"Diplomacy 3.0": from digital communication to digital diplomacy

Antonio Casado Rigalt
antonio.casado@maec.es

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antonio.casado@maec.es

OFICINA DE INFORMACIÓN DIPLOMÁTICA
Diplomacy is changing. States are adopting new ways to conduct relations and interact globally to achieve their goals and defend their interests. This is the most important diplomatic transformation since the Second World War and stems from the digital revolution.

Diplomatic tasks will continue to be structured on their time-worn five pillars: represent, negotiate, inform, protect and promote the interests of the State before third parties. However, the exercise of these functions will now be very different.

So-called “e-diplomacy” still presents us with blurred contours. At any event, the demands for transparency, flexibility and immediacy mean less institutionalised and centralised diplomacy. Digital diplomacy will become one of the cornerstones of diplomatic activity.

Towards a more participative social structure based on networks

The economic crisis that broke out following the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in 2008 has left behind a legacy of collective pessimism. Public discourse is frequently plagued with dejection and resignation regarding a world that we once viewed as free, open and safe, and which we now fear is disintegrating.

The concern at such phenomena as terrorism, illegal immigration, nationalism and populism is palpable. And this is being manifested in two forms that have dangerously taken root in Western public opinion: uncertainty and disaffection with public institutions. Feeling unsafe and under-represented, citizens are reacting defensively and with mistrust.

However, sociological studies also show less pessimistic tendencies, such as associationism, inspired by participative democracy, and the commitment to the positive discourse of “Yes, we can”, “we, the people”.

This is the manifestation of a new sociological phenomenon: from a social organisation based on hierarchy and control to another organisation founded on the network society. “Generation Z” is knocking on the door, bringing with it new ways to conduct relations and to understand the world.

We are faced with the first generation that has taken on board the smallness of the world, whereby diversity is inherent in society and technology is the best ally of democracy. This context paints a future where the management of politics and public affairs will be underscored by dialogue, interaction and reciprocity.

New forms of diplomacy adapted to social reality

International relations are not alien to this new reality. Structures, ways of working and of connecting in foreign policy are changing. The DNA of diplomacy means adapting to the digital environment. The international agenda is embracing new fields of action such as internet freedom, cyber-security and good governance of the social media.

Digital diplomacy represents, above all, decentralisation and horizontality. Diplomacy will become more public and more diffuse than ever. Controlling and centralising foreign action will be almost impossible given the high number of players that form part of the international agenda and the generalised and almost immediate access of people to information.

The digital transition in a diplomatic world used to vertical command structures and information flows is proving to be complicated. Consular affairs have adapted better and more quickly, particularly through the use of the social media as a public service tool. Recourse to the Internet and the social media as a foreign policy instrument is proving to be more complex.

“Diplomacy 2.0”: the advent of digital communication

Diplomacy has harnessed the benefits of the Internet to step up the spread of its foreign agenda. It is “Diplomacy 2.0” that has translated into the incorporation of digital communication in foreign affairs ministries. Hence, these departments have included powerful digital sections that sit side-by-side with traditional relations with the media.
The advantages of this new digital expression are clear. Firstly, contact with citizens is direct and without filters. The intermediary has disappeared. News agencies and daily papers are no longer essential to launch a campaign or to disseminate the official position on foreign policy. Furthermore, in the digital era the potential audience of the message is multiplied.

At the same time, the digital explosion has generated new challenges and opportunities. Unidirectional communication has moved on from being a pipe-dream. This wall has been definitively torn down. Now, anyone can state their opinion and, furthermore, expect a response.

By not responding to a message, an observation or a question, citizens are distanced from our information channels. If we are not sufficiently quick and flexible, we let them down. Their reaction becomes one of disinterest, rejection or contempt. They will thus opt for other sources of information, with the consequent loss of influence of the official sources of information and become more distanced from public institutions.

In order for the public to tune in to our web sites and social media, added value must be provided: quality information that is clear, rigorous, painstaking and interesting. It is not enough to merely communicate corporate content: most current governmental information is limited to transmitting official positions and points of view. We must move away from the “bureaucratic bubble” and interact intelligently on current affairs. Our obligation is to be aware of the concerns of society as an antidote to irrelevance. We must make ourselves listen, chat and involve people with a more amenable, accessible tone that is quick and easy to assimilate.

