

FROM PINSTRIPES TO TWEETS

How Today's Digital Diplomats Are Winning (and Losing) Hearts and Minds

By R. S. Zaharna

Ah, the good old days of diplomacy. The men donned pinstriped suits and the women were draped in pearls. The image of the diplomat was one of luxury, privilege, exclusivity, and secrecy. The embellishments of high culture and high education were captured in the rich symbolism of the famous painting *The Ambassadors*, created by Hans Holbein the Younger in 1533, at the dawn of contemporary diplomacy in the West. Mouse-click forward five centuries and digital communication technology is not only altering the methods but also the meaning of diplomacy. By going “digital,” the once secretive and exclusive domain of the elite has gone public.

In the realm of influencing relations between nations, digital media has suddenly unpinned the power to communicate from the almost exclusive control of the state. Thanks to digital platforms such as social media, state actors must now compete with non-state actors for a voice in the international arena as well as for legitimacy in the eyes of the public—including their domestic one. This is the great communication challenge for diplomats today and tomorrow.

The art of communication has always been central to diplomacy, from the Byzantine diplomats to the emerging digital diplomats of our time. Understanding the centrality of communication in the evolution of diplomacy helps put the angst over digital and social media in perspective. Currently, diplomacy is associated with the state-centric system of international relations that developed in modern Europe in the seventeenth century. Diplomacy and communication are as old as human society itself. Diplomacy and negotiations were requisite in arranging marriages as well

as in commerce and trade throughout the territories of dynastic China. Among the earliest recorded diplomatic documents on political relations are the Amarna Tablets from ancient Egypt.

▷ U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry takes a selfie at Gandhi Memorial Hospital, Addis Ababa, May 1, 2014. *Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty Images*



Even in ancient times, the centrality of communication in the practice of diplomacy was evident in the value placed on written and oral communication skills. In ancient Greece, oratory skills were highly prized, as diplomats had to present their case in open, public forums. Eloquence was similarly valued in envoys in ancient India. The *Arthashastra*, a treatise on statecraft believed to have been written by Kautilya, discussed the duties of diplomats in detail as representatives, informers, communicators, and negotiators. As Trần Văn Dĩnh noted in *Communication and Diplomacy in a Changing World*, “all Vietnamese envoys to Peking were top poets and writers—especially those endowed with a wit, a gift for quick repartee.” The verbal adroitness of the envoys became part of Vietnamese folklore.

The diplomacy of the Prophet Mohammed is well known throughout the Islamic world. The Prophet sent special envoys to deliver letters to the leaders of the region: Emperor Heraclius of the Byzantium; Sassanid King Khosrow II of the Persian Empire; Ashamat Al-Negashi, Emperor of the Abyssinian Kingdom of Aksum; and to the Muqawqis who ruled Egypt.

In modern Europe, the term diplomacy was originally associated with the study of handwriting, which was necessary in order to verify the inscriptions presented by representatives of neighboring territories. In his book *On the Way to Diplomacy*, the political scientist Costas M. Constantinou notes that it wasn't until the late eighteenth century that the word diplomacy gained political currency and aligned to statecraft and external affairs.

Modern diplomatic practice has continued to place a premium on communication. “The value of a diplomat lay in his ability to communicate, negotiate, and persuade,” diplomatic scholars Keith Hamilton and Richard Langhorne wrote in *The Practice of Diplomacy: Its Evolution, Theory and Administration*. The phrase “to be diplomatic” suggests verbal finesse and tact in potentially disruptive situations. The idea of diplomats as the messengers and builders of relations between heads of states represents a somewhat nostalgic one, albeit critical even in this digital era. Speaking of her travels to more than a hundred countries, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called it “shoe-leather diplomacy” and emphasized the importance of being on the ground. Today's diplomats, according to Daryl Copeland, a former Canadian diplomat and author of *Guerrilla Diplomacy: Rethinking International Relations*, also need to be as home in the bazaar as on the floor of the United Nations Security Council.

Whereas diplomacy and communication have a cordial relationship, the initial resistance of diplomats to digital media is emblematic of the rather strained relations between diplomacy and communication technology. Seemingly every communication innovation has represented at first a jolt, then a boon, to diplomatic practice. The invention of the telegraph initially caused an uproar in ministries and chancelleries

far and wide, but then was openly embraced. The “diplomatic cable” became a staple of the trade. In *Real-Time Diplomacy: Politics and Power in the Social Media Era*, Philip Seib, vice dean of the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and former director of the Center on Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California, highlights the challenge now presented by digital technology. “In a high-speed, media-centric world, conventional diplomacy has become an anachronism,” he writes. “Not only do events move quickly, but so too does public reaction to those events. The cushion of time that enabled policymakers to judiciously gather information and weigh alternatives is gone.”

