DIPLOMACY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

EXPLORING TOMORROW'S PRACTICE

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

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Summary

Julian Slotman[1]

Background

- The roundtable was convened in the context of the Clingendael research project "Diplomacy in the Digital Age", initiated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, and follows an earlier report: *Futures for Diplomacy: Integrative Diplomacy in the 21st Century.[2]* Its purpose was to explore the meanings and implications of terms such as 'e-diplomacy', 'digital diplomacy' and 'cyber diplomacy', about which there is some confusion – both amongst practitioners and analysts. Whilst the role of social media has come to dominate this discussion, the aim of the Clingendael project – and thus of the roundtable – is to take a broader perspective by exploring the contexts in which this is occurring. The final report, co-authored by Brian Hocking (bhocking@clingendael.nl) and Jan Melissen (jmelissen@clingendael.nl and @JanMDiplo), will be published in May.
- The session was organised in four parts: discussing digital diplomacy agendas; parameters of change in the digital age; changing rules and norms, and changing roles and relationships in diplomacy.
- The following summary is not a verbatim record but is intended to capture the key points raised during the four sessions. The summary is based on a transcript of the notes written by Martijn van Lith, Jesper Daniek Saman, Julian Slotman and Julia Soldatiuk.

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[1] Julian Slotman is a research intern on digital diplomacy and international policy networks in the Research Department of the Clingendael Institute. After doing his Bachelor's in Econometrics and Operations Research, Julian graduated from Maastricht University with Master's degrees in Economics and Public Policy. He did two other internships at the Dutch embassy in Berlin and the Rabobank research department, and he will start working as a research officer at the CPB Netherlands Bureau of Economic Policy Analysis.

[2] Hocking, B., Melissen, J., Riordan, S., & Sharp, P. (2012). *Futures for Diplomacy: Integrative diplomacy in the 21st Century (No. 1)*. The Hague: Clingendael, Netherlands Institute of International Relations.

1. Digital diplomacy agendas

1. The context of diplomacy is changing – as it has done over its long history of evolution. In the 21st century, the modern-day state is increasingly interconnected and subject to many interdependencies and alliances across societies. Non-state actors are becoming more influential in the domain of international policy-making, once the exclusive preserve of professional diplomats. Meanwhile, digital innovations are revolutionizing the institutionalized modes of communication. Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) are forced to reconsider their roles in the complex networks of foreign policy-making.[3]

2. Numerous terms have been coined to describe these innovations in diplomatic practice. The abundance of more or less overlapping definitions confuses the debate on the policy agendas of the new forms of diplomacy. A conceptualization of *digital diplomacy* is therefore badly needed, both by the practitioners and scholars of digital diplomacy.

3. Digital diplomacy incorporates various policy domains, such as digitalized public diplomacy, e-governance, networked diplomacy and, arguably, cyber-diplomacy. The common denominator of the policy domains associated with digital diplomacy is their use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), in some way or another. Digital diplomacy is, however, more than a set of overlapping functional domains. Rather, it provides a framework to conceptualize innovations to the functions, capabilities and organization of diplomacy. Nevertheless, a more limiting interpretation of digital diplomacy may be considered more suitable for other debates. The actual interpretation often depends on the institutional and cultural baggage of the actors in digital diplomacy.

4. The adoption of ICTs for foreign policies should be guided by strategic considerations. This process is slowed significantly by the steep learning curve, institutional and cultural characteristics of the national diplomatic systems (NDSs) and the risk averseness of important decision-makers. Unfortunately, there is insufficient interaction between policymakers and academia to encourage meaningful learning from each other. Most MFAs therefore restrict their digital diplomacy policies to those aimed at public diplomacy, while leaving the door open for other initiatives.

5. MFAs feel themselves constrained by a delicate trade-off between openness and confidentiality. As a consequence, they usually fail to interact with their publics, leading to a growing engagement gap. MFAs have to try to catch up with their publics, which are usually more adaptive to technological advancements.

6. The information availability and the increased influence of non-governmental stakeholders on foreign policy making will redefine the role of the diplomat, be it through evolution or revolution. More so than before, diplomats will have to interact with the public and understand the implications of social media communication patterns. Furthermore, digitalization arguably increases the speed of communication and decision making.

7. The evolutionary or revolutionary change will be determined mainly by technology hypes, public pressures and the willingness of leadership to adopt changes. The "digital disruptions" will not change the essence of diplomacy because diplomacy is by nature adaptive to the environment, interpreting change and (cultural)

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[3] http://www.diplomatmagazine.nl/2014/12/07/future-networking-foreign-ministries-business-usual/

diversity. The real revolution will thus take place in those areas where there is no other option than to use digital tools.

