Alec Ross v. Evgeny Morozov: pro/con arguments with respect to Digital Diplomacy

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Abstract: The advent and popularity of new technologies such as the web 2.0 revolution, has made it increasingly more difficult to ignore both the positive and negative effects that they have on the world surrounding us, in domestic politics or inter-state relations. In my paper I will look mostly at some of the dangers and disadvantages as well as point to the benefits and advantages of adopting social media in public policy, and its use by politicians and diplomats, as illustrated in the United States and the United Kingdom. This analysis will be rendered through a soft-power theoretical lens as developed by Joseph Nye.

Given the novelty of the topic, social media having swept internal and external politics within the past decade, the majority of sources available and used will be public policy-related and not academic sources per say. That being said, methodologically I will stick with synthesizing and combining previous arguments made separately by researchers and analysts into a comparative look of the positive and negative aspects of adopting social media for public policies, especially digital diplomacy which has such an encompassing outlook. The reason for my choice of focus lies in the fact that the majority of researchers on this topic have championed the favourable view of the web 2.0 revolution, while its potential dangers have been too easily refuted or dismissed, almost blindly or naively, and this can be prejudicial for a comprehensive understanding of digital diplomacy in particular, and the effects of social media usage on politics and public policy overall.

Introduction

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has revolutionized almost all the aspects of our everyday lives, from the acquisition of knowledge and how we learn, to how we interact with each other. At a macro-level, ICT has also had an impact on the diplomatic practice, and has begun to change it, arguably, all the way to its very core, from the actors involved in the process, to the modes of interactions of these actors. So much so, that the traditional forms of diplomacy have been expanded to include more "modern" subfields such as public diplomacy and digital diplomacy. The latter, as the focus of this paper, will be discussed in detail, with the former being touched upon, since they are closely connected. While there is no universally accepted definition of digital diplomacy, or eDiplomacy[1], one of the variations widely accepted of the term explains it as the "use of the web and ICT to help carry out diplomatic objectives" (Hanson, 2010), or "solve foreign policy problems" (Foreign & Commonwealth Office website). While broad, this definition avoids linking digital diplomacy solely with social media platforms, with which it is closely associated in popular opinion, but not exclusively. Proponents of eDiplomacy see it as complementary to the pre-digital practices (Lichtenstein, 2010), while sceptics are afraid the technological revolution will replace the established norms of inter-state interactions. On top of this, the novelty and continuing evolution of digital diplomacy draw cautionary practitioners and analysts to point proponents to the many unknown variables and consequences that digital diplomacy has attached to it.

In this paper, I will look precisely at these, at the advantages presented by proponents of digital diplomacy as well as some of the dangers that the practice may cause or create, given its intrinsic attachment to the internet and more broadly ICTs. Throughout the analysis, the practical

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[1] Throughout this paper, these two terms, digital diplomacy and eDiplomacy, will be used synonymously and interchangeably to avoid the repetition of one term over the other.

implications of the usage of e-Diplomacy will be considered both in the pros and cons of the practice. Firstly, I will explain some of the ways in which digital diplomacy has made a name for itself, particularly through the practices of the US State Department. Secondly, I will present some of the arguments made in favour of eDiplomacy by some of its proponents, particularly by Alec Ross, the face of American digital diplomacy under Secretary Hillary Clinton, as the Senior Advisor for Innovation at the State Department. Finally, I will expose some of the reservations and critiques put forward by practitioners and commentators "led" by probably the greatest sceptic of them all, certainly the most loquacious, Prof Evgeny Morozov from Georgetown University.

