Introducing Diplomacy in the Digital Age

This report represents initial reflections on diplomacy in the digital age. In the ongoing debate amongst international relations scholars, information and communication technology (ICT) experts, digital strategists, social media advocates and others, the first question for us is: what is happening to diplomacy? And the obvious answer is what has always happened to it: diplomacy is responding to changes in the international and domestic environment, in the main centres of authority, particularly states, and in the character of societies at home and abroad. The extent to which diplomacy is a social institution is now more visible than ever. In the early 21st century societal transformations have a much greater impact on diplomacy than in earlier periods, when the authority of elites was questioned less than is the case today. Confronted with fast-moving change in society, governments have a hard time anticipating impending developments, let alone events, even though new technological capabilities appear to enhance the capacity for forecasting future trends.

'Newness' in diplomacy today has everything to do with the application of new communications technologies to diplomacy. This issue goes right to the heart of diplomacy's core functions, including negotiation, representation and communication. Given the centrality of communication in diplomacy, it is hardly surprising that the rise of social media should be of interest to practitioners of diplomacy. Most of them, like people outside diplomatic culture, are in the process of adjusting their 'analogue' habits and finding their own voice in a new information sphere. This takes time, and for technological enthusiasts to simply proclaim the arrival of a 'new statecraft' in the form of what is variously termed e-diplomacy, digital diplomacy, cyber diplomacy and 'twiplomacy' is too simplistic. Paradoxically, greater complexity encourages Nescafé-school analyses and the search for simple explanations about what is happening to diplomacy as the regulating mechanism of the society of states. As in other epochs of fast technological change, the lure of quick fixes addressing multifaceted processes of change in diplomacy appears almost irresistible at the opening of the 'digital age'.

Questions with few instant answers

What is it, then, that we wish to convey by employing such terms as 'digital diplomacy' and 'e-diplomacy'? There is clearly more at stake than the advent of new communication technologies. How do we identify and make sense of broader developments that need to be taken into account? Historical experience suggests that communication technologies are conditioned by the environments in which they operate and may have different effects depending on the processes and institutions to which they are applied. This is something to bear in mind – as an antidote to presentism and the desire to give instant answers to complex questions.

We recognize that the rise of networking sites like Twitter, Facebook and other social media is important, but the ongoing debate equally needs to address the wider impact of digitalization on the external relations of governments and other international actors. This presents us with two basic questions. First, what is meant by the 'digital age'? The term appears with increasing frequency but carries with it the same sense of vagueness and imprecision as 'globalization'. It has provided a meta-narrative for change in diplomacy but references to the 'digital age' often fail to spell out or merely imply precisely what is changing and how it affects the nature of diplomatic activity. Second, is 'digitalization' part of an ongoing evolutionary process of change and adaptation that has always characterised diplomacy? Or does it represent revolutionary changes, a fundamental 'time-break' that warrants the appellation '21st century statecraft'?

The social media in particular are a magnet to a fast-growing global crowd. Facebook is 'as big as the world's largest nation', and older generations have no other option than catching up with the young. About 90 per cent of people between 18 and 29 are now using social networking sites. Those who stay outside their magnetic field, may find themselves on the periphery of a phenomenon that is here to stay or that will mutate into something very different from past patterns of communication. The attraction of social media has turned this 21st century tool of diplomacy into a prime focus for debate, and 'digilliterates' seem to have no right to join the conversation. This may help explain why the demands of political correctness probably result in a skewed picture of who in diplomacy is using social networking sites, how, and with what aims and objectives.

Integrative diplomacy and networking

An excessive focus on the social media conflates new communications technologies with broader dimensions of change in domestic and international policy. We can make our point more clearly by relating this report to an earlier Clingendael study that developed a new framework for diplomacy which we termed 'integrative diplomacy'. This broader picture of change in the practice of international relations is our interpretation of diplomacy in the digital age. It sees the global environment as characterised by relationships between states and non-state entities, producing complex webs of diplomacy – sometimes competitive, sometimes collaborative. Central to this image are patterns of mutual dependency, policy and actor linkages, and 'networked' diplomacy embracing diverse stakeholders. Networking as the conceptual basis of modern diplomatic practice – including its digital dimension – has fundamental implications for conceptualizing and practicing diplomacy, for office routines and rules of engagement among people representing different types of public and private actors, and in a more general sense for officials engaging with the outside world. For the people who work for government, networking implies a fundamental willingness to adapt to 'interface cultures' that are radically different from those of more familiar but increasingly outdated hierarchical environments.