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The first step is to design realistic, effective and daring communication strategies. All too often, we report in a fragmented manner on disjointed projects and initiatives. Communication must pursue a global and clear objective, in the awareness of who we are addressing and to what end. And, above all, we must fully incorporate digital communication in all the mechanisms we use in foreign policy.
“Diplomacy 3.0”: diplomacy with a digital facade

Hence, the new challenge facing diplomacy is to use the Internet and the social media as weapons at the disposal of foreign action. “Diplomacy 3.0”: the transition from digital communication to digital diplomacy. The “Spanish Foreign Action Strategy” approved in 2014 acknowledges the value of the Internet and new information technologies as fresh instruments for achieving the goals of foreign policy. Communication alone is no longer enough.

Diplomats must add new “digital” functions to the task of reporting, such as processing information on the Internet, analysing big data or building digital strategies of alliances. Augmented reality and virtual reality converge in a universe unexplored by diplomatic and consular work. Unexplored and fascinating.

Faced with the risk of an excessive focus on digital diplomacy, this should be seen as part of a whole. And this whole is the foreign strategy of a country designed to achieve its goals through a diversified arsenal of instruments including public, economic, parliamentary diplomacy, etc. And the new digital diplomacy.

The impact of this new tool can be viewed from two perspectives. One, on the work of the diplomat; and the other, on structures. In particular, those of foreign affairs ministries and their foreign network. In both cases, the combination of online and off-line strategies is essential.

Our work is called on to radically change towards a more creative and independent profile. If anyone can benefit from digitalisation, it is the diplomat. Tasks such as the search for information, negotiation, the design of alliances and communication and cooperation with third parties, will become easier. However, new challenges will emerge, because it is clear that digitalisation has enhanced the availability of information, but has also complicated its processing and analysis.

Social media is the new vehicle through which most people receive information, express themselves and are in contact with each other. If we want to be aware of the concerns of our citizens and communicate with them, we must be present on the Internet.
One of the keys to success in international politics is forging associations with governments and national and foreign public and private entities. The novelty now is that networking has become digital. And, in order to create these networks it will be essential to be aware of the rules and codes of our potential allies.

Suitable preparation of public servants will be key in terms of technical and professional training: ‘capability’ and ‘capacity’. The handling of digital resources with a strategic vision. In order to use the Internet and social media to influence and have an impact, it will be necessary to listen, converse and create alliances, and, above all, offer added value to the Internet in the form of true, quality and rigorous information.

From the point of view of structures, digital diplomacy obliges foreign affairs ministries to have these new instruments available: some of which are ready to receive and process information and others that are designed to decide on and manage foreign action. Against this backdrop, the structure of central departments with embassies and consular offices is important. This new paradigm obliges flexible mechanisms to be adopted that are prepared to understand, detect trends, prevent crises and react rapidly.

The result of these processes will be a certain “de-institutionalisation” of diplomacy. This will mainly consist of work increasingly based on knowledge and capability, and less on a formal structure tied to institutional status. Diplomats will form a cog in a machine that obliges them to work in a network, accentuating their independence, and hence, their relevance and level of responsibility.

Digital diplomacy: a new diplomatic instrument

“Digital diplomacy”, “e-diplomacy” and “cyber-diplomacy” are all terms that describe the same reality: the advent of a new diplomacy adapted to the digital world. The challenges are significant. Those foreign services that are best prepared will hold the advantage. To achieve that, it will be essential to develop a culture of digitalisation, establish suitable structures and design the correct strategies.

To date, the path of traditional diplomacy to digital diplomacy has consisted of incorporating digital communication to the task of diplomatic information. The positions and perspectives of foreign policy have found a new showcase on the Internet and social media. In this transition, an adjustment to the existing information models has been sufficient.

The digital and diplomatic reality imposes a qualitative leap, a genuine digital transformation. “Diplomacy 3.0” not only requires reporting. We must interact and chat with our citizens. We must forge alliances and participation with governments and civil society through the Internet.