Theoretical Framework

The perspective through which digital diplomacy will be scrutinized in this paper is that of soft power, as developed by Joseph Nye Jr. Nye coined "soft power" as "the ability to set the agenda in world politics by persuading others to want what you want, enticing and attracting them through the force of one's values, beliefs and ideas, rather than coercing them through the use of military or economic power" (1990). One of the explanations for the rise of digital diplomacy as an example of soft power, especially in the United States, can be placed on previous use of cowboy unilateralism by the George W. Bush Administrations (Glasser, 2012). Glasser even claimed that such a softer form of American projection abroad came at a time when the US desperately needed it in order to revive the image tarnished internationally by President Obama's predecessor (2012). As such, one of the assumptions held throughout my analysis is that ICTs and specifically social media platforms as the most widely distributed projections of digital diplomacy are *tools* employed by decision makers to promote universally-acclaimed

values and norms in corners of the world where these are seen as needed developing. These values, touched upon later in the paper, have been switching the focus of the media and audiences everywhere over the interests and priorities of the United States internationally.

The practice of digital diplomacy has expanded in the past decade with the advent of the web 2.0 revolution, the spread of "soft" cyber channels, or social media networking amongst internet users. Unsurprisingly, given the location of the private industry in charge of these platforms, the United States has spearheaded the digital revolution also in the diplomatic area, which is why this will be the main case study of my research. Alongside digital diplomacy, an interconnected concept has been refined under Hillary Clinton's leadership at the State Department, namely that of "smart power" which has been described as "using the full range of new tools to protect US interests and leverage influence abroad – including through public diplomacy and social media sites" (Filiatrault, 2012). As indicated by Clinton herself, smart power requires "reaching out to both friends and adversaries, to bolster old alliances and forge new ones" (Filiatrault, 2012). Predictably enough, this sounds like an upgraded, 2.0 version of Nye's soft power concept, more closely related to digital diplomacy than Nye's 1990's explanation. No acknowledged connection has been admitted between the two by any State Department official, nor is it the point here to investigate any such relation, however all discourse/content analysis points to the 1990 concept as inspiration, or starting point for the development of "smart power".

Background

It has been estimated that digital diplomacy might have started with the "establishment of the Taskforce on eDiplomacy (now the Office of eDiplomacy) in 2002" and not much later as it

is often believed (Hanson, 2012, 5). Hanson transgresses partisan lines to even claim that Colin

Powell, with his "experience in the world's most technologically advanced military, brought the

vision to begin the transformation" (2012, 5). Building on this, Condoleezza Rice supported and

"added to his early work through her Transformational Diplomacy agenda" while Hillary Clinton

capitalized on this "legacy with her far-reaching 21st Century Statecraft" (Hanson, 2012, 5).

Clinton's agenda is aimed at "harnessing communications technology and information networks

to address the US's grand challenges on the international stage: aiding democratic movements,

providing disaster relief and alleviating poverty" (Gustin, 2011). The philosophy behind the 21st

Century Statecraft has thus been that the "networked world exists above the state, below the state

and through the state" (Lichtenstein, 2010). The State Department has divided its digital

diplomacy efforts in practice institutionally according to the subsequent goals and guidelines:

knowledge management, public diplomacy, information management, consular communications

and response, disaster response, internet freedom, external resources and policy planning

(Hanson, 2012). Amongst its 150+ full-time staffers at the State Department HQ working in the

eDiplomacy Office there are over "ten bloggers active in Arabic, Urdu and Somali in the Arab

blogosphere, countering online extremism" in addition to the almost 1000 diplomats using digital

diplomacy at US missions across the globe (Barton, 2012). The external aspect of eDiplomacy is

mirrored also at the institutional level, both between State Department employees within the

U.S., as well as abroad, through internal social networking channels to facilitate communication,

information flow as well as knowledge retention, and these include a "Facebook-like social

networking site, Corridor, and an internal Wiki called Diplopedia" (Barton, 2012). In a majority

of cases too, the Department has risked the occasional "petty scandal by freeing up the talents of

many hundreds of its staff online, including through blogs, Twitter accounts, wikis and even

custom-made mobile phone apps" (Medcalf, 2012). American diplomats are thus seen as acting as "soft power force multipliers on everything from counter-terrorism to consular assistance, from information sharing to the promotion of internet freedom in authoritarian societies" (Medcalf, 2012).

