The case of Mediatisation in the Ministry of External Affairs of India

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ABSTRACT

Established in 2002 as an independent and dedicated unit under the term 'Taskforce' by the US State Department, e-diplomacy has widened its scope, simultaneous to the growth and spread of internet. While a few still believe that the significant evolution on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has not altered diplomacy intrinsically, there are many who see it as a generation shift, as social media tools, like Twitter, leading the stage. Rise of Narendra Modi, the 15th Prime Minister of India, to the helm of Indian politics brought into limelight the application of digital tools for diplomatic purposes, be it external affairs, defense, public relations, etc. This paper aims at bringing out an understanding of issues related to e-diplomacy from an Indian polity perspective. It tries to cover and extend the experiences of Indian politicians or offices making use of digital tools to serve diplomatic purposes, and the intricacies therein, citing various case studies.

Keywords: E-Diplomacy, Digital Diplomacy, Indian Politics, ICT, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Media has become such an integral part of our everyday life that we hardly notice how many of our daily routines are connected to, or even acted out in media. The penetration of media into all aspects of society has been coupled with vast socio-historical processes, such as globalization, individualization and commercialization.

Not only does digital media penetrate into the lives of individuals, but all society in general: states, organizations and even institutions such as religion.

Diplomacy is argued to be undergoing an "existential crisis" as the policy environment and the structures it operates within are growing more complex. These complexities and questioning of the essence of diplomacy are a part of the rapid change, taking place in society. The deep processes such as globalization and the increasing speed of communication are stated to be the root causes of these changes. The term digital diplomacy has become a buzzword in the last years. With this rise of interest in digital diplomacy and the stated growing complexity of the environment of diplomacy, it is interesting to see how the conductors of diplomacy, namely, ministries for foreign affairs (MFA) perceive the impact of mediatisation.

Digital diplomacy often refers to state leaders' activity on social media sites such as Twitter or Facebook. Fitting to the headline, the Indian Prime Minister, Shri. Narendra Modi is ranked as the second most followed world leader with over 30 million followers (according to Twiplomacy 2017).

To Potter (2002), digital diplomacy mainly refers to the diplomatic practices through digital and networked technologies, including the Internet, mobile devices, and social media channels. Hanson (2012) defines it simply as the use of the internet and new Information Communications Technologies to help carry out diplomatic objectives. He outlines eight policy goals for digital diplomacy:

(1) Knowledge management: To harness departmental and whole of government knowledge, so that it is retained, shared and its use optimized in pursuit of national interests abroad.
(2) Public diplomacy: To maintain contact with audiences as they migrate online and to harness new communications tools to listen to and target important audiences with key messages and to influence major online influencers.
(3) Information management: To help aggregate the overwhelming flow of information and to use this to better inform policy-making and to help anticipate and respond to emerging social and political movements.

(4) Consular communications and response: To create direct, personal communications channels with citizens travelling overseas, with manageable communications in crisis situations.
(5) Disaster response: To harness the power of connective technologies in disaster response situations.
(6) Internet freedom: Creation of technologies to keep the internet free and open. This has the related objectives of promoting freedom of speech and democracy as well as undermining authoritarian regimes.
(7) External resources: Creating digital mechanisms to draw on and harness external expertise to advance national goals.
(8) Policy planning: To allow for effective oversight, coordination and planning of international policy across government, in response to the internationalisation of the bureaucracy.

Digital diplomacy describes new methods and modes of conducting diplomacy with the help of the Internet and ICTs, and describes their impact on contemporary diplomatic practices. Related - and interchangeable - terms include cyber diplomacy, net diplomacy, and e-diplomacy.

Cumulatively, the Internet is having a profound effect on the two cornerstones of diplomacy: information and communication. Diplo's digital diplomacy taxonomy looks at three aspects of the interplay between Internet and diplomacy:
1. Internet driven-changes in the environment in which diplomacy is conducted (geo-politics, geo-economics, sovereignty, interdependence);
2. The emergence of new topics on diplomatic agendas (Internet governance, cybersecurity, privacy, and more);
3. Use of a new Internet tools in the practice of diplomacy (social media, big data, and more). The taxonomy goes beyond the typical narrow focus on social media and public diplomacy in contemporary literature on digital diplomacy to cover the overall interplay between Internet and diplomacy.

