The Digital Revolution Meets Diplomacy
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Alec Ross, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's Senior Advisor for Innovation, says in this YouTube clip that e-diplomacy is about:

…figuring out how we can change diplomacy from something that historically has just been government-to-government, to also being able to connect government to people, people-to-people and people-to-government. So taking diplomacy away just for people in suits and ties talking to other people in suits and ties and being able to get more people involved in the dialogue.

It is a grand and optimistic ambition. Too optimistic perhaps if you just consider the rather modest traffic that most countries' social networking sites attract. However, in some cases these tools have facilitated a hitherto impossible scale of direct, daily communication between individual diplomats and the masses. Alec Ross and former State Department e-diplomat Jared Cohen (now of Google Ideas) maintain Twitter accounts with over 300,000 followers each. The US Embassy in Jakarta's Facebook account has a similarly enormous following with regular competitions that transform the virtual experience of social networking into real-world outcomes such as attending embassy events.

This type of engagement by mid-ranking officials was until recently impossible. In fact the idea of allowing young diplomats to communicate directly with the public is still too alien a concept for most risk-averse foreign ministries to contemplate. But these new tools have shifted the ground beneath their feet, making resistance self-defeating. As one official recently put it to me: With over 500 million active users, Facebook is equivalent in size to the world's third most populous country. It is just too big to ignore.

This changes things. Whereas diplomats of old would have been limited in the connections they could make and sustain to a few hundred people, foreign ministries must now confront the reality that it is possible for a single diplomat to engage hundreds of thousands of people.

However, it is true that other foreign ministries that have experimented with social media have so far failed to match the Ross/Cohen/Jakarta Facebook success. One reason is that traditional diplomatic qualities of caution, reserve and tact are not well suited to the lively, irreverent and casual nature of social media. However, Ross' own success with the medium demonstrates that his vision is not just idle fancy.

The promise of mobile technologies

The impressive e-diplomacy office at the US State Department has also conducted a staggering array of experiments to put this vision into practice. Consider three particularly striking examples: Haiti, Mexico and Afghanistan.

In the wake of the devastating earthquake in Haiti, Secretary Clinton was able to draw on the IT expertise of a US entrepreneur, whom she had eaten dinner with the week before, to set up an easy way for US citizens to donate to the relief effort via text message, resulting in over three million donations worth over $30 million in three weeks. This was repeated in the wake of the Pakistani floods.

In Mexico, where tens of thousands of people have been killed in recent drug wars, a technical delegation (or "techdel") organized by the State Department in 2009 came up with the idea of overcoming the fear of reprisals for reporting crime by creating a mechanism for making anonymous, free tip-offs by mobile phone. The world's richest man, Mexican entrepreneur Carlos Slim, agreed to sponsor the project.

In Afghanistan, the US has also been able to harness the widespread availability of mobile phones to support development and security outcomes. To circumvent widespread corruption, the US has started to experiment with the payment of salaries to Afghan police officers via mobile phone, with talk of rolling it out to other nations as well.

These three examples confound an easy assumption about e-diplomacy: that it is limited in its application to the rich world where computer penetration rates are high and internet connections fast. Haiti, Mexico and Afghanistan hardly fit this model. Indonesia is another developing country where e-diplomacy has a bright future: It is home to the most prolific Twitter users on the planet (over 20 percent of all computer users) and the second largest Facebook population. US e-diplomacyefforts in Indonesia have thrived, and while others have been less successful, the potential in this market is enormous.

Although the examples just discussed show the 'sexier' side of e-diplomacy, they only begin to tell the full story. In my recent meetings with e-diplomacy units in the US, UK and Canadian foreign ministries, I was struck by the potential that new digital tools held for improving internal and closed-group communication.

Digital governance

A recent Lowy Institute brief on the topic details the extent of these innovations and why the business case for adopting e-diplomacy platforms is strongest in these 'internal' areas, in particular as a result of the efficiency gains they promise. Consider just a few of the examples from the report.

Wikis and closed-group websites like GCPEDIA in Canada, See Britain in the UK and Govdex in Australia now allow for easy coordination across government agencies. In some advanced cases, they also make it possible for non-government experts like academics and think-tankers to join discussions and offer advice. Expanding these platforms, for example to allow closed communication between groups of collaborating embassies/governments, offers the prospect of much easier and more efficient communication and better coordination.

Internal blogs are allowing area experts to share information informally on the latest developments in their field in an open, informal and opt-in way for the first time, regardless of location. They are also proving to be a useful management tool with the UK's permanent undersecretary blogging internally every Monday morning as a way of reaching a large and scattered network of employees.

Remote access is also proving handy during consular emergencies. During the outbreak of H1N1, the US Deputy Chief of Mission in Mexico used an internal blog to provide updates to US missions across Mexico, which staff could access remotely from home, thus minimizing infection risks.

Furthermore, in Mexico, the US State Department and Mexican Foreign Ministry are using cloud computing to develop common protocols in emergency situations. While the protocols are held only quasi-securely, this technology offers the advantage of being hosted by an external, neutral third party with both governments able to cooperate and update procedures on a rolling basis.

These platforms are just a prelude. The pace of change is so fast that many of these early innovations will soon be redundant, and new, better innovations will be rolled out. The basic direction of change, however, is clear.

Foreign ministries around the world ignore these developments at their own peril.

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