In the United Kingdom on the other hand, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has established broad steps to be followed in any digital diplomacy activity. They are, in no particular order: <u>listening</u> to the angles and tones involved in the discussions of issues; actively <u>publishing</u> and pushing UK's message across the FCO's global web involvement; <u>engaging</u> relevant organizations and online groups to encourage debate and foster partnerships; and <u>evaluating</u> goals, targets and ways of improvement (original emphasis, FCO website, 2012). While the steps followed by diplomatic corps may be similar, the voracity with which eDiplomacy has been pursued has differed at least between the US and the UK, the former dedicating considerable human and financial capital to a practice that even a decade in the making, still holds a broad degree of uncertainty over "what it can do and how pervasive its influence is going to be" (Hanson, 2012, 1).

Advantages of eDiplomacy

At the core of U.S. digital diplomacy efforts lie the beliefs that the web 2.0 revolution has permeated our everyday lives in ways unthinkable previously, and that it is a permanent technological revolution that should be utilized and not avoided. One of the most common quotes put forwarded by Alec Ross encouraging sceptics to embrace digital diplomacy is that "the twenty first century is a terrible time to be a control freak" (Lichtenstein, 2010). The quote is important to keep in mind when weighing the pros and cons of digital diplomacy because on

one level boils down the debate to openness v. closed systems and societies, and the acceptance

of a loss of control over messages and audiences, given the accepted transparency and instant

dissemination of knowledge that the internet has brought with it. Clay Shirky, a New York

University professor advocating in favour of digital diplomacy has explained the dilemma over

control to members of the State Department that "you do not actually control the message, and if

you believe you control the message, it merely means you no longer understand what's going

on" (Lichtenstein, 2010).

The fear over the loss of control is also reflected in the perception that eDiplomacy instils

in practitioners and analysts, specifically whether it tries to complement or replace the traditional

practices of diplomacy "behind closed doors along the corridors of power" (Gustin, 2011). While

digital diplomacy uses "widely available technologies to reach out to citizens, companies and

other non-state actors", offline diplomacy still reflects the "world of communiqués, diplomatic

cables and slow government-to-government negotiations, [or] what Ross likes to call 'white guys

with white shirts and red ties talking to other white guys with white shirts and red ties, with flags

in the background, determining the relationships'" (Lichtenstein, 2010). State Department

officials admitted thus that digital diplomacy is not "mere corporate rebranding – swapping

tweets for broadcasts [...since] not every problem is best addressed with an app" (Lichtenstein,

2010). Instead, it represents for its proponents a "shift in form and in strategy – a way to amplify

traditional diplomatic efforts, develop tech-based policy solutions and encourage cyber-activism"

(Lichtenstein, 2010). It thus builds on "traditional forms of diplomacy to account for the

technologies, the networks and the demographics of the 21st century" (Ross, quoted in Barton,

2012). Moreover, despite the change in the modes and orders of the practice, the communication

objectives of international diplomacy have arguably not changed despite the fact that the medium did (Conti, 2012).

One of the most famous examples of eDiplomacy in action has been the Green Revolution in Iran, when in June 2009, through the help of cell phones and social media, images and videos of the young Iranian woman Neda Agha-Soltan were captured and disseminated all over the internet, drawing peoples' attention from all over the world. In fact most of the news that reached the West from the Iranian post-election protests came though social networks. Three days into the protests, a "Twitter post by the opposition candidate Mir Hussein Moussavi alerted Jared Cohen [NB: at the State Department] that Twitter was scheduled to go down for maintenance" (Lichtenstein, 2010). At that point, Cohen asked the CEO of the company to keep the platform up in order to prevent communication between protesters as well as the flow of information broadcasted from being interrupted. In another case, telecom magnate Carlos Slim offered to sponsor a nation-wide free short code for text messages in Mexico that would enable anonymous crime reporting.

> All personally identifiable data would be stripped from the S.M.S. before it entered a centralized database. From the database, the information would be fed into federal and municipal police systems, then could be monitored by a third-party NGO and mapped on the Internet publicly — in essence bringing anonymity and transparency to crime reporting. Just as important, the actions taken (or not taken) by municipal police forces would also be publicly traceable and monitored (Lichtenstein, 2010).

Even before the example of Iran, in February 2008, large-scale protests were organized through Facebook, Skype and instant messaging against the Revolutionary Armed Forces in Columbia (FARC) in almost two hundred cities around the world which ended up being the "largest protest against a terrorist organization in history" (Lichtenstein, 2010). Cohen had contacted the group "responsible" for the mobilization, One million Voices Against FARC, and

investigated their recruitment methods and tactics, as well as started "social networks of people who could talk about how to combat terrorism worldwide" (Lichtenstein, 2010). Another case of engagement is represented by Farah Pandith, the US special representative to Muslim communities. Digital diplomacy, in this case, proved to be the solution to the problem of trying to engage over 1 billion people in a meaningful way. Thus, eDiplomacy took "Pandith — an articulate, attractive female speaking on behalf of the United States to a large, diverse population that continues to suspect this country's motives — and scaled her presence with technology so that her job would promise more than a Sisyphean series of intercontinental flights" (Lichtenstein, 2010). Pandith's speaking points and Q&As could then be broken down, translated into Pashto, Dari, Urdu, Arabic, Swahili etc. and disseminated through previously-identified "influencer" Muslims on social-media platforms which would act as mediators between Pandith and audiences in Islamic countries not directly attentive to U.S. specific opinions pertinent to them, or where government-controlled media may distort American stances with respect to Muslim engagement.

From a practitioner's stance, U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul to the Russian Federation uses a multilingual multiplatform social-media strategy as part of his job. One of the first reservations that he had involved, of course, "blending the personal and the professional [...] learning where the lines are" (Freeland, 2012). He tweets, blogs when he has a more "complicated point to make and uses Facebook when he wants to converse with a community. He tries to write mostly in Russian, but occasionally uses the Latin alphabet if his Cyrillic keyboard is not handy, and will post in English if he wants to communicate with his followers outside Russia" (Freeland, 2012). In his own words, social media is "more than a tool for communication – it is also a well-positioned window into the national debate" giving him the

"tools to reach beyond the sometimes hostile national media and speak to any Russians who care to listen" (Freeland, 2012).

In a reverse situation, one can find Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren to the United States, also a novice at digital diplomacy. Again, in his own words, he acknowledges the challenges faces in getting Israeli messages across and tries to shy from "controversy, instead thanking various U.S. dignitaries for visiting or hosting him, linking to op-eds he had published or speeches he had given, and wishing folks a happy new week on Saturday evenings" (Tracy, 2012). He also admits that nowadays there are "few alternatives as far-reaching and effective, with very wide and young audiences, as Twitter" for example, which enables him to "enables him to communicate with other diplomats and journalists, while also allowing him to add a personal touch" (Tracy, 2012). Social networks thus provide Ambassador Oren with a medium to multiply the audiences for his messaging, and in agreement with the British FCO guidelines on digital diplomacy, it also allows him to listen, receive feedback, communicate and learn what is out there, as well as broadcast his message and reaching out to various communities.