The Challenge

The Internet has become central to public and private communication while contemporary tools, including social media, have brought millions into open, peer-to-peer conversation spaces. This provides enormous opportunities and challenges for states and international organizations as they seek to engage with new policy spaces developing around the Internet. E-diplomacy, for states and international organizations, requires a new set of skills, organizational changes, and innovative ways of approaching global policy.

The Solution

Diplo provides solutions for two main aspects of e-diplomacy. First, Diplo offers complete support for conceptualizing and deploying e-participation in international meetings. This includes strategic planning for remote hubs and workshops, guidelines for meeting organizers, integration of social media tools, and training of moderators.

Second, Diplo provides capacity development for the use of social media in diplomatic services and international organizations. It starts with an assessment of the specific organizational and communication needs and requirements of the organization in question. The program includes one-day intensive training in social media, followed by one-month intensive online coaching, and around one-year of ongoing assistance for the integration of social media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public Diplomacy

In international relations, public diplomacy or people's diplomacy, broadly speaking, is the communication with and dissemination of propaganda to foreign public to establish a dialogue designed to inform and influence.

Standard diplomacy might be described as the ways in which government leaders communicate with each other at the highest levels, the elite diplomacy we are all familiar with. Public diplomacy, by contrast focuses on the ways in which a country (or multi-lateral organization such as the United Nations) communicates with citizens in other societies. A country may be acting deliberately or inadvertently, and through both official and private individuals and institutions. Effective public diplomacy starts from the premise that dialogue, rather than a sales pitch, is often central to achieving the goals of foreign policy: public diplomacy must be seen as a two-way street.

Tools for E-Diplomacy

The concept of **social networks** needs no introduction, since they are now part of our everyday lives. Twitter and Facebook are currently the most popular e-tools used by foreign ministries around the world. These two networks are particularly good examples of integrated platforms, because they can be linked to one another, driving traffic from one platform to the other.

Apart from Twitter and Facebook, other platforms include **YouTube**, **Flickr**, **LinkedIn**, **Pinterest**, and **Instagram**. While the above refers to social media, there are then other e-tools which are important for public diplomacy. These include **blogs**, which are immensely popular, and **wikis**, which are nowadays frequently used for internal purposes, such as knowledge management.

Facebook

Facebook is increasingly used for professional outreach as well. By creating institutional or public personal profiles, pages, interest groups, or events, an organization can gather a community interested in their work, curate content, and engage efficiently with the community and the public.

The term Facebook diplomacy was introduced and elaborated to describe the potential 'soft power' that can be created with Internet social networking tools like Facebook to counter terrorism, and interfere with repressive governments and militant groups in a discussion at a social networking and technology conference in December 2008 in New York.

Facebook ambassador is a generic term representation as an idiom or neologism that can be attributed to individual users on Facebook who have developed a Facebook page presence and professional representation on Facebook. The 'Facebook Ambassadors' of public and citizen diplomacy include over 200 ambassadors from 87 countries that each maintain a public profile or fan page and together maintain many popular Facebook pages (on-line electronic publications) like Goodwill Ambassadors, Ambassadors of the World, Peace and Goodwill, and Age of Aquarius which collectively have nearly 250,000 subscribers.

Twitter

Twitter allows the user to sound the opinions of the community on various issues, engage in discussions with others to present and explain own positions, and identify articles and readings on particular topics of interest (through following posts tagged with 'hashtags,' for example #ediplomacy). Previously used mainly to connect with friends and share updates (statements, feelings, photos, event invitations, music, interesting readings and links, etc.

Twitter diplomacy, also "Twiplomacy" or "hashtag diplomacy", is the use of social network and microblogging website, Twitter, by heads of state, leaders of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and their diplomats to conduct diplomatic outreach and public diplomacy via messages of 140 characters each.

