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The Ebb and Flow of Digital Diplomacy [1]

Last week I had the pleasure of attending the International Communication Association's 68th Annual Conference in Prague. During a debate on virtual embassies, American University Professor R.S. Zaharna asked me, why are so many digital initiatives, like virtual embassies, short-lived? Why is it that MFAs often announce grand digital initiatives that are abandoned within a few months?

The answers to this question illustrate the difficulty of practicing digital diplomacy.

Answer #1: Lack of Resources

In 2015, the Israeli MFA launched a Twitter embassy to the Gulf Cooperation Council, a group of six Gulf States that have no bilateral ties with Israel. The MFA intended to use the embassy to engage directly with the populations of these states on a range of issues, including Israeli scientific achievements, Israeli society and Israel's policies in the region. Moreover, the MFA hoped to bypass a highly critical domestic media. However, since 2015 the embassy has steadily become less active. Two-way conversations between the embassy and its audiences are rare, while most digital content is generic in nature and not tailored to the unique attributes of Gulf citizens.

The MFA seems to have abandoned the embassy's original goals, now using it as a one-way channel for message dissemination. A possible reason for this is that digital diplomacy is resource-intensive. Once a virtual embassy is launched, content needs to be created, videos need to be produced, and conversations need to take place. As digital diplomacy departments are usually understaffed and over-burdened, they soon abandon digital initiatives and fall back on less intensive forms of digital diplomacy such as information dissemination.

Answer #2: Administrations Change

When administrations change, so do diplomatic goals and diplomatic working routines. One notable example is Canada. Under Stephen Harper's conservative government, Canadian digital diplomacy was hampered as all online communications had to be approved by the prime minister's office. Thus, diplomats could not converse in real-time with followers. The government also focused on a digital initiative meant to facilitate democracy in Iran. Essentially, the Canadian government decided to help create, Digital Public Square a forum for Iranian citizens to speak their minds free from the restrictions of the Iranian regime.

The election of Justin Trudeau led to an immediate change in Canada's digital diplomacy goals and working routines. Diplomats were set free and no longer needed to pre-approve content. Since the restrictions have been lifted off Canadian diplomats, Digital Public Square has also become less prevalent on Canadian social media channels. This is not surprising. Why focus on a new digital square when Canadian diplomats can use existing digital diplomacy tools to interact with Iranians and promote democratic values?

Answer #3: Understanding Audiences

In 2015, the Hamas terror group decided to hold its first Twitter Q&A session. Twitter users could ask questions regarding the group's goals, its policies opposite Israel and the prospects of reconciliation with the West Bank government. While people *could* have asked questions on policy issues, many used the event to berate the group and criticize its actions. The Q&A was hijacked by Israeli and American Twitter users who used Hamas' hashtag to blast the group for its terror activity.

Hamas failed to account for the power that online audiences hold as they can accept or reject digital diplomacy messages, endorse or condemn a digital diplomacy campaign and engage with—or derail—a digital diplomacy event. In this case, Hamas was rejected by audiences. The backlash from the Q&A even made headlines throughout the world, instigating a crisis of legitimacy for the Hamas government.

Answer #4: Overestimating Digital Capabilities

In some cases, diplomats may misjudge the impact of digital tools. One such instance was the State Department's Twitter Channel "Think Again Turn Away." The channel was part of the Department's CVE (Countering Violent Extremism) activities meant to dissuade people from joining or communicating online with Daesh. The assumption among some American diplomats was that a Twitter channel could impact people's beliefs and their *behavior*s. Therefore, the channel documented cases of sexual violence by Daesh terrorists as well as its violence toward fellow Muslims, its destruction of heritage sites and its loss of territory throughout Iraq and Syria.

Yet the State Department soon had to contend with the fact that altering someone's behavior based solely on social media content is difficult at best and simply not plausible at worst. Changing people's behaviors requires interactions, engagement and long-term relationship building—not infographics. Ironically, engagement and relationship building were the very building blocks of Daesh's online recruitment efforts.

Answer #5: Changes in Audience Preferences

Finally, another reason for the short lifespan of digital diplomacy initiatives is rapid changes in audience preferences. For instance, the growing rhetoric of fake news and disinformation has led to changes in the behavior of some online audiences. Last year saw the largest growth in traditional media subscriptions in more than a decade. Importantly, it is millennials who are flocking back to traditional media news sites given their lack of trust of online content. This change will soon bring about new digital diplomacy initiatives, such as creating diplomatic blog platforms where audiences can access accurate information written by diplomats.

Moreover, digital audiences rapidly migrate from one platform to another. Once an MFA has established and created a community on Instagram, it may quickly lose the community as its members all move onto Snapchat or Google+. As such, digital diplomacy often sees diplomats abandon initiatives, and communities, given the constant need to migrate and follow their audiences.

Conclusions

Diplomacy seems to be highly susceptible to change. New administrations alter communications protocols while audiences constantly migrate between platforms. All of these often lead diplomats to abandon digital initiatives soon after these have been launched. Yet these changes might also suggest that diplomats need to focus, among other things, on creating their own platforms and attracting audiences to these platforms. The promise of delivering timely, accurate and relevant analysis of world events may enable diplomats to do just that.