From the examples and details presented above, some of the advantages of digital diplomacy come about as exposed and promoted by its believers. These include the complementarity of eDiplomacy to traditional diplomacy as opposed to being seen as a replacement of the old practices; facilitating knowledge acquisition on the ground; allowing independent innovation and individual capacities to expand beyond their offline strengths and limits; bypassing governments and officials to reach bigger audiences directly, thus facilitating raw knowledge acquisition from the ground. This last point translates into what Secretary Clinton has branded in a more sophisticated manner "people-to-people diplomacy" which is one form of keeping up, or coping with changing demographics and technological advances, tapping

previously unknown resources from which the United States can only have to gain, instead of "shunning the social media everybody else uses" (Cohen quoted in Lichtenstein, 2010). Along the same line, Cohen also emphasized that the "private sector is pumping out innovation like crazy" and neglecting the "inevitability that this technology is going to spread [...is] a very dangerously cautious approach" (Lichtenstein, 2010). Here of course he was counteracting one of the many criticisms made by the fiercest sceptic of eDiplomacy, Prof. Evgeny Morozov, who exposed his reservations about the diplomatic brand and values promoted most famously in "The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom" (2011).

Disadvantages of eDiplomacy

In "The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom" (2011), Morozov criticized the State Department, among others, for its "naive embrace of Internet freedom" as an unrealistic and utopian "unwinnable fight" (quoted in Lichtenstein, 2010). Morozov's criticisms point to the concept that "technology cannot succeed in opening up the world where offline efforts have failed" (quoted in Barton, 2012). His concerns included the fact that "diplomacy is, perhaps, one element of the U.S. government that should not be subject to the demands of 'open government'; whenever it works, it is usually because it is done behind closed doors, but this may be increasingly hard to achieve in the age of Twittering bureaucrats" (quoted in Lichtenstein, 2010). The openness debate is intrinsically a different, upgraded label for the decades-old democratization agenda of the United States, driven by both Republican and Democratic administrations.

Morozov has argued that the "State Department's online democratising efforts have fallen prey to the same problems that plagued President George W. Bush's lower-tech 'Freedom

Agenda' […since] by aligning themselves with internet companies and organizations, Clinton's digital diplomats have convinced their enemies abroad that internet freedom is another Trojan horse for American imperialism" (quoted in Barton, 2012). The danger here does not lie solely in the renewed sounding board arguments of American imperialism but that the web 2.0 revolution come to be associated too closely with American interests, diplomacy, and Western values imposed on reluctant if often outright unfriendly countries. An example of such a criticism was voiced by Hamid Tehrani, the Persian editor of Global Voices, who a year after the Iranian Green Revolution declared that "The West was focused not on the Iranian people but on the role of Western technology… Twitter was important in publicising what was happening" (Heaven, 2011) as a technological and informational breakthrough since not much could be done on other fronts given President Obama's official stance of non-intervention in the election results and protests.

Another criticism has been drawn from the events that unfolded in June 2009 in Iran and the impact of social media in the protests, namely that the close association between the State Department and Silicon Valley "something led largely by Ross, means that repressive regimes now see Google, Facebook and Twitter as tentacles of American foreign policy's research, putting all users of those internet tools under suspicion" (Morozov, quoted in Barton, 2012). The U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Carlos Pascual, himself admitted that social media platforms being seen as a tool of the U.S. government would be dangerous for both the companies as well as the people still using the networks, in the eyes of China, Iran or Cuba for example, indifferent of the actual real connection, or lack thereof (Lichtenstein, 2010). Ambassador Pascual acknowledged that there is a line between the private industry and governmental interests, and that this simply needs to be respected, so that states increase the openness of their societies, instead of closing it.

This is as much if not more important not for the governments themselves but for the companies involved with them in eDiplomacy, given that business interests could be affected outside of the developed world, since more than "90 percent of the physical infrastructure of the Web is owned by private industry" (Former Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell, quoted in Franke, 2011). This marriage between Silicon Valley and the State Department, as it has been referred to, can be seen not only as utilitarian, as Morozov argued, but also as "favouritism or quid pro quo", State Department officials adopting a "philosophical" stance on the matter, pointing to the differentiation between the "governments that control information- or try to- and the governments that do not" with the former having the ability to shut down networks, while the latter do not (Lichtenstein, 2010).