Vocabulary list (A)
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Hybridity and the integration of 'online' and 'offline'

Three related assumptions guide this contribution to the discussion about diplomacy in the digital age. First, the tools of the digital age create new issues and routines, and simultaneously redefine existing ones. Old phenomena take on new dimensions and they do so in all spheres of human interaction. There are many examples of behavioral mutations in the diplomatic world. Diplomatic missions' outreach to the societies of host countries, for instance, is as old as diplomacy itself, and 'offline' public diplomacy work has received a great deal of attention in the public outreach strategies of foreign ministries. The penetration and interaction with foreign publics has however taken on entirely new dimensions in the digital age and reaches well beyond the West. The US Embassy in Jakarta has over 600,000 likes on its Facebook account, and European embassies in Beijing use the Chinese microblog Sina Weibo to engage with swathes of the population out of their reach in the age of offline diplomacy. The Chinese leadership encourages its embassies throughout the world to take advantage of Twitter, while this US-based platform is blocked at home.

Diplomatic coalition building and networking are affected by digital developments, which is perhaps most clearly visible in the more experimental human rights' and official development aid fields. The digital domain for instance opens up new forms of engagement opportunities for Dutch transnational campaigning in favour of LGBT rights, UK actions aimed at the prevention of sexual violence, and Swedish policy initiatives supporting vulnerable citizens, including mothers and their unborn children. Even a relatively traditional multi-stakeholder network like the OECD/DAC initiated Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation – aiming at getting extreme poverty 'to zero in one generation' – is likely to become progressively digital when it reaches out to non-state actors and promotes greater youth involvement.

Second, hybridity is the norm in the current media and diplomatic environments. The evolution of communications technologies rarely involves the supplanting of one form by another. More typically, existing forms of communication adapt to the emergence of new technologies. They help generate rapidly evolving 'hybrid' media environments in which traditional media are adapting to new 'online' ways of conceptualizing, sharing and visualizing 'the news'. In diplomacy, the balance between old and new forms of communication is different and appears not to reflect similar revolutionary changes. Things may not be what they seem at first sight – and media reports sometimes only tell part of the story. When in the spring of 2015 Pope Francis publicly referred to the "first genocide of the 20th century" in Armenia, Turkish foreign minister Mevlüt Cavusoglu was quick to get world attention by voicing his protest through Twitter. But obviously this move was only the opening shot, and paralleled by traditional diplomatic initiatives through less visible channels. Various technological revolutions have not led to newly invented means of communication entirely taking over from tried and tested ones. But in future diplomacy we expect to see the progressive adoption of a mix of 'old' and 'new' modes of communication – within governmental networks, in transnational multi-stakeholder environments, and in both friendly and antagonistic relations between states.

In a more general sense, diplomacy is characterized by hybridity. State-based diplomacy is not irrelevant but it assumes more complex forms, is adapting its structures to new demands, and the roles performed by its practitioners are changing. We are presented with a milieu in which traditional diplomatic forms and processes are interacting to produce more diverse and complex diplomatic scenarios. As far as such scenarios involve non-traditional actors, they will expect that governments adapt to the networking norms of public-private environments – and indeed accept the use of digital tools increasingly used outside the sphere of government.

Third, the challenges posed by digital technologies will demand strategies dealing with the integration of 'online' and 'offline' environments. In their book The New Digital Age, Eric Schmidt, Chairman of Google, and Jared Cohen, one of the architects of the '21st century statecraft' in Hillary Clinton's State Department, argue that the revolution in communications technologies mean that governments will have to develop two general orientations – and two foreign policies – the online and the offline. Whilst appreciating the thrust of their argument, we want to express the problem facing governments and diplomats in a slightly different form.

The juxtaposition of 'digital' and 'analogue' has clear limits. There are highly significant changes in the 'offline' world of diplomacy that intersect with the emerging 'online' world. Just as the 'real world' of contemporary diplomacy is not captured in the dichotomous categories of state and non-state actors locked in zero sum relationships, so digital technologies will demand a transition facilitating the integration of 'analogue' and 'digital' environments impacting on government. Rather than separate foreign policies attuned to each, the real test – now and increasingly in the future – will be integrating the two. The speed and the scope with which foreign ministries will be confronted with this challenge will be faster and probably more encompassing than anything they have experienced since their invention in the 17th century. It will require a redefinition of roles and new diplomatic skills, and involve a challenge to vertical organizational structures and traditional work processes within foreign ministries. The good news is that new technologies facilitate such fundamental change requiring the integration of existing analogue and emerging digital spaces.

Vocabulary list (B)
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Hocking B., J. Melissen (2015). *Diplomacy in the Digital Age* (pp. 8-12). Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael.