

# Corroding consensus-building: how self-centered public diplomacy is damaging diplomacy and what can be done about it

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# **CORRODING CONSENSUS- BUILDING : HOW SELF-CENTERED PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IS DAMAGING DIPLOMACY AND WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT IT.**

**Paul Webster Hare**

## **ABSTRACT**

Public Diplomacy (PD) is an activity which has become central to the analysis of modern diplomacy. Yet while there are common definitions of PD widely-used internationally, practice between states has come to diverge more and more. There is disagreement in the academic literature about what should be included in PD activities, the actors and boundaries. But there is little analysis of the effects of PD on mainstream diplomacy. This paper, written by a diplomat and sometime practitioner of PD, argues that PD is losing its connection with wider diplomacy which is based on reciprocity and consensus-building. The digital revolution has enabled PD self-promotion which diminishes the necessity for diplomatic partnering. Global rivalries are played out daily for global publics with little room for quiet reflection and compromise. Such self-centered PD has immersed itself in the confusing and divisive nature of online engagement. Whilst the Internet has brought massive benefits and opportunities to both diplomacy and PD, the consensus-building part of true diplomatic engagement is receding. ISIS and Russia are just the first major collective challenges to diplomacy through new PD techniques. In the past diplomacy has responded to crises and conflicts and rebuilt its options. Now PD's chaotic and troubling evolution needs a new response. This should include partners in the non-state sector and the owners of technology platforms. The article takes a practitioner's perspective and proposes a forum where state and non-state experts could discuss appropriate collective responses by diplomacy so it can reassert options available for consensus-building.

## **INTRODUCTION : HOW PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IS ANALYZED**

The term PD came into common usage in The United States after the 1960s though its central concept is nothing new in diplomacy. The activity of states engaging with overseas publics and non-state organizations has been part of diplomacy from its earliest times when commercial negotiations were common issues. But public diplomacy today means something very different from when Edward Gullion coined the definition "the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy . . . [including] the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with those of another . . . (and) the transnational flow of information and ideas"<sup>1</sup>

As Nicholas Cull has shown, the reason that the term "public diplomacy" took off in 1965 `was that there was a real need for such a concept in Washington DC. A dozen years into its life, the United States Information Agency needed alternatives to the anodyne term information or malignant term propaganda: a fresh turn of phrase upon which it could build new and benign meanings.'<sup>2</sup>

Since then academic discussion of PD has flourished with lively debates over updating definitions. Gregory has proposed a much more comprehensive focus seeing PD as “an instrument used by states, associations of states, and some sub-state agencies and non-state actors to understand cultures, attitudes, and behavior; to build and manage relationships; and to influence thoughts and mobilize actions to advance their interests and values”<sup>3</sup>.

PD has further evolved with discussion over how far non-state actors are now major practitioners. Is ‘polylateralism’<sup>4</sup> – relations in PD between one state actor and at least one non-state actor – a significant influence on the practice of PD? And, if so, which category of non-state actor qualifies as PD practitioners? And how far did 9/11 mark a watershed in viewing PD? Is there now a ‘new’ PD which contrasts with its state-centric Cold War paradigm? The search for theories of PD and new paradigms which explain its results has begun but with few conclusions. Eytan Gilboa<sup>5</sup> and Kadir Jun Ayhan are among those who have surveyed the boundaries and overlaps in current PD theory.

And studies abound on how far PD can learn from Public Relations, International Relations theory, media studies and the practice of inter-cultural communication. As Gilboa has written, academics ‘have developed models and tools for analysis in several relevant disciplines but have not proposed a comprehensive and integrated framework.’<sup>6</sup>

While there is copious work in dissecting PD and suggesting frameworks for analysis little work has been done on the effects of modern technology- driven PD on wider diplomacy. Practitioners increasingly lament that getting PD messages out in cyberspace has outpaced meaningful analysis of results. James Pamment has argued that mediatization has profoundly influenced all aspects of diplomacy and that it no longer makes sense to study PD apart from other diplomatic activities. <sup>7</sup>Western definitions of the concepts of PD and soft power having been espoused enthusiastically but have come to mean different things to different states. PD has multiplied its objectives, some of which complement diplomacy and while some undermine it. This article examines the modern evolution of PD and its effects on diplomatic activity. Are states becoming absorbed in egocentric PD to the point where PD in the digital realm has detached itself from other aspects of diplomacy?

## **DIPLOMACY ITSELF**

Diplomacy itself has also changed profoundly over more than half a century. But its core elements – a continuous, relationship-building activity with different state actors to produce peaceful outcomes to international problems – are still supported by long-standing practice and reciprocity. The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (VCDR), unchanged since 1961, remains the fundamental cooperative feature of conventional diplomacy. Every state plays two roles in the diplomatic activity – the sending and receiving state. Fundamental to this activity is the interaction between states. No state is obliged to open diplomatic relations with another. If they do, every state has some common interest to connect and make diplomacy work. No state can be discriminated against in the treatment of diplomatic missions, and the principle of inviolability in relation to such missions involves a critical element of cooperation between states.