One final point should be added to the criticisms and reservations already put forward by Morozov et al, and that is that governments have not only the ability to control information, but that with the advent of social networks on the ground and the digital diplomatic crusade that the United States has been undertaking with respect to internet freedom but not exclusively, closed governments have even started spying on their own citizens and their online activities in countries like Egypt, Syria, China and Libya. Repressive regimes have already started cracking down on dissidents, people being "tortured for their passwords, so that opposition networks can be traced and arrested, with censorship, filtering and spying by governments to control and oppress people being more common" (EurActiv, 2011). The U.S. State Department has publicly condemned these actions and in 2011 announced a "$30 million initiative to support digital activists and push back against Internet repression wherever it occurs" (Gustin, 2011). Details of the program have been largely kept under the radar but the mission of it is to "support technologies and train activists so they can exercise their universal rights, including freedom of

expression" (Gustin, 2011). This initiative as part of the 21st Century Statecraft has also been an application of the adoption of the "global citizenship" framework by the State Department for its foreign policy agenda based on multiculturalism and soft-power influence, instead of being seen as imposing "America's Values" on the rest of the world (Ferenstein, 2011). Part of the global citizenship brand means "treating other countries' citizens as one's own specifically by spending time and resources that are traditionally reserved for domestic policy on other nations; namely, education and direct citizen access to senior officials" (Ferenstein, 2011). The State Department has even supported "overtly subversive technologies such as a "panic button" for activists spying on corrupt governments, which immediately erases any incriminating evidence of snooping, should law enforcement try to imprison an activist for treason" (Ferenstein, 2011).

Authoritarian regimes have not been alone at surveying the internet, Western democratic states have also been faced with the social media enabling the "dissemination and mining for information to go unchecked" (Franke, 2011). The U.S. Central Command has even begun "using software that allows it to target social media websites used by terrorists", and private companies are not far behind these efforts either, with for example "California-based security firm Ntrepid having developed a programme that cloaks multiple artificial profiles in the hope of luring out the next Irhabi 007 (a young Moroccan convicted in the UK of using the Internet to incite terrorist attacks)" (Franke, 2011). The State Department too has a team of "eleven bloggers active in Arabic, Urdu and Somali in the Arab blogosphere, countering online extremism" in an active and open manner (acknowledging their connection to the U.S. government in their posts etc) (Barton, 2012). These contrasting practices of the U.S. government have not been lost on Morozov who called them out on it, that the "idea that the US government can advance the cause

of internet freedom by loudly affirming its commitment to it - especially when it hypocritically attempts to shut down projects like WikiLeaks - is delusional" (Barton, 2012).

Conclusion

Thus, while unsurprisingly ICTs have been used both for good and bad, they have permeated areas unthought-of before, such as civil society and even diplomacy. Some of the advantages of eDiplomacy as opposed to offline traditional practices have included a more direct connection to foreign audiences on the ground; reliable and fast knowledge acquisition of changing circumstances, be they of natural origin (such as the earthquake in Haiti) or man-made (the Arab Spring in the Middle East and Northern Africa), an expansion of the diplomatic practice and efforts onto the digital arena and the encouragement of start-up civil societies in countries lacking them. On the other hand, however, despite the fact that digital diplomacy reinforces the already ever-growing socio-economic divide between the Global North and South to reinforce the supremacy of the developed world, and that there are yet numerous unknown variables, outcomes and possibilities about it, many criticisms have been pointed out by sceptics of this development in a traditionally closed and discreet if not outright secretive practice. Some of these reservations have included the blurring of the distinction between governments and the private industries including the diffusion of control and responsibility from state actors to the non-state ones as well ad of the message, audience and messengers; the increased surveillance and use of oppressive tactics against dissidents; and finally, being seen as a tool for American imperialism imposing seemingly Western views and values on unfriendly actors through ICTs and soft-power arguments.

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