Public Diplomacy or Propaganda?

There is an enduring perception that the media can often influence international relations more so than the diplomat. When the mass media emerged in the twentieth century, first radio and then television were perceived as being all-powerful. During World War I, radio in particular was associated with propaganda, which could penetrate the psyche of troops and demoralize them. The prevailing belief at the time, including among the field’s early researchers, was that propaganda messages delivered by the mass media would have an immediate and persuasive effect on the audience derived from deception, manipulation, and coercion. Like a shot from a hypodermic needle, once the message was injected into a society there would be little resistance from a passive audience.

After World War I, researchers began an intensive study of propaganda, the media, and the ways to influence audience attitude and behavior—a focus that continues today. Not surprisingly, the outbreak of World War II in Europe saw the deployment of the mass media as part of the war effort. The Voice of America broadcasting service was launched within months of the U.S. entry into the war. Later, during the Cold War, the United States government used Radio Free Europe to penetrate the Iron Curtain.

Such international broadcasts have become a standard instrument in a nation’s communication efforts to influence publics. Current government efforts using broadcast media, and now social and digital media as well, to reach audiences falls within the realm of what has been termed public diplomacy—a state’s efforts to communicate directly with publics rather than directly with governments. While public diplomacy strives to persuade based on credibility and openness, it nonetheless faces a challenge to distance and distinguish itself from propaganda. Edmund Gullion, a past dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, who is credited with coining the term public diplomacy, introduced it in a deliberate attempt to find an alternative to the word propaganda. That term change occurred in 1965, but the term, like the field itself, was largely dormant until September 11, 2001.

Ambassadors Who Tweet

The 9/11 attacks on the United States represented a wake-up call for public diplomacy, underscoring that the perceptions of foreign publics have domestic consequences. Public diplomacy, or “the battle for hearts and minds,” as it was more commonly called, was second to the military offensive when the United States launched the War on Terrorism. Not surprisingly, given the historical successes of broadcast media and the continuing perception of media power, post-9/11 American public diplomacy was driven by mass media initiatives.

The notion of public diplomacy had already received a boost from its link to the idea of “soft power,” introduced by the political scientist Joseph Nye in 1990. At the time, Nye suggested that the world was growing increasingly intolerant of hard power displays, such as military force or economic sanctions. Soft power, on the other hand, represented the ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. Over the past decade, more countries have increasingly recognized the importance of public diplomacy and soft power.

The advance of public diplomacy has coincidentally paralleled the rise of social media. Once again, communication technology that was first viewed with trepidation is increasingly being perceived as a benefit to diplomatic practice. In 2009, Shahira Fahmy of the University of Arizona conducted a search in scholarly databases pairing the term “diplomacy” with different types of social media tools—“blog,” “YouTube,” “Twitter.” To her surprise, the search generated zero results. Only a few years later, Fergus Hanson of the Lowy Institute in Australia wrote about the development of “e-diplomacy” in the U.S. State Department. He concluded that most public diplomacy initiatives have social media “baked in” as an integral part of their designs.

Today, the adoption of digital and social media in public diplomacy appears to be spreading rapidly, even if many diplomats remain personally hesitant to take the plunge. In 2009, then Mexican envoy to the United States Arturo Sarukhan became the first ambassador in the Washington diplomatic corps to take to Twitter. At a recent forum at American University in Washington, he noted the inherent risks of using it: errors are very public, and could even go viral. Of the 183 accredited ambassadors in Washington, he estimated that only forty have created personal Twitter accounts.

Tech-savvy diplomats contend that the benefits outweigh the risks. According to Sarukhan, simply logging in and monitoring social media “widens the information and intelligence bandwidth.” Diplomats can complement the often partisan views of media commentators and policy experts who dominate the air waves with less scripted conversation on Twitter. He lauds the benefits of social media as a means

of circumventing traditional media, especially when trying to get out a message and influence the narrative. He believes that his active and persistent presence on Twitter might have played a role in diluting and quelling a damaging media narrative of Mexico that had started to emerge.