The functions of the diplomatic mission were defined in Article 3 of the VCDR and all of them require the cooperation of the receiving state. First is the function of representation in the receiving state. This clearly requires constant contact, dialogue and mutual respect between the two states. Second is the protection of national interests in the receiving state which includes protection of citizens who are nationals. In practice again this involves extensive cooperation with the receiving state's authorities and occasional conflict with the laws of that state. The third is the activity of negotiation where the other party's role is central- the classic give and take of diplomacy. The fourth gives the diplomatic actor some leeway to engage with publics for its function to 'ascertain by all lawful means conditions and developments in the receiving state and to report thereon'. This recognizes a role for diplomacy in reaching out into civil society of the receiving state. But the Conventions do not appear to anticipate the consequences of interacting with the public of the receiving state - in other words PD - in order to report on developments. The digital revolution has transformed this area of activity. Fifth, the mission may engage in promoting friendly relations between the sending state and receiving state, which can include developing their economic, cultural and scientific relations. And, unsurprisingly, there is no mention at all of PD in the Vienna Convention. And no mention of the Internet!

The United Nations is another manifestation of diplomacy as a team game. When the Charter was signed it was not expected that all nations would join but it is now the global institution of diplomacy. Its institutions have exposed flaws in the concept of diplomatic equality, but in terms of budgets, membership of UN agencies and peacekeeping forces the UN retains essential elements of continuous diplomatic cooperation for it to function. None of its activities are manifestations of self-centered diplomacy.

A key evolution of diplomacy has been in widening the range of cooperation with non-state actors. The requirement for diplomacy to work and build consensus with numerous domestic and transnational stakeholders has shown that practice in diplomacy often precedes analysis. The practitioner writes and theories adapt. See Copeland's

By contrast, a key feature of PD is that there are normally no other states directly involved in the process of crafting the objectives or messages. States do mimic each other and compete for attention. But PD is crafted by one country or organization to communicate messages and engage with overseas publics. Traditional forms of PD, such as educational exchanges and cultural institutes, do necessitate cooperation with the receiving country. In major showpieces of PD like the Olympic Games and World Expos interaction with the host state is continuous. In international broadcasting, such as the Voice of America model, the receiving state's acquiescence may be required in not jamming frequencies. In the post Cold War era the activity of PD has become an ever-present in all states' diplomatic activities. Engaging with global publics is seen as part of a mix of foreign policies aimed at attracting tourism, foreign investment, and the economic benefits of international education. National interest requires such engagement. When the prize of 'soft power' - the power to attract - is added into what seems an alluring array of benefits it is not hard to see why PD has become the force it has.

## **DIGITAL PUBLIC DIPLOMACY**

What difference has digital PD made to these cooperative activities of diplomacy? Digitalization of PD methods has expanded opportunities for reaching audiences and reduced the costs of more traditional methods. Not only has it largely eliminated barriers to message transmission across borders it has removed the filtering role of the receiving state in diplomatic exchanges and missions. Indeed actors are now able to completely obscure

their identity in contacts with overseas publics. Up to 15% of Twitter traffic involving 48 million users is estimated to be computerized through bots and other methods.<sup>9</sup> Between January and March 2019 Facebook took down 2.2 billion false accounts, just slightly less than the total of 2.39 billion active users. As Mark Zuckerberg said 'Understanding the prevalence of harmful content will help companies and governments design better systems for dealing with it.'<sup>10</sup>

To the operators of PD the audience is now limitless. Messages, visual content and conversations are technically feasible in a way that was unthinkable a decade ago. There is little to obstruct this through media checking filters, and information can be retransmitted without a moment's thought. There are few consequences for misleading those who receive it. Any state can now aspire to target members of publics to produce maximum effect. So why complicate your activities with partners? The objectives of PD are increasingly seen as selfish for the operators. The state wants to achieve its objectives. Leaders want to get their views out because others do. But there is little to suggest that digital PD is in any sense smoothing the edges of disputes, nor has the objective, as stated in the preamble to the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, of 'the promotion of friendly international relations among nations'.

States have embraced digital PD with an impressive passion. In 2017 Burson-Marsteller found 856 Twitter accounts belonging to heads of state or government or foreign ministers in 172 countries, with combined followers of 356 million people. Only 15 countries in the world did not have a Twitter account. 88% of states are on Facebook.<sup>11</sup> Whether all this a waste of time or not, states feel obliged to follow the trend. Meanwhile international media produces leagues tables of soft power and other measures of supposed the results of public diplomacy. States are encouraged to compete in PD even if the efforts all largely cancel each other out.

How far is PD changing diplomacy and if so does diplomacy need to respond? How far are our current institutions capable of adapting to the changes in PD brought by the digital revolution? And how far is the practice of modern PD undermining global norms? Is it trying to attract attention in a way that cuts through some of the bedrocks of conventional diplomacy?

Fuchs<sup>12</sup> has argued that Social Media have changed the nature of the 'Public Sphere', blurring the distinction between private and public activities. Users play multiple roles and these obscure the functions of messaging. States no longer have the perceived authority to deliver information. Private profit drives volume of traffic and advertisers strive for attention. Shelf-lives of content are becoming ever shorter. The trend in PD is to react quickly, make your voice heard and avoid arguments about issues because they are too complicated.

A world without common ideologies is reflected in a self-centered activity which is modern PD. Conventional diplomacy continues to try to smooth edges and promote consensus. But often there are too many cross winds – some caused by multilateral PD – to make progress. One problem is PD has come to be practiced and understood in very different ways in major countries. In the history of diplomacy every state adopts its own diplomatic style but PD has opened up such divergence of practice that it is negatively impacting wider diplomacy.

## **PD AND THE MAJOR POWERS**

How PD was conceived in the 1960s is not what we see or understand today. The decline of the utility of military power has had a lasting impact on how diplomacy is practiced and non-kinetic PD is seen as a new method of promoting national interest. PD itself has experienced major upturns and downturns in policy attention. It is instructive to examine how the PD strategies and methods of the major powers have increasingly diverged in a multipolar and fragmenting world order. They have also each adapted the concept of soft power to their own national policy mix.

After the end of the Cold War the West rethought the value of PD and saw it as less necessary. The United States slashed its budgets. Total U.S. PD funding, excluding broadcasting, which peaked at \$1.6bn in the early 1990s had fallen to \$700m by the end of the decade.<sup>13</sup> 9/11 caused a rethink. Non-state actors in 2001 had perpetrated the largest ever attack on the American homeland. The soft power of Osama Bin Laden – no coercion on the attackers to do their deeds - had had a devastating effect. The United States sought to answer the question “Why do they hate us?” and part of the answer was a reinvigorated interest in PD. U.S. analysis prioritized creating a meaningful dialogue with the overseas publics that wished to cause the U.S. harm. It aimed to be a two-way street, building relationships sustained over time. This justification for U.S. PD on security grounds has been reinforced over time. U.S. soft power was increasingly associated with American products and entertainment <sup>14</sup>and but the government saw its role as less concerned with soft power generation. Shawn Powers showed that PD resources in the U.S. rose again after 9/11. By 2016 the U.S. public diplomacy budget had risen to \$2.03bn. But this still represented a decline of 36% per foreign citizen compared to 1986 <sup>15</sup>.

Other powers have seen PD as offering different opportunities. Russia saw the end of The Cold War as demanding a major revision of its projection of PD messages. Its military power was in sharp decline and its objective of reestablishing national identity and a role in diplomacy became part of a chaotic political and economic transition. Once stability was restored, Russia believed that several foreign policy ends could be achieved through PD which involved a small fraction of the cost of a military budget. After 2000 Russia dedicated more resources to PD and its international outreach and broadcasting became priorities. Russia’s budget for the international broadcaster RT alone in 2017 was over \$300m <sup>16</sup>. Comprehensive figures of spending on other branches of Russian PD are difficult to calculate because of they would have to include significant spending on covert activities.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century China has outstripped all competitors in spending on PD. It has espoused the objective and benefits of soft power with focused and lavishly resourced enthusiasm. It’s total PD budget is again obscure but, according to David Shambaugh, it could be over \$10 bn a year <sup>17</sup>. China now funds more than 500 Confucius Institutes and the offshoot Confucius Classrooms, 140 Xinhau news agencies and the China Global Television Network showing what a major commitment China has made to PD. All this excludes the more than one trillion dollars that has been allocated the One Belt One Road project – itself probably the largest ever infrastructure project involving PD ever undertaken.

But beyond the budget comparisons the activity of PD has taken on new meanings in different countries. In the United States, there have been 13 confirmed or acting Under Secretaries for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs since the position was created in 1999. The United States has maintained a specific career track for PD and only from 1999 was the United States Information Agency fully integrated into the Department of State. The ebbs and flows have taken their toll and US PD has moved away from longer term programs such as Fulbright scholarships and Visitor Exchanges and sharply towards security. One example is the United States’ State Department Global Engagement Center established to

'recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining United States national security'.<sup>18</sup>

Recently President Trump's 'America First' message to the world is the antithesis of a country using PD for soft power. The personalization of the Twitter messages only reinforces the impression that the U.S. is talking at rather than listening to other countries. Soft power to this U.S. Administration almost seems an oxymoron. Yet Mike Pompeo, the U.S. Secretary of State, has vowed to 'restore the swagger' of US diplomacy and he enrolled on Twitter on his first day on the job. He said he believed in spreading US messages all over the world. 'So many matters of global importance demand our focus ---- I'm committed to putting the interests of the American people first and look forward to serving with the world's finest diplomatic corps.'<sup>19</sup> Another shift in vacillating US approaches to PD may be in the offing.

For China the approach to PD has been strategic and sustained with enduring leadership commitment. In late 2014, President Xi Jinping highlighted the importance of international communication for China, 'We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's message to the world'.<sup>20</sup> Falk Hartig sees the Chinese approach as different from the two-way engagement favored by the United States. 'The Chinese understanding of public diplomacy ..... strongly falls back on the traditional understanding of public diplomacy: as a means of persuasion characterized by a one-way flow of information during which certain actors control the message in order to win over international audiences'<sup>21</sup>

China has had a clear PD objective integral to its foreign and economic policies – to project China's 'Peaceful Rise' and the harmony with the rest of the world. The Chinese have sought to allay fears of that China's rapid development would lead people to assume that 'a strong nation is bound to seek hegemony.'<sup>22</sup> China has recognized the need to respond to the Western narrative by giving its own version of its global trajectory. As Gary Rawnsley has called it, China now wishes to 'talk back' to overseas publics.<sup>23</sup>

Russia too has molded its own approach to PD and, like China, Vladimir Putin's long period in power has provided a sustained strategic approach to implementing the policy. It has embraced the concept of soft power and PD as a more cost-effective means of persuasion than military power. In July 2012 President Putin defined soft power as being 'all about promoting one's interests and policies through persuasion and creating a positive perception of one's country, based not just on its material achievements but also its spiritual and intellectual heritage.'<sup>24</sup> And Putin, writing in the *Moskovskiye Novosti* newspaper in the 2012 election campaign, described it as 'a matrix of tools and methods to reach foreign policy goals without the use of arms but exerting information and other levers of influence.'

<sup>25</sup>

How the Russian government has creatively and destructively used digital information to transform public diplomacy and soft power will be discussed later in this article. Unlike China, Russia is not prioritizing projecting a peaceful image to persuade others that China's rise should not be feared. Russia itself feels threatened and diminished and wishes to assert itself. Fyodor Lukyanov, Editor in Chief of the journal 'Russia in Global Affairs', believes Russia's understanding of soft power differs radically from the West's. Lukyanov argued for reasserting three traditional tenets of the foreign policy of the Soviet Union. First, to promote Russian culture, language and education as attractive and competitive. Second, to counter foreign media's depiction of Russian way of life and policies. And third, to create a group of friends around the world that Russia can count on.<sup>26</sup>

One method Russia has used to nurture this group of friends around the world is through the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund. This 'actively promotes the integration of Russian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the international sphere, supporting NGOs, which together with the government show their foreign policy activity for the successful formation of decent social, political and business images of Russia in the world.'

<sup>27</sup>There are many examples of these Russia-inspired 'NGOs' with international offices to help craft narratives which are favorable to Russia's global view. One is the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation with offices in New York and Paris.

These are just a few examples of the different perceptions and execution of between countries of PD and soft power projection. These divergences on the use of PD and the attributes of soft power do not mean that PD has shattered all diplomatic norms. All participating countries remain parties to the Vienna Convention and traditional diplomatic activities do of course continue. Nevertheless digital PD is tugging diplomacy in different directions. Before assessing how far PD is undermining the practice of diplomacy, it is appropriate to examine whether there is evidence that consensus-building is becoming more difficult.

## **DIPLOMACY IN A WORLD WITH LITTLE CONSENSUS AND LESS TRUST**

Any consensus that exists about the direction the world should be moving means there is fertile ground for diplomacy. If there is a framework for agreement in negotiations progress can be made. Both world wars stimulated a fresh look for diplomatic options because diplomatic failures had contributed to the humanitarian and economic disaster of war. All international problems cannot be laid at the door of diplomacy. Just because global issues are divisive and intractable, seeing the world in disarray or facing a 'Thucydides Trap', does not mean diplomacy is not fit for task. It might face insurmountable challenges and need new options. But it is impossible to determine what share of the responsibility diplomacy should assume.

Diplomacy does however play its part in whether there is positivity or negativity in perceptions of how the world is moving. The challenge is how to gauge how far the activity of PD contributes to this. In the contemporary era there is a vast range of data to trawl and two worrying results emerge. First, countries diverge greatly in how they view world progress and the future - put crudely the optimists versus pessimists. Second, there is widespread ignorance about the progress the world has made. Both represent bad news for diplomacy.

In December 2015 a YouGov survey of 18000 people from 17 countries suggested the Chinese came out top of those who thought 'the world was getting better'. 41% of Chinese polled thought so followed by Indonesians (23%) and Saudi Arabians (16%)<sup>28</sup>. By contrast major western countries recorded much lower scores - The United States (6%), Germany and UK (both 4%) and France (3%). Another survey of 28 countries in May 2018 by Ipsos produced similar results. In 'What Worries the World' the divisions were clear. Overwhelming majorities in China (92%) Saudi Arabia (78%) South Korea (68%) and India (60%) thought their countries were headed in the right direction.<sup>29</sup>

The Gapminder project surveys international opinion on knowledge of major global development issues such as poverty levels, the environment and health. It finds disturbingly low levels of knowledge on key measures of progress. For example, 58% of those surveyed in the UK in 2013 thought that poverty levels had increased globally in the last thirty years. Even 55% of those with a university degree agreed with this false statistic.<sup>30</sup> In the US polls show widespread erroneous beliefs ranging from the proportion of Americans without health insurance to whether Iran has a nuclear bomb.<sup>31</sup>

Another bad sign for diplomacy is whether antagonism arises in relation to others. Do we share common beliefs and can we work with others? The 'Us' v 'Them' phenomenon fuels populism because it suggests international relations is seen as a zero sum game. Beyond populism, nationalism cuts across traditional unifying factors like ideology or religion which might produce consensus beyond the efforts of diplomacy. Democracy in the post Cold War world was promoted in Western PD as the best way of managing change but democracies also elect populist leaders who rail against cooperation with others. Populists may see the best methods of retaining power to divide us from them – to merge grievances. The polling available also suggests that trust in governments has shown a steady decline in the last 40 years in countries like the United States.<sup>32</sup> Some countries, like the Scandinavian, retain high levels of trust but international indicators such as participation in voluntary organizations also suggest fewer bondings for commonality of purpose.

Set against this backdrop, despite the accelerating interconnectedness of technology advances, the world is showing many features that suggest the objectives of diplomacy and international norm-setting face serious challenges. How far does analysis suggest the practice of PD is part of the problem?

## **WHERE PUBLIC DIPLOMACY STILL COMPLEMENTS DIPLOMACY**

Not all forms of PD are straining the fabric that binds diplomacy. Global state-sponsored broadcasting has been part of PD for decades. The BBC World Service dates from 1932 and Voice of America from 1942. Digital technology has enabled greater global reach, interactivity and expanded opportunities for commercial fund-raising. Websites and social media can reinforce the impact of such established platforms. Opportunities for PD in the fields of education, culture and tourism have been transformed in the digital era. New entrants to the field have embraced such programs with enthusiasm using extensive digital PD. Russia's Ministry of education announced an objective of tripling the number of international students by 2025<sup>33</sup>, and two Chinese universities, Tsinghua and Peking, have entered the top 20 in The Times List of the world's top universities.<sup>34</sup>

PD plays a significant role in conventional diplomacy. In 2018 the diplomatic discussions on nuclear issues between Presidents Xi Jinping of China and Kim Jung Un of North Korea could have been done over the phone. But the public display of unity and friendship was intended to show international publics and governments that China still counted in the North Korea negotiations. And the vigorous and compassionate reaction to the New Zealand mosque shootings in March 2019 showed New Zealand effectively using social media and actions to engage with overseas opinion.

Constance Duncombe has argued that social media played an active and constructive PD role in the Iran nuclear negotiations. <sup>35</sup> Tweets exchanged showed that Iran was treated with respect and showed the publics of all the participants that national identities were being preserved. Javed Zarif, the Iranian Foreign Minister, was even able to engage directly with Senator Tom Cotton, one of the fiercest Republican critics of the negotiations. The Iran agreement depended as well on a framework for negotiations involving the permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany and the EU, and drew on commitments assumed by the parties to a major near-universal agreement, the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty. Social media facilitated the personalization of the exchanges supplementing and complementing the face-to face aspect of traditional diplomacy.

The Twitter and other internet exchanges between the United States and North Korea brought a new dimension to diplomacy demonstrating to both publics and the wider world the clear and present dangers of war. Each leader vaunted his own strength and capacity to inflict severe damage on the other. Perhaps there were parallels with US-Soviet recognition of Mutually Assured Destruction of the Cold War Era. Rhetoric was overblown but it established channels of communication which were multiplied across borders. The rhetoric could only go so far and created a kind of stalemate, a time ripe for diplomatic negotiations which then developed.

Social Media and other aspects of the digital revolution have opened many new windows for diplomacy. They have transformed the pace of diplomatic activity and increased the pressures to compete. Pamment has shown how modern 'thought leader' PD on the Prevention of Sexual Violence in Conflict was successfully implemented with a valuable security objective as well as bolstering the UK's soft power.<sup>36</sup> Use of Social Media have greatly assisted the traditional diplomatic tasks of protecting nationals. For PD and political reporting Social Media provide valuable records of interaction, the tracking of social movements and themes and the direction of trending conversations on issues. In practice studies suggest states find it difficult to develop a dialogue with foreign publics. The recipient audience is often likely to shift to other issues less comfortable to the state messenger and does not engage as expected.<sup>37</sup>

What is missing from any of these uses of PD is the preparation of a real diplomatic process. There is no conscious attention to reciprocity and engagement with other states. Points-scoring gives gratification and satisfies the requirements that 'e-diplomacy' must be practiced. There is however no objective or commitment to harmonize objectives with other countries and make the incompatible compatible. Egocentric PD makes the diplomatic capacity to build norms and practice appropriate to the modern world more problematic. How does this happen?

## **WHERE PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IS UNDERMINING DIPLOMACY**

At the outset, the opportunities offered by social media to diplomacy were seen by many as only positive for diplomacy Collaboration would be available by clicking on a link and it would cost little or nothing. States and their leaders could now say what they wanted to the world. Yet though states proliferate with their digital presence the case for diplomacy is not being made. There is no collective thought as to how digital PD is affecting diplomatic practice. No issue group is promoting ideas for how diplomacy can reassert its presence. There is no Greenpeace for diplomacy or global problem-solving.

Social media and public diplomacy do enter the arena of major global issues. But the existence of hashtags does not produce diplomatic processes. Take the twitter feed on the

issue of non-proliferation. <https://twitter.com/hashtag/nonproliferation?lang=en>. It is a flow of ideas, comments, promotion of events, expression of hope and rants against others. It is true that some hand-wringing can be cathartic. But the world's diplomats in the 1950s and 1960s established 'norms' and international treaties in the critical area of nuclear weapons but they used painstaking diplomacy.

PD is also proving remarkably innovative on social media. Overseas publics are 'engaged' with false information, false identities and group creation techniques. As Ilan Manor has argued visual content is particularly powerful for achieving deception. 'Any teenager with Photoshop can doctor images or create false ones'. The practice of diplomacy is succumbing to the temptations of digital opportunity. <sup>38</sup>The power of trust in individuals is being subverted. And the response of diplomacy is to rely on old methods. Unsurprisingly those who would wish diplomacy harm have seen opportunities to exploit this apparent cornucopia for PD. Two recent examples are the activities of ISIS and Russia, both of which have with skill and ruthlessness weaponized information and communication in highly effective PD campaigns.

In the case of ISIS a non-state terrorist actor did not initially attack states – it sought to lure their citizens to join their cause. ISIS also posed an unusual challenge to conventional diplomacy and PD. When it was strong enough to seize territory it constituted an existential conventional threat to states like Syria and Iraq. More significantly in the longer term were ISIS's inventive, brazen and brutal graphics, sophisticated messaging and creative and gradual dialogue with those it targeted for recruitment. This was the first collective PD threat in modern history. <sup>39</sup> ISIS undermined the authority of as many as 85 states in its recruiting activities. The diplomatic response was slow and confused. ISIS showed diplomacy was behind the game.

Russia did other things. Fearing an 'Arab Spring' – like movement in Russia, it became obsessed with the impact of social media and the opportunity it might give its opponents for internal subversion.<sup>40</sup> To counter this Russia used its PD to engage with overseas publics without the knowledge of the receiving state. It manipulated information and engagement just as if they were weapons on the battlefield. It harnessed new machine-driven artillery – bots - on social media and showed how easily opinions could be manipulated to foreign policy and diplomatic ends. It was promoting discord and undermining trust in facts and institutions. It also had specific objectives. In Sweden it aimed to discredit NATO entry, in the UK to derail the relationship with the EU, in the Netherlands and France to try to promote extreme right-wing parties. It sowed seeds of division in the U.S. presidential election of 2016. This was egocentric PD at its most destructive and innovative.

No traditional media would have agreed to air ISIS videos or been willingly used to dupe publics through fake news. Both ISIS and Russia by-passed such traditional diplomatic means. They worked in ways that would never have been imagined by the drafters of the Vienna Convention. Other countries have learnt from Russia. China now runs disinformation campaigns and influence operations in states like Taiwan and Australia. Despite losing its territorial presence, ISIS retains its database of contacts and archives of material which are being applied to promote its virtual caliphate.

ISIS and Russia have shown what is possible in PD when the shackles of the give and take of diplomacy are taken off. Neither was concerned to enlist state partners but showed that engagement with overseas publics acting alone could produce results. The budgets of ISIS and Russia for these operations were also a small fraction of what major PD programs such as Fulbright scholarships or the British Council cost. They achieved quick and alarming results.

Diplomacy's challenge is daunting because countering these hostile acts cannot be achieved by cutting off access to digital communication. Diplomacy is dependent on secure digital communication. By releasing vast numbers of diplomatic cables Wikileaks damaged all diplomacy not just of the United States. Diplomacy cannot simply outlaw the technology of vulnerability. Even when the Egyptian government shut down the internet in January 2011 to break up the opposition communications this proved short-lived as tourists and businesses demanded access. Artificial intelligence is in its infancy but is already being harnessed in ways which are revolutionizing disinformation and manipulation of global publics. Digital diplomacy is as yet without a collective strategy to respond to these threats.

## **THE PD PLATFORM OWNERS AS NON-STATE ACTORS**

Straddling all the activities of diplomacy, PD, concepts of world order, social media, and the disrupting influence of disinformation and machine-driven bots, is the Internet and the digital revolution. Like others, diplomats watched in awe as the revolution developed and promised a new era for consensus building through a better wired and informed world. As Tim Berners Lee wrote in his autobiography 'Weaving The Web' in the late 1990s, "The experience of seeing the web take off by the grassroots effort of thousands gives me tremendous hope that ... we can collectively make our world what we want."<sup>41</sup> In other words diplomacy had previously unthinkable new opportunities to promote peace.

Interoperability and compatibility worldwide did happen, but that did not mean the content on the operating systems would be conducive to consensus-building. Now the impact of self-centered PD is adding a new dimension to public diplomacy. The technology platforms started at grassroots but have grown into vast empires. Facebook and Google now collect almost 60% of online advertising in the United States. Google alone handles about 25% of all Internet traffic worldwide. State-owned satellite broadcasters like Al Jazeera are challenging states domestic news output. China has already broken up the universality of platforms and many other governments are learning fast to control their use for political ends. The treasure trove of data collected every day has transformed the pursuit of product marketing and political targeting. Collective and individual vulnerability to hacking and extortion is an ever-present threat without parallel in history. Intellectual property is stolen every minute. Never before has communication depended so much on platforms out of control of the diplomats.

How these platforms develop will be a critical influence on how diplomacy itself evolves. Platforms need universality and free unlimited use to preserve their business model. The policy challenges over data privacy and fragmentation of the technology empires will mean that diplomacy will be needed to address constructive governance of the platforms themselves. Consensus needs to be built on issues ranging from cyber warfare to protection of data. Only diplomacy can do this. The interests of the platform owners and the leaders of diplomacy do partly converge. And this presents an opportunity.

## **WHAT CAN DIPLOMACY DO TO REASSERT ITS ROLE?**

Diplomacy is being caught by surprise by the impact of digital PD. In contrast with the global objectives of the Vienna Conventions and The United Nations, the painstaking work of diplomacy is absent from the digital dimension. States are using digital PD for their own

ends. Messages of threats, insults, ridicule and occasionally uplifting themes clutter the cybersphere of state-authored PD. The risks of miscalculation and misunderstanding leading to emotion-fueled conflicts are obvious. The pressure to respond quickly also means that there is less inclination to consult and coordinate. Alliances are not made on Twitter. As Henry Kissinger has said, 'The Internet drives you to the immediate resolution of symptoms but may make it harder to get to the essence of the problems. It's easier to know what people are saying but the question is whether diplomats have time to connect with its deeper historical context.'<sup>42</sup> Diplomatic practice, respecting the need to negotiate and the reciprocal benefits of international relations, did not happen by accident.

It is not surprising that diplomacy's response to change has not attracted the attention of leaders have many other preoccupations. Why take time to invest in an activity that has no upside potential for domestic political ambitions? State-directed PD is now part of the turmoil of complex digital networks comprising companies, NGOs, transnational organizations and billions of individuals. Sometimes all these actors' interests overlap. Most need global economic stability and absence of major conflicts to function. Teresa LaPorte<sup>43</sup> has argued for a broader connection between states and non-state actors in PD for common causes. In two major PD projects I directed for the UK in Cuba and Shanghai we worked with and received funding from numerous non-state actors over many months, all of whom shared some of our objectives.

But the efforts that are currently being made are disparate and uncoordinated. Diplomatic actors in PD follow others in the battle for power in a networked society with messages that are 'self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many.'<sup>44</sup> It is often a PD where short-termism and self-gratification is paramount. Diplomacy needs to have a mechanism where it can work with other networks and offer the avenues for consensus building

Who might assist diplomacy in this maelstrom? Fortunately the diplomatic cupboard is not entirely bare. There is some stirring of new collective efforts. There are a few limited examples of collaboration between states on digital PD. One is the Stockholm Initiative for Digital Diplomacy, or Diplohack, started by the Swedish and the Netherlands embassies in London. Now diplomats from several countries have been joined by entrepreneurs and NGOs to address specific global issues with the objective of agreeing solutions in an agreed timeframe. This example is not addressing specifically the corrosive nature of digital PD but shows how good PD can be done collectively.

On the central issue of Russian PD disinformation The European Union did eventually come up with a collective response. The Russian campaign using false identities, surrogates and machine drive social media had been multi-targeted. The EU member states responded with the East StratCom Team.<sup>45</sup> The target audience for this collective PD was publics in Eastern Europe particularly those which support for media freedom.

Another example of collective PD, although temporary and ad hoc, was The United States convening of The Global Counter ISIS Coalition Communications Working Group.<sup>46</sup> This was a group of 30 countries seeking to counter-message ISIS with centers located in London and in Abu Dhabi. These efforts came late in the day and the measures taken were not as permanent additions to diplomatic options. But it serves as a useful precedent. The UK also learnt that coalition-building was needed for effective PD against ISIS.<sup>47</sup>

Many diplomatic institutions have embraced technology and use it actively in diplomacy. But just using technology does not mean that diplomacy is advanced. There must be efforts to argue the causes and to build international consensus. The International Criminal Court, an

international organization born at the outset of the digital age, has done all the right things in preparing its PD. It has YouTube and Twitter accounts, live streaming of hearings and many digital database but this has not translated into effectiveness in gaining diplomatic credibility. The ICC deals with issues highly sensitive to states' sovereignty and less than 140 have ratified it. Major states like China, Russia and the US have not become parties and some like the Philippines have withdrawn. Conventional diplomacy has again had its inadequacies exposed.

Many wring their hands because the world is heading in dangerous directions and the vulnerabilities of new technologies are part of this. Talk of doom abounds whether as 'World in Disarray'<sup>48</sup>, the 'Thucydides Trap'<sup>49</sup> or 'Us 'v Them, The Failure of Globalism'<sup>50</sup>. The analyses are cogent and attract attention of leaders and publics. But the symptoms and concerns are more visible than proposed solutions for diplomacy. Past failures of diplomacy and conflicts have brought benefits to diplomatic and social reform as historian Margaret MacMillan has argued <sup>51</sup>. Now we face threats of a non-kinetic kind. These threats associated with unfiltered PD challenge trust and freedom of speech. There is no point in hoping PD's nasty side will disappear. Diplomacy needs to return to the playing field and reassert its role. The United Nations and the Vienna Conventions had carefully-crafted objectives. Diplomats came together to address the urgent problems of the time. The benefits we have derived from diplomacy over the last 75 years did not happen by accident. They were designed to meet the needs and opportunities of the time. Today diplomats need to do the same.

Leaders who are striving for power and influence to promote national interest also sense that diplomacy needs new options. The capacity of the contemporary world to resolve problems peacefully is not what it might or should be. President Putin gave his view in 2007 'I consider that the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today's world. And this is not only because if there was individual leadership in today's - and precisely in today's - world, then the military, political and economic resources would not suffice.'<sup>52</sup> And from President Xi Jinping 'The intertwined threats of terrorism and a lack of cybersecurity - among others - have cast a dark shadow over the world. People around the world want peace and cooperation, not conflict or confrontation.'<sup>53</sup>

So if the leaders feel anxiety for peace in today's world those involved in diplomacy should examine whether its options are adequate. But that is not happening. Is there any evidence that help is at hand from actors outside mainstream diplomacy? The statement below which seems to recognize diplomatic objectives comes from a non-diplomatic actor.

