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Twiplomacy: Worth Praising, but with Caution ^[1]

The use of Twitter as a diplomatic tool fits in nicely with the new sense of political empowerment that has accompanied the rise of social media. As Internet connectivity rates continue to grow (particularly through the rapidly expanding availability of smartphones), Twitter helps foster an unprecedented sense of community among members of global publics.

Members of these communities expect to participate in – not be mere bystanders to – formulation and implementation of policy. People are tired of policymakers telling them, “This is how we are affecting your lives,” and having no way to respond or connect with others who might feel the same way. Twitter and other social media give people a venue to talk back to the powerful, and to build communities of interest.

Policymakers ignore this phenomenon at their peril. Particularly since the events in the Arab world beginning in 2011, a feeling of intellectual entitlement has taken hold quickly. Activists (a term now encompassing a vastly enlarged, social-media-enabled constituency) expect dialogue, not dicta. So, when the U.S. State Department, to cite one example, uses Twitter to communicate with the world, it had better be prepared to sustain the conversation.

Numerous governments are enthusiastically Tweeting on a daily basis, joining the ranks of individuals, non-governmental organizations, and other political players who have embraced this tool. But this is happening with little understanding of network dynamics. Where does the information go? What responses does it elicit within the network that the original source (e.g., a government) is not aware of? For all their willingness to plunge into the world of networks, governments remain hierarchic in structure, and often do not recognize the paths that information may take and the transformations that may occur to it within networks. All this is to say that governments using Twiplomacy need to better understand where their information is going. Only with that knowledge can policymakers comprehend the effects their social-media products may have.

One more cautionary note: Tweeting, per se, has little value – content is what matters. Some diplomats’ Tweets are like those of movie stars, offering bits of personal information that might make them seem less distant, but have little value in advancing diplomatic goals. Again, a maturation process is underway, with Twiplomats (a terrible word) still learning how to maximize the value of social media. This will take some time.

Overall, Twiplomacy helps reduce barriers between policymakers and those affected by policy. This is useful, but it profoundly alters the DNA of diplomacy, and that deserves far more study than it has so far received.