These new media tools pose considerable challenges for diplomatic institutions, as a recent Aspen Institute report on integrating social media and diplomacy noted. One of the major challenges is the different pace of adoption, integration, and use of the tools between the public and governments. The diplomatic services of many nations are still inclined to use social media much like broadcast media: to shoot messages at publics. The problem, as countries are learning, is that social media has enabled publics to shoot back.

“Why Wasn’t I Consulted?”

Early efforts by American diplomats to use media in cultivating relations with foreign publics seem almost quaint—“telling our story,” per the motto of the former United States Information Agency. Digital media has intervened in the relational power dynamics, changing the balance of power between the state and the public. While on the surface digital media represents a technological shift, the more important change is in diplomatic thinking. Digital media has compelled nations to reconsider how they view publics and communicate with them. The supposedly passive audience of the information-starved age has been transformed into an aggressive, digital-media-empowered audience that demands to know, “why wasn’t I consulted?”

In the first phase of this progression, after 9/11, American public diplomacy initiatives echoed the Cold War approach and strategy. The focus was on getting the message out. The mass media was the tool of choice, not only because of its expansive reach, but also because it allowed for complete control over the message’s design and delivery. The goal was information dominance, gaining the upper hand in the battle for hearts and minds. American public diplomacy after 9/11 produced one high-profile media initiative after another—Al-Hurra television, Radio Sawa, and *Hi* magazine—largely aimed at influencing attitudes in the Arab World. Each initiative introduced with great fanfare was quickly met with a barrage of criticism because of its perceived disregard for the cultural and political sensitivities of the publics. As commentator Rami G. Khouri remarked at the time, “Al-Hurra, like the U.S. government’s Radio Sawa and *Hi* magazine before it, will be an entertaining, expensive and irrelevant hoax.” Capturing the sentiments of many, he added, “Where do they get this stuff from? Why do they keep insulting us like this?” Many even portrayed the elusive Osama bin Laden, who periodically released video tapes promoting Al-Qaeda’s cause to Al Jazeera, getting the upper hand in this public relations war. The late Ambassador

Richard Holbrooke famously remarked, “How can a man in a cave out-communicate the world’s leading communications society?”

Social media has effectively rendered this one-way quest for information dominance and control obsolete. That ushered in a new phase of public diplomacy based on the relational imperative. A new era focused on relationship-building as the foundation of public communication was emerging. Governments realized that publics were no longer content to be the target audience, or “target practice,” for public diplomacy messages. Social media had greatly expanded the array of media and information choices. Breaking the barriers of selectivity and gaining audience attention had become much more challenging for official public diplomacy. During this early period of social media, official public diplomacy responded rather quickly with pronouncements of “engagement.” In fact for a while, U.S. and UK diplomats and scholars stopped using the term “public diplomacy” in favor of “engagement.” Yet, despite the vocal intent of engaging or involving the audiences, social media initiatives were rather tepid and consisted mostly of grafting some of the interactive features of social media onto mass media initiatives. *Hi* magazine, as an early example, added a comments section. Later initiatives in this engagement phase included ventures onto digital media platforms, for example YouTube video contests, and the mandatory Facebook page for all foreign ministries.

Proliferation of social media soon spawned a third phase of public diplomacy in which governments operated on the understanding that publics were not content with being merely participants in government-initiated and controlled communication. Thanks to digital media’s low costs and high capabilities, publics quickly seized the mantle of being content producers. They now had the ability to augment their voice and initiate a new communication dynamic in the public arena. Governments, not wanting to lose relevancy, in turn, quickly lauded the publics, movements, and initiatives they favored. This phase saw the increasingly organized participation of civil society organizations and the rise of “relationship building,” “mutuality,” “partnerships,” and “social networks” in the lexicon of public diplomacy. Many of these words found particular resonance in pro-democracy initiatives.

The third phase of social media and public diplomacy solidified the relational paradigm of public diplomacy with its emphasis on relationship building and networking. Simply crafting clever messages or developing creative media approaches was no longer enough in reaching or influencing publics. Effective public diplomacy now rested on a government’s ability to cultivate relations with publics in order to promote policy agendas and create policy change. The operative words in this phase are publics, movements, and initiatives that a government favored. The challenge for diplomacy is that digital media remained a medium, and policy itself remained

the message. And in the policy battles, publics are using digital media to go for the political jugular.

Digital Strategies

In a fourth phase, governments are facing adversarial relations with publics, be they publics that are challenging the policies of foreign governments or their own governments. While adversarial publics may emerge spontaneously, they can quickly become a recognized movement, such as Occupy Wall Street in the United States, or the Gezi Park protest movement in Turkey.