"I think today we need more global infrastructure in order to unlock a lot of the biggest opportunities and solve some of the biggest challenges. So when you're talking about spreading freedom or trade, or you're talking about fighting terrorism, where a civil war in one country leads to refugee crises across multiple continents, these are not typically problems any one country has the tools by itself to go solve. I think we have a responsibility as a technology company at a pretty big scale to see what we can do to push on that.'

The words show Facebook's founder has identified growing problems that are disrupting diplomacy and the associated role of digital communication. 'Facebook stands for bringing us closer together and building a global community. When we began, this idea was not controversial. Every year, the world got more connected and this was seen as a positive trend. Yet now, across the world there are people left behind by globalization, and movements for withdrawing from global connection. There are questions about whether we can make a global community that works for everyone, and whether the path ahead is to connect more or reverse course.'<sup>54</sup>

Facebook and other technology platforms are businesses and their interests are revenue and profit driven. Yet their future does depend on continued global problem-solving and an economy not ravaged by war. Showing social responsibility and engagement is part of what appeals to their users and advertisers. The opportunity for governments is there to partner with these powerful, wealthy platforms. Another example is 'Twitter for Good' whose 'philanthropic mission is to make the world a better place by harnessing the positive power of Twitter. We embrace this goal through civic engagement, volunteerism, and partnerships with charities around the world.'<sup>55</sup>

To reassert itself in the era of digital PD diplomacy needs to do two things. The first is to show a collective willingness of governments to devote some resources to diplomatic innovation. Diplomacy needs to recognize that reciprocity of benefits and shared interest in brainstorming on issues still lies at its core. As James Pamment has written, we need collectively to restore "the role of the diplomat as a 'stabilizer' of identities, bringing order and coherence to the policy framework" needs to reassert itself. <sup>56</sup>The second task is to accept that PD needs a collective dimension which needs to actively engage digitally with publics on diplomatically difficult issues. The counter-narrative is of confusion, division, and insoluble issues – a strong breeding ground for conflicts. The Global Peace Index is indeed falling.<sup>57</sup> Currently self-generated and non-reciprocal PD has little to do with diplomacy. Collective PD for diplomacy will not solve all of diplomacy's institutional and conceptual problems. It will not solve the complex global issues diplomats acknowledge and Mark Zuckerberg identifies. But it will show renewed attention to a global activity which is central to how the world behaves but has been neglected for decades.

## **PD REBORN : ONE SMALL STEP FOR COLLECTIVE PUBLIC DIPLOMACY**

What then could be offered to reestablish diplomacy's presence as a prime player in handling global differences? The starting point for any proposals is that sovereignty cannot be undermined unless the benefits outweigh the disadvantages for all 'receiving' and 'sending' states. Governments do not want to be surprised or humiliated so a small step of reciprocal benefit should be made. Diplomatic internationalism needs a digital forum even if its labors are in vain.

Any forum needs to reflect the reality of today's networks. Representation is needed from all interested parties – states, business, the technology platforms, NGOs, academia. As Shaun Riordan has argued cyberdiplomacy needs to encompass the multiple actors at the different layers of cyberspace - hardware, logic code organization, data flows and social activity<sup>58</sup>. But governments cannot and should not hide. They need to be the ones that contribute the costs and take the lead; otherwise the impact will be small. The appointment of a small number of volunteers from major countries – perhaps starting within the G 20 membership - would be charged with using their collective ingenuity and skills to reassert diplomacy's presence on the Internet and on Social Media. Collective problem solving would be shown to alive again. The socialization power of diplomatic actors would be given a new arena along diplomacy's important quality of recognizing the interdependence of multiple issues, irrespective of region or main impact. A sort of virtual Peace Corps – The United States has a proved successful model – could be established for the global community. Just like the Peace Corps the volunteers would serve for a limited time but continuously and then return to their previous careers. A growing cadre of international problem solvers would be formed.

The forum could address specific issues like fake news and disinformation. Beyond this key digital principles like privacy, internet freedom, and the threats of cyber hacking need a

collective brainstorming capacity. How can Artificial Intelligence be harnessed to promote consensus-building? How can cyberdiplomacy be applied to target the damaging manipulation of algorithms to influence information searches? The membership of the forum would avoid sovereignty and zero-sum issues. The motivation would be striving for shared actions to meet shared interests – the only current forum to link all stakeholders without the perception of 'us and them'. It is not Pollyannish to try something new: rather a realistic recognition of PD's deficiencies.

Who might launch this so that it gains traction? Global outreach individuals could help. Bold leaders could seize the international high ground. A leader with a long mandate - Xi, Modi, Macron? Perhaps Bill Gates or Davos and its Young Global Leaders. Diplomacy has plenty of choices. What is not in doubt is that diplomacy has ceded ground to disruptive aspects of PD. Costs of failure of state interaction – not just of bilateral diplomacy but multilateral institutions - are seen in refugee camps, the vast expenditure on data protection, and the loss of international trust and optimism. Partners for diplomacy have been underused and the technology platforms themselves can be enlisted in this cause. Now is a good time for PD to innovate again and resist corrosion of its core activity.

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