



Diplomacy in the 21st Century

Digitisation and Government Responsibility

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Summary

Digitisation affects humanity in many ways; including the functioning of government. A salient example is its impact upon modern diplomacy. Information wealth leads to the reduction of context and background to unmanageable amounts of facts when decisions need to be taken. The speed of communication results in time pressure on deciders undermining the objective of well-pondered judgements. The use of social media with their publicity tend to override strategical needs in devising policies. Thus, digitisation may empower diplomacy in previously unimaginable ways. But its risks need to be tamed by the awareness of its users that its effectiveness must not be allowed to compromise its legitimacy.

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Analysis

Technologies today, as they shape globalisation, impact the human condition in ways that have few precedents in human history. Mainly, these are the technologies of weapons of mass destruction, information technology, communication, and biotechnology. In specific ways, they also impact diplomacy. One of the most important components of these technologies is digitisation generally (Hocking/Melissen ch. 2).

Digitisation invades more or less every area of life. By reducing every activity and every utterance to its binary code, digitisation subjugates physical life and reduces it inescapably to its arithmetic representation. This datafication grants those who perform administrative or managerial activities advantages over “analogue” activities in terms of the time consumed, amount of information processed, and number of interlocutors. This is true for various aspects of diplomacy as well, and has three major consequences: (1) The amount of information available at the diplomat’s fingertips is limitless. Only because diplomats and their superiors--politicians--are human is there an obstacle to taking into account all of the necessary data in all of their wealth for making a decision (Schmidt/Cohen); (2) the speed with which information or opinion is communicated is close to real-time. The diplomatic bureaucracy as well as government itself are therefore in a position to make a decision almost immediately after the need arises, and to communicate it to addressees as immediately; (3) the diplomat can have a conversation on various platforms with theoretically every other human being using the same platform. They are therefore able to gauge the opinion of various relevant publics constantly and to react to the publics’ needs, requests or opinions. This is the world of social media.

These advantages are obvious and explain the urgent efforts of diplomatic institutions to make use of digitisation extensively, just as is happening in many other professions. There may be more advantages, less obvious ones, that still remain in the realm of research and speculation. For example, will digitisation lead to less cumbersome decision-making processes? Will misunderstandings between states and peoples be minimised, or completely vanish due to the possibility of examining notions about others? Will global networks enable governments to work more efficiently toward abolishing remaining development obstacles?

Foreign policy makes use of the tools and techniques provided by diplomacy. As over the millennia those tools have only rarely undergone significant changes, they seem to have proven their effectiveness and efficiency. Reading Thucydides, Sunzi, Kautilya or Machiavelli, principles of diplomacy valid today are easily recognisable. But referring to Thucydides, Sunzi, Kautilya or Machiavelli, the assumption is that humans’ perception of their environment and their ways of reacting to it are in principle timeless. Digitisation may prove that assumption wrong. The three aspects of the digitisation of diplomacy illustrate this.

Information Wealth

Facts are never self-explanatory. They need to be understood, which is possible only through context, background, and judgment of their relevance. The judgement of their relevance again depends on a comparison with other facts deemed relevant. The prism through which such a comparison is made consists of the knowledge of one’s own (and in the case of diplomacy of one’s own country’s) political and strategic concepts and values, of concepts of partners, resp. other countries. Prioritisation of such relevant facts in their contexts will enable decision-makers to base their choices sufficiently on knowledge and understanding. Confronted with a limitless supply of facts, which are updated incessantly, the impulse both of diplomats in charge of digesting and processing information for decision-makers, and for those decision-makers themselves, is to replace context with more facts and to prioritise according to the previously proven reliability of sources,



or according to the relevance of sources. This makes sense as more facts provide at least a semblance of context, previous reliability allows the assumption of present reliability, and relevance of sources corresponds to a decision-maker's responsibility to answer to public attention even when dealing with the need to make decisions on matters outside of the public eye. Also, there is experience both in fact-evaluation and decision-making; such experience expresses itself through the "gut-feeling" of analysts as well as politicians when preparing decisions and when making them.

At the same time these mental processes allow the individual's consciousness of context, and historical memory that contribute to the evaluation of diplomatic necessities, to shrink. Digitisation reduces the need to think more than necessary to systematise the facts available simply because it facilitates thought processes. One question arising here is whether this reduction, once turned into normal work routine, impacts decision-making processes negatively to a degree that would allow doubts that a decision is arrived at in the best possible way and therefore might carry dangers for the longer-term objectives of the state. The next question is then whether it also at some point affects the very ability of individuals to carry out such thought- and decision-making processes, as well as the accuracy of gut-feelings. Does the individual diplomat and politician come to depend on digitisation as at least partially an *ersatz* for thought itself?