Twitter has taken on diverse and occasional roles in diplomatic communications, from cordial announcements of bi-lateral cooperation to terse exchanges and diplomatic jabs, as well as casual posts.

As of April 2014, an estimated 241 million active users had joined Twitter. Twitter also offers policymakers the possibility to hear the many perspectives of a worldwide audience.

World leaders and their diplomats have taken note of Twitter's rapid expansion and have begun using it to engage with foreign publics and their own citizens. A 2013 study by website Twiplomacy found that 153 of the 193 countries represented at the United Nations had established government Twitter accounts. The same study also found that those accounts amounted to 505 Twitter handles used by world leaders and their foreign ministers, with their tweets able to reach a combined audience of over 106 million followers.

Tweeting to a global audience also poses challenges to leaders and diplomats. In early 2014, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani decided to delete a controversial tweet that received much media attention, though it was likely intended for his domestic audience.

The Beginning

The world has started moving towards Government 2.0 without even being conscious about it. What has made Government 2.0 possible is the widespread availability of Internet connected desktops and hand held devices. At present India has 80 million

Internet connections, and over 50 million people use social media. However, the number of mobile phones in India is more than 700 million, and growing at 15 million per month. Thus, there is the possibility of a great leap in numbers of Indians using Internet in the next few years on mobile platforms. The use of new media channels by government organizations and high-ranking officials is on the rise.

Here is a brief chronology of the use of New Media by Indian government organizations and high-ranking officials:
- Jan 2009: Narendra Modi joins Twitter
- April 2009: Shashi Tharoor, then Minister of State of External Affairs starts tweeting.
- Oct 2009: India Post joins Twitter becoming the first government department to use New Media.
- June 2010: Indian Embassy Argentina joins Twitter
- May 2010: Delhi Traffic Police launches a Facebook page.
- June 2010: Karnataka State CID joins Facebook & Twitter
- Jul 2010: Public Diplomacy Division of MEA (Ministry of External Affairs) launches its Twitter page followed by Facebook, YouTube and Blogger.
- Nov 2010: Sushma Swaraj joins Twitter; Now the Minister of External Affairs.
- Dec 2010: Kanpur Police joins Facebook.
- Jan 2011: Embassy of India, Sofia joins Twitter
- Jan 2011: Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) launches its Facebook page to ensure effective monitoring of garbage lifting at areas under its jurisdiction
- Jan 2011: J&K Traffic Police launches its Facebook page
- Jan 2011: Census 2011 joins Facebook.
- Feb 2011: National Highway Authority of India (NHAI) makes a début on social networking site Facebook.
- Feb 2011: Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao joins Twitter
- Feb 2011: Indian Embassy Washington DC joins Facebook.
- Feb 2011: India's biggest jail Tihar launches its Facebook
- Mar 2011: Official Spokesperson Ministry of External Affairs joins Twitter.

METHODOLOGY

The research has been done by citing different case studies of Indian politicians and other offices, which make use of social media tools to practice diplomatic purposes.

FINDINGS/DISCUSSION

Social Media and Indian Politics

The NDA government led by Narendra Modi (@narendramodi) came into power in May 2014, pioneering a new wave in digital governance. As the Prime Minister marks three years in office, we look back at how his vision of "minimum government, maximum governance" has been implemented via Twitter - from the Prime Minister himself to his ministers and their ministries to connect with Indian citizens through our live communications platform.

In these three years, PM Modi's following on Twitter has grown by 750% from 4 million to 30 million followers, a milestone he crossed making him the most-followed political leader in India and third in the world after Pope.

For the first time in the political history of the country, 95% of ministers in the ruling Government are active on Twitter with 22 of his Cabinet ministers and 42 of his 50 ministries actively using Twitter to engage with citizens, update them on government policies, and connect with them through live conversations. Over the last two years, the NDA government has used Twitter effectively for transparent & accountable governance.