The existence of contentious publics—foreign and domestic—is not a new challenge for policymakers. However, in the past the suppression of public movements and rebellions was made possible by a state’s ability to control and if need be silence communication. Government control over the mass media accorded it that ability and power. Social media, by definition, does not lend itself to such control. The very visible, global magnitude of social media in the hands of adversarial publics is new for state actors. Governments that try to treat the new media like the old media are suffering the consequences.

As governments struggle to devise an effective response, publics are further exploiting the capabilities of digital media. They are not only challenging governments, but challenging their legitimacy. Communication credibility is one thing; political legitimacy is another. “Crisis” and “confrontation” are appearing with increasing frequency in public diplomacy discussions as states struggle to effectively respond to challenges from their own domestic public as well as global publics.

Diaspora populations, playing a more prominent role, are a critical public often overlooked in public diplomacy. Digital media has been called the quintessential communication tool of diasporas. When disaster and crisis strike, diaspora publics have the most incentive to respond. How tech-savvy digital diaspora respond is another matter. Diaspora may respond in an outpouring of support and serve as a bridge between their country of origin and global publics. Electronic Intifada, an activist website started during the second Palestinian Intifada, is a prime example. Diaspora can even use their intimate ties to the home country to unseat a government. It is perhaps not coincidental that some of the most piercing foils in public diplomacy-as-regime change have been spearheaded by leaders in the diaspora. But, this again, is not a new phenomenon. Cassette tapes were once considered new media and their circulation is credited with sparking an unexpected youth revolution in Iran and sending a shah into exile.

New strategies are available to the new cyber publics demanding a voice. All publics are exploiting the anonymity conferred by digital media. Unlike the traditional media where people can identify the source, the Internet is a bastion of hidden identities.

The power of anonymity was evident in one of the most prominent and baffling hoaxes in the early period of the Arab Spring. I remember reading some of the first reports in the *Washington Post* about the dramatic abduction of a Syrian-American blogger Amina Arraf, “A Gay Girl in Damascus,” in June 2011. At the time, Syrian activists were struggling to get on the radar screen of Washington policymakers. Amina’s first post had been in mid-February. Two months later, in late April, her blog gained wide attention after a moving post, “My Father the Hero.” By early May, she was on the short list of Arab bloggers in recommended reading for President Barack Obama prepared by *Foreign Policy*. Then, suddenly on June 6 Amina was abducted. The *New York Times*, *Guardian*, and other prominent Western news outlets covered the story. Reporters Without Borders issued a press release. Supporters created a Facebook page, with more than 15,000 clamoring for Amina’s release.

This was a heady time for social media in the Arab World, with global attention focused on the Arab Spring. Andy Carvin, a prominent blogger with National Public Radio, led a crowd-sourced effort to find Amina. She never was found because she didn’t exist. She turned out to be a cyber vehicle created by an American graduate student studying in Edinburgh who wanted to join the conversation on events in Syria. He did it through Amina.

While Amina may not have been real, her cyber effect certainly was. The strategy succeeded in generating attention and compassion for activists in Syria. As one reader posted on the *New York Times* blog The Lede, “If she is a real person or not, or if her accounts are fictionalized or not, to me is irrelevant. The Syrian government is oppressing its people forcefully—this is a fact. If the story of her disappearance gets a few more people to pay attention, then whether true or false, more attention will be focused on the Syrian government.” Despite being a fictitious person, Amina Abdallah Arraf al-Omari today has her own Wikipedia page.

Some have suggested that digital media has evened the communication playing field between state and non-state actors. Many state actors believe that the activists are using digital strategies that allow them to gain the upper hand over states—for example in the case of “digital jihadists,” including the extremist group called the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Here we may pause and reflect again on strategy. Many Western governments and much of the media appear focused on the content of ISIS’s messages. While the graphic nature of the content by its very nature does draw attention, it is not the content that matters in digital media as much as the relational connections and the exchange of information. Everything about these tools highlights their interactivity. They are tools for engagement, for creating conversations, and building relationships. This relational dynamic is where the communication power is.

Activists have realized this new dynamic and are exploiting the interactive capabilities of digital communication tools. Many in government and diplomacy, however, appear still tethered to the “message-media” mindset of trying to craft messages and control media. They still struggle to find the right message and miss the importance of mapping the network of relations that carry, shape, and ultimately distort their messages.