Speed of Communication

Speed is of the essence, both for absorbing information and for timing decisions. But speed is only one of the components that constitutes the essence of what makes an appropriate decision. Judgement is as consequential as speed. That entails an understanding of all factors necessary to formulate a complex course of action corresponding to long-term objectives, values, and concepts. Once a new piece of information is received by a diplomat, be it about an event, a statement by an interlocutor, or another country's government, they need to need to process it and pass it on with a proposal for a course of action to a decision-maker on the political level, i.e. a politician. The more urgent the information, the faster decision-making needs to happen.

The same then is true for the decision-maker. A politician making a decision wants it to be acted upon. He also wants it made known to everybody concerned in order to influence the course of events. The interlocutor waits for a decision, thus the decision-maker waits for a proposal for a course of action, and so, often, does the public. As digitisation offers the means to interlock action and reaction almost seamlessly, it also overwhelms the consciousness for having to arrive at a sound judgement before making a proposal or before making a decision. A decision may be urgently expected due to the nature of the question it concerns. It may also seem urgent due to public pressure. Often in the case of international conferences or meetings accompanied by—sometimes worldwide—public attention, the urgency is measurable in public attention, not in the need for the problem to be resolved. Thus the perspective for proposing or deciding on a course of action is reduced to the need to act as fast as possible.

When acting quickly is possible, speed becomes more important than the weight of the matter in the consciousness of the diplomat or the decision-maker. In that way, in day-to-day business, a new dynamic arises governing the handling of information. Instead of spending time pondering possible future contingencies and parameters of judgements, that is, conceiving well-informed strategies, digitisation makes it less burdensome to wait for moments when decisions are needed and then to make them instantaneously. Thus politics turns into a train of isolated moments each requiring action instead of the implementation of concepts: Stress is the result of every single news item that could possibly produce world-wide repercussions.



While digitisation therefore offers the comfort of almost instant communication to the diplomat as well as the politician, it also leads to the question of whether that kind of communication does not submit to the prerogatives of marketing a politician's decision more than the subject-matter would justify. If that becomes a tendency in decision-finding, it may undermine the authority of government, in the process blurring the distinction between ideas that constitute the values of a political concept and ideas arising as an off-the-cuff reaction to a sudden challenge. A further question would be what the importance of values, of the truth of politics, will remain over a longer term, and lastly, whether the very character of both the diplomat and the politician will not be affected.

Social Media

The most conspicuous area where digitisation impacts diplomacy is that of social media, not because its impact would go further than that of the wealth of information or the speed of communication, but because it is the area most exposed to the public eye. Traditional "public diplomacy" may not go back that far in the practice of diplomacy but it remains still within traditional confines of being directed according to concepts and strategies of a foreign policy (see below "High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy"). Once diplomacy enters the realm of social media it exposes itself to new conditions of work. If it confines itself to releasing traditional policy statements it quickly renders itself inconsequential. It therefore is compelled to accept the parameters along which social media function. Diplomacy has (again, such as other areas of politics as well) to turn itself willy-nilly into an integral part of the fluid communities that users of social media constitute. It also has to internalise and use the fact that social media only function because they offer transparency and emotional impact. That means that diplomats have to appear as individuals, have to offer insight in at least some private aspects of what they are doing, and allow an exchange over policies that may become emotionally charged. The advantages lie in opportunities to "look good" as a country internationally, reaching beyond the confines of traditional audiences for public diplomacy. They also lie in the chance to find support for any given political measures beyond the small traditional realm of citizens interested in foreign policy only in times of crises. That support may be important to find domestically where foreign policy and domestic issues overlap and influence each other, and internationally when a country's foreign policy is contested abroad.

With the use of social media as a tool for diplomacy, all problems arise out of the risk that technology usurps politics. The image of the country presented through social media will necessarily be contested by those communities not approving, especially if it is a country that has power internationally and makes (often unavoidable) decisions that are not universally welcome. A discussion on a social media platform that pertains to questions of national interests, values and basic foreign policy objectives will invite extremist voices and risks drawing the country into conflicts that are not resolvable through presenting an image of "looking good," possibly reinforcing those conflicts. This is especially salient for discussions with audiences in non-democratic countries. Where the use of democratic liberties is repressed, audiences can be manipulated into reactions by their governments. Not only may this add fuel to an international controversy, but it may well also lead someone using social media for public diplomacy purposes to try to manipulate their audiences as well, undercutting their very purpose to present well-reflected truth. Even if diplomats speak to a sympathetic audience, they will gear their contributions to the need to create drama. Gesturing to an audience that waits to be tickled emotionally as a precondition to shape a political consensus, a diplomat risks throwing overboard the care necessary in presenting balanced and sober judgements; a dry bureaucrat cannot expect applause on



the net. Especially where foreign policy is part of a domestic debate, the context of its strategies and purposes is at risk of disfigurement and loss of substance.