One significant public engagement initiative from the government is through Twitter Seva. As an India-first innovation, Twitter Seva is currently being used for citizen engagement across 10 large government ministries and public service departments in the country. Including the Ministry of Commerce (@DIPPGOI), the Ministry of External Affairs (@MEAIndia), the Department of Telecommunications (@Dot_India), Department of Posts, MTNL, BSNL under the Ministry of Communication, Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances, Ministry of Home Affairs, the UP Police (@Uppolice) as well as the Bengaluru Police (@BlrCityPolice).

Twitter Seva helps process large volume of Tweets, converting them into resolvable tickets, and assigning them to the relevant authority for real-time resolution. The Twitter Seva system has tracked more than 1,220,000 Tweets since it began and each Tweet stacks up as a metric of the Government's intent to deliver effective and transparent service. The service is driving efficient and effective customer service as well as collation of real-time citizen feedback. Along with the personal accounts of ministers, the ministries are providing live assistance via a range of official handles (@CimGOI, @ctopassportseva, @eesl_india) and hashtags (#mociseva, #passportseva).

Modi's Government has empowered citizens with a voice to speak up on policy-making, provide feedback on services, and get real-time responses - all through Twitter's live communications platform, one they can use with ease and efficiency. Users across the country feel heard today, and we look forward to working with the NDA government for more digital governance partnerships in the years ahead.

Case Study: PM Modi

Our Prime Minister, Modi with an aim of boosting Indian economy sees social media as driving the service sector and tourism in India. It has the potential to educate people faster, by connecting us to human guides rather than textbooks.

Modi told Zuckerberg "social media brought about a big change in my way of thinking". He said people ostensibly vote via social media constantly, by sharing their opinion. It can make governments aware that they are going in the wrong direction and gives them an opportunity to do a course correction.

For the Government of India, Twitter has emerged as a critical platform for citizen engagement over the past three years. One of the world's most Twitter-savvy leaders, PM Modi's @narendramodi account currently has over 30.2 million followers, which is 7 times more since 2014. India's technocrat Prime Minister with 25 of his Cabinet ministers and 29 Ministers of State actively leverage the platform to engage with citizens, update them on government policies, and connect with them through live conversations.

While President Trump's tweets have generated 166 million interactions (likes and retweets) over the past 12 months –PM Modi is in second place with 35 million interactions. For instance, in 2015 Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi sent a Direct Message to his then 12.5 million followers celebrating one year in government. Today, selected accounts can still send him direct messages and are greeted by this welcome message.

All 7 of his flagship programs such as #MakeInIndia, #MannKiBaat, #SwachhBharat, #SelfieWithDaughter, #MyCleanIndia, and #TransformingIndia have been widely discussed by millions of people on Twitter over the past three years.

PM Modi has also been active in communicating and maintaining a dialogue with international leaders on Twitter. During his international visits, he Tweets greetings and wishes, and extends invitations to leaders to explore the Indian shores for business opportunities. He has used the platform extensively to make governance transparent and open for the public.

"While I was minister of state for external affairs, I used Twitter for India's 'public diplomacy'. My visit to Liberia, for example, was the first ministerial visit in 38 years; my trip to Haiti in the aftermath of the earthquake there was the first Indian ministerial visit ever. Both were ignored here in India by the mainstream media, but through my updates and a couple of links I posted, India's Africa diplomacy and Haiti relief efforts were more widely known because of Twitter.", PM Modi said.

Our Prime Minister's tweets are an example how he is successful in strengthening Indian ties with other countries. Few of them are presented below.

"India-Mauritius relations are vital for Indian Ocean region. PM Jugnauth & I discussed issues relating to maritime security & economic ties." on 27 May, 2017.

"I thank the SCO for making India a part of this esteemed organisation, which now represents 40% of humanity and nearly 20% of global GDP." on 9 June, 2017.

"Held talks with President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. We discussed ways to boost India-Uzbekistan relations, especially economic cooperation." on 8 June, 2017.

"Met President Xi Jinping. We spoke about India-China relations and how to further improve ties." on 8 June, 2017.

"Deeply saddened at the tragic loss of Myanmar's military transport plane. India stands ready to help in every way in the recovery efforts." On 7 June, 2017

"I conveyed my best wishes to Shri Deuba for peace, prosperity and progress in Nepal under his leadership." On 6 June, 2017.