Governments need to shift from analyzing messages to studying the online and offline relational dynamics. It is not so much what adversarial publics are saying, so much as how they are organizing themselves. Ali Fisher and his colleagues recently noted patterns of “swarmcast”—a tactic used by groups of protesters to quickly form and disperse to challenge authorities. Swarming often involves protesters using disruptive, highly visible events to gain media attention—and then dispersing before security authorities can respond. This tactic and other interactive network patterns are part of a “netwar” strategy first identified by John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt in their study of the “Battle for Seattle” waged by protesters against a meeting of the World Trade Organization in 2007.

This is just one illustration of how activists are turning the tables on governments thanks to social and digital media tools. The pairing of online with offline strategies is particularly powerful, as seen in reports of how ISIS is also using social media to draw in and connect with potential recruits in Western countries. A recent article in the *New York Times* provided a glimpse into how the group responds to potential recruits on a personal level. While many officials focused on the graphic message content, the critical feature was how ISIS was using the social media tools to connect and build relations. British fighters answer questions on a website called ask.fm as specific as what shoes to bring and whether toothbrushes are available. When asked what to do upon arriving in Turkey or Syria, the fighters often casually reply, “Kik me”—the instant messenger for smartphones—to continue the discussion in private.

This type of outreach challenges government public diplomacy efforts. One of the crucial things learned in the intensive study from early propaganda to present studies of mediated communication is that while the media is good for creating awareness, it is not as effective at creating attitude change. With digital media, people again flock to sites that reinforce rather than challenge their beliefs. The prime mode for attitude change remains interpersonal communication. Trust, which is so critical, especially in risk taking, is conveyed primarily through subtle nonverbal cues conveyed through eye contact, facial twitches, or posture. Whereas digital media may not be able to create attitude change, its portability makes it ideal for facilitating those offline relations. To overlook these important offline relations is to ascribe a phantom persuasion element to digital media.

People Power

Digital media in the hands of adversarial publics should be a wake-up call to governments. Public diplomacy is no longer a competition just between states. The perceptions of foreign publics have domestic consequences. In turn, domestic publics can influence the global perceptions of a country. Governments need to re-think what the relational imperative means in a digital era. The relational imperative represents a mind shift from focusing primarily on messages and media as the core of diplomatic communication to the relational connections between publics and nations. Previously there was the “message imperative,” and communication strategists began with the questions, “what is our message?” and “how can we deliver it?” The relational imperative requires the questions “what are the connections or relations among the parties?” and “how are the parties and publics using those connections to further their cause?” The Gezi Park example is illustrative of how an innocuous environmental group of protesters morphed into a much larger alliance of seemingly disparate groups joining together against Turkish authorities.

One of the reasons that the Arab Spring caught the attention of Western researchers was because of the way people were using the social media to “circulate” information and organize themselves. While the slogans such as “We are all Khaled Said” may have been powerful, it was the interconnectivity of social media that amplified the message content. This interconnectivity and relational dimension represents uncharted territory for governments still operating in a message-media mindset.

Today, relational connections can matter more than messages. Yet, governments are still concentrating primarily on using digital and social media to convey the message. The unspoken assumption is that the governments are still autonomous entities that can still initiate and control the communication dynamic. Dominant public diplomacy strategies still focus primarily on control and influence, whether it be controlling the message, the media, or the narrative. Digital media eludes effort to control.

This relational dynamic is why social and digital media have usurped communication control from governments. Government control over the mass media, common in the Arab world, is illustrative of the one-to-many one-way form of communication power. With social media, publics now have the communication power to compete with governments in the public sphere. This observation is not new; media scholars have been waving red flags for several years. The challenge is not in controlling or countering the public, but finding ways to respond effectively when the public is in control, when the audience is seeking to influence governments and their policies. Trying to counter the communication can be as ineffective as attempts to control the communication; both rest on the outdated idea that the state and its opponents are autonomous political entities. In an interconnected and globalized world, the luxury of autonomy is an illusion; they are all interconnected.

Here, the mutual influence accorded by digital media takes on a new significance. Digital media is shattering the assumption of one-way influence, assumption in public diplomacy, that governments can seek to influence publics without being influenced as well. In an interconnected sphere, one cannot influence the other without being influenced in return. Public demands for openness, accountability, and transparency scratch the surface of this emerging trend. How states will respond to mutual influence—of being open to public influence rather than only trying to influence publics—is increasingly becoming the critical unanswered question. It is a question that more and more nations will need to find answers to soon.