoke:

Palgrave, 2005) and Jan Melissen, *Beyond the New Public Diplomacy* (Clingendael: Netherlands Institute of International RelationsClingendael, 2011), available at http://www.clingendael.nl/publications/2011/20111014_cdsp_paper_jmelissen.pdf

[7] James K. Glassman, 'Public Diplomacy 2.0', speech delivered at the New American Foundation, Washington, DC, 12 December 2008, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3NU4d81Ps4>;

[8] 'What is Digital Diplomacy?', The Foreign and Commonwealth Office website (n.d.), available at <http://digitaldiplomacy.fco.gov.uk/en/about/digital-diplomacy/>; Tara Sonenshine, 'Web 2.0 Engagement,' U.S. Department of State website, <http://www.state.gov/r/remarks/2012/199173.htm>.

[9] Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

[10] W. Phillips Davison, 'News Media and International Negotiation', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 2, 1974, pp. 174-191.

[11] Sixteen interviews with foreign diplomats from fourteen different countries were conducted by the author in London in 2010.

[12] Cristina Archetti, *Explaining News: National Politics and Journalistic Cultures in Global Context* (New York: Palgrave, 2010), Chapter 1.

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[13] While no studies of foreign countries' visibility in UK news are available, research conducted in the

United States suggest that 'in many ways, international news transmission continues to reflect the earlier imperial system in which news agencies follow national flags, armies, and traders'; see H. Denis Wu, 'Systemic Determinants of International News Coverage: A Comparison of 38 Countries', *Journal of Communication*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2000, p. 111. This statement is largely confirmed by literature on media flows. See, for example, Timothy M. Jones, Peter Van Aerst and Rens Vliegenhart, 'Foreign Nation Visibility in US News Coverage: A Longitudinal Analysis (1956-2006)', *Communication Research*, vol. XX, no. X, 2011, pp. 1-20, particularly the literature review presented on pp. 2-6.

[14] Available at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Defence-News-Danish-Embassy-in-London/326005760827?ref=ts>

[15] Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'In It Together: Embassy Internet Initiative Invites User Activity',

2010, available online at <http://www.amblondon.um.dk/en/menu/TheEmbassy/DefenceSection/Defence+>

[News/InItTogether.htm](http://www.amblondon.um.dk/en/menu/TheEmbassy/DefenceSection/Defence+News/InItTogether.htm).

[16] Patrick Carter, *Public Diplomacy Review*, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) website, 2005,

available at <http://www.fco.gov.uk/resources/en/pdf/public-diplomacy-review>, p. 14.

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