The philosophy of social media as applied to government assumes that the new networks constitute the true (not necessarily representative) democratic public and expects that governments react to the will of such “democratic” publics (Morozow, ch. 1). Such reactions to which the use of social media lures the individuals playing the social media in their official (or semi- or pseudo-private) capacity may override the need to pursue strategies consistently and without having the eye on an expected public reaction—after all, how to explain the treadmill work of day-to-day administration is an emotionally charged subjective statement! Lastly there is the security problem. Transparency at least to some degree is vital for a functioning social media community. But transparency may compromise the security of a state and the safety of its own or other countries' nationals. This threat exists, and if it is disregarded, one of the most essential elements of diplomacy, the trust between interlocutors across borders, gets lost, with dire consequences for international relations. Diplomacy, as the execution of politics in general, is not only about abstract values, concepts and strategies. It is about the real world. It may entail lives and countries in danger, it may well risk armed conflicts, and war.

Government Responsibility

The spectre of war may help to sharpen the point this paper made at the beginning: that the digitisation of diplomacy is part and parcel of a process which is reshaping the human condition. After all, information, speed, and social media may all be effective instruments of cyber war. This will not be discussed here. But it illustrates how the responsibility of a government in employing digitisation weighs heavy. The dilemma is that it is a double-edged responsibility.

Responsible government has to make the best use of all technical means available to govern efficiently and effectively, and therefore uses digitisation just like other technologies, that is, as an administrative aid. On the other hand, responsible government has to make sure it acts within the framework of what gives it its legitimacy, its effectiveness, and its efficiency.

Politics is an effort by humans to give structure to their interactions on a longer-term basis in communities beyond families or clans or fluid groups created by individuals. It rests on historical, cultural, or simply administrative traditions but needs to deal with present or future challenges in ways that satisfy the members of the community which establishes a political organisation. A major incentive in doing this is the acquisition of power within or over a community. The more responsibly—in the eyes of community members—politicians use that power, the more legitimate a government is. Foreign policy deals in similar ways with the relationship between human communities, trying to balance the relationships between politically organised human communities to the best possible benefit and the least necessary damage to most of them. For that purpose diplomats and politicians need to bring facts and information together with knowledge of the past and ideas for the future, and they need to risk, sometimes against many odds, to forge new paths. When today diplomats, as other humans, increasingly perceive their environment through their screens and homogenised in the language of arithmetics (Kissinger 342), they need to make sure that they are still able to inspect their options for courses of action in the light of all the varied plurality of thought inherent in the soul of human beings— their ambitions, hopes and dreams, in order to devise a strategy that corresponds best to the values of their community and to their own power aspirations. For that purpose they need to make sure that an examination of ideas, not only of facts and events, takes place, through introspection or through discussions



with interlocutors, inside a government and/or with other governments. Otherwise their legitimacy will be in doubt sooner or later.

Maybe digitisation will empower diplomacy with a heretofore unknown reach. But who in fact is empowered? Diplomats and politicians? Or algorithms? The sifting through the wealth of incoming information may well be left to algorithms programmed to provide context, background and prioritisation. Algorithms may well be designed to present a proposal for a course of action as quickly as the need for a decision arises. Considering that half of conversational exchange in today's social media is done by bots already (Yvonne Hofstetter), the business of conversing with the multitudes of communities through social media may well be left best to algorithms and bots trained to give the right response with exactly the necessary dose of emotion and transparency in order to reach the largest possible consensus. So will digitised networks that produce a new, and within reasonable limits, transparent effectiveness of government, solve heretofore unsolvable conflicts? Or, in the case of less democratic governments, will they offer perfect new means of oppression? Thus, will the disempowerment of humans through digitisation become a new driver of history?

This is why the dilemma of responsibility is double-edged. The success of future diplomacy to a large degree depends on the successful use of digitisation, yet digitisation produces effects that undermine what humans have regarded as the precondition of successful politics. In view of the task to make the best possible use of digitisation (and not to lag behind international competitors), governments need to refine the ways governance avoids giving in to the danger of total and intrusive order of networked efficiency. The diverging character straits of digitisation need to be brought together in a system that balances and harnesses them.

The natural impulse of a bureaucracy (to return from the high plane where this discussion has led this paper to the world of stuffy offices where civil servants labour) to harness diverging tendencies is to introduce administrative rules for their use. In the case of digitisation this is not enough. The speed of the technical evolution of digitisation will overtake any regulation as fast as it is proclaimed. What is important goes deeper—a wide-reaching consensus among the whole body of governance on what digitisation means. Possibly the spread of modern press during the nineteenth century, which opened public space in revolutionary ways but was tamed through the growth of emancipated civic-mindedness (Osterhammel 1.5), offers a precedent. That consensus must include the awareness of the ambiguous character of digitisation, its advantages, and the imperative to maintain the ability to structure information so that it becomes knowledge, to interrupt the flow of communication to reflect on decisions to be proposed or taken, and to enter into conversations with society without foregoing the prerogatives that only make diplomacy—and politics in general—legitimate.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



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About the Author of this Issue

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