2. Parameters of change

1. Because of the changing character of diplomacy and since MFAs are forced to do more with less, they have to reconsider the way they do their work, reinforcing creative thinking. This has led to more collaboration with external stakeholders and digitalizing some functions of diplomacy. By engaging with a wider environment and strategically employing social media, MFAs have begun to tap into the great potential of networked diplomacy and digital diplomacy.

2. While it is clear that a number of diplomatic skills escape digitalisation, the traditional role of the diplomats as gatekeepers in the relationship between societies and the international communities is changing. Diplomats are increasingly expected to understand the characteristics of the network society and the "duality" between the networked society and diplomacy. They do, however, depend heavily on their MFA for providing them with the ICT tools that would allow them to make full use of digitalised foreign policy networks.

3. MFAs often use combinations of communication channels but it appears to be difficult to tailor communication to specific contexts. Moreover, the message may be poorly targeted or misinterpreted. Diplomats should be very careful with their online presence, as their digital footsteps can be traced by anybody. Not communicating is, however, also risky.

4. An international comparison of digital diplomacy practices reveals that MFAs generally see themselves as foreign policy storytellers. Despite efforts to control online foreign policy narratives, their influence is waning. Indeed, MFAs are no longer the sole authors of foreign policy narratives and the success of their digital diplomacy strategy depends on their ability to learn from dynamic issue networks. Therefore, there is a great need for case studies exploring the characteristics and structures of issue networks in international advocacy and the private sector.

3. Rules of the game

1. The control of MFAs on the increasingly complex web of international policy is dwindling. MFAs are forced to become more open and transparent about foreign policy and reconsider their policy development and evaluation, international strategies and diplomatic training. They have to learn how to speak and listen to their publics and react accordingly. Particularly listening and doing are considered to be difficult.

2. Digital policy innovations should respond to physical needs. Data can help diplomats to close information and engagement gaps. Under the condition that governments do not abuse big data, they can indeed improve the effectiveness of a range of foreign policies. More research is however needed to measure the impact of these policies.

3. The NDSs have to deal with an increasing number of governmental and external stakeholders. Digital diplomacy can be used to learn more about stakeholders and build coalitions with and between them. Embassies have a special role in this process, connecting foreign stakeholders with the home networks. Moreover, as the sensors of the diplomatic system, they collect, evaluate and assess (semantic) data. The common trend towards decentralization of international policy leads to

greater responsibilities for the diplomatic missions and allows foreign stakeholders more influence on the policy processes.

4. The confidential nature of diplomatic decision-making appears to be at odds with the move towards more open and transparent foreign policy. Some foreign policy information is indeed too sensitive to be public. Moreover, it is not always desirable to have all information available to the public. Nevertheless, open data will help to create a better base of understanding for foreign policy makers. Policy makers should therefore try to strike a balance between openness and confidentiality. This requires discretion and a pragmatic attitude towards confidentiality.

4. Changing roles and relationships

1. The spread of the "Ubernet" will diminish the value of borders. Indeed, the top ten populations of the world already include social media communities.[4] MFAs have to learn to interpret complex information streams. They are being influenced by the same external actors that they are trying to influence. Meanwhile, the foreign policy narrative is constructed by a multi-voice community of employees of the ministry.

2. The toolbox of MFAs has to change but the tools used today may not be the ones used in ten years. MFAs should learn how to employ digital and networked diplomacy as they go along. However, the timespan between an event and the expected policy reaction is also becoming shorter. The role of policy planners has to be redefined accordingly. MFAs should experiment with combinations of modern communication tools, depending on the content matter and target group.

3. Both recruitment and training have to be adapted to the changing profile of the future diplomat. MFAs should not just hire new skills, but also train the current workforce. MFAs have recently begun investing in recruitment and training of their current employees, with varying degrees of success. The training of leadership and local staff at the embassies is generally considered to be a valuable investment. The most important determinants of success are political leadership, strategic orientation, the willingness to delegate responsibilities and practical considerations.

4. The relationships between MFAs and external actors are changing, creating opportunities and threats for MFAs. While the importance of some traditional stakeholders for foreign policy is decreasing, most stakeholders benefit from enhanced cooperation and digitalisation. The effectiveness of international policy networks depends on the relevance and the appeal of the issue, momentum, the flexibility of the network, openness and transparency towards outside actors and the willingness to take risks. Networked and digital diplomacy require a long-term strategy to deal with all these factors.

5. Conclusion

The digitalisation of diplomacy will be a continuous process. Both researchers and practitioners should focus on the practical applications of ICTs for diplomacy, instead of worrying about the technicalities. They should make sure that digital diplomacy meets the needs and demands of all relevant stakeholders. A clearer definition of digital diplomacy is desirable and more research is needed to assess

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[4] http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/03/11/digital-life-in-2025/

the resources required for digital diplomacy and its impact. The literature on digital transformation contains valuable lessons that need to be validated and complemented with thorough case studies that inform foreign ministries and other international actors.