Case Study: Sushma Swaraj

External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj has employed the site on countless occasions recently to evacuate Indians trapped in dangerous conditions abroad, rescue Indian hostages, provide emergency consular services, coordinate humanitarian aid following natural disasters, and generally be a source of concrete aid and comfort to India's massive global diaspora when necessary.

In fact, a quick survey of her feed reveals daily requests for assistance from around the world and Swaraj resolving the issues. Her results-driven approach via Twitter has garnered her scores of admirers worldwide: She is the most followed female world leader with nearly eight million followers.

Sushma Swaraj practices public diplomacy effectively through her twitter handle, as illustrated below.

"I am happy all 168 Indians in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1z5ZS3Ho_zE … rescued. 141 came on 19th - remaining coming today pic.twitter.com/KM551QK6lX", on 22 Feb 2015.

"Humanitarian gesture - Indian Navy evacuated 3 Pak nationals from Hodeida by INS Sumitra. Pakistan brought 11 Indians from Makala." Swaraj Tweeted on 5 April, 2015.

"I am happy to inform that 10 Indian nationals working as crew on MV AL Kausar which was hijacked by pirates have been rescued. We thank Federal Government of Somalia, Galmudug state authorities and people of Somalia for their help and cooperation." on 12 Apr 2017.

"India helped evacuate also Germans out of Yemen. Thank you India! @narendramodi @MEAIndia @SushmaSwaraj" a compliment given by Michael Steiner on 7 April 2015.

Our Foreign Minister also knows how to keep the international ties intact, while she tweets, "With Mr. Dmitry Rogozin, Deputy Prime Minister of Russia in New Delhi." on May 10, 2017.

Mr. Gopal Pandey also tweets in favour of Sushma Swaraj highlighting events involving discussion of foreign policies and bilateral cooperation. Recently on 27 April, 2017 he tweeted, "Intensifying cooperation with Cyprus. EAM @SushmaSwaraj calls on President Nicos Anastasiades, discusses areas of bilateral cooperation."

Case Study: Dr. Shashi Tharoor

Dr. Shashi Tharoor is another compelling example of how India's leaders are using Twitter to serve the public. The former high-ranking UN official and current Parliament member from the Indian state of Kerala is one of the country's most eloquent effective Twitter users.

One of the earliest Indian government officials to use Twitter, Tharoor's early social media practice did not come without controversy. When he became Minister of State for External Affairs (the second highest ranking official in the Ministry) in 2009, government computers were prohibited from accessing Twitter. Despite this, Tharoor defiantly tweeted from his personal phone to broadcast news and updates about his trips abroad, including a visit to Haiti in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake. Tharoor's Twitter use in this manner ignited considerable controversy both within the government and amongst the media, who were not accustomed to a government minister bypassing them to communicate directly with the public. Tharoor ultimately overcame the resistance persuaded the Ministry to not only change its attitude but to establish the @ IndianDiplomacy Twitter handle, which is still in use today.

Since then, Tharoor has also routinely used Twitter to deliver services to his constituents, celebrate and advocate for his home state, and shape the national discourse on a wide variety of topics. In addition, his tweets are often the subject of national news themselves.

One of the few examples how Tharoor practiced e-diplomacy via Twitter, "First dinner by EAM for diplomatic corps. back on a beat i thought i'd left when i quit the UN. But better food here! spoke French after yrs," he tweeted at 12.29 a.m. June 2, 2009.

CONCLUSION

The Internet (especially the social media) no doubt has transformed the international community today. It has become an unquestionable channel for diplomatic communication and has altered the practice of diplomacy. Nowadays, foreign ministries (MFAs) and embassies are part of a myriad of online social networks in which information is disseminated, gathered and analysed. The use of social media by diplomats has opened communication between policymakers and citizens. These tools, especially Facebook and Twitter, provide diplomatic missions with direct access to citizens, both inside and outside of their countries. This communication often bypasses state and media filters, potentially enabling countries to more effectively influence foreign audiences and achieve diplomatic objectives.

Essentially, digital diplomacy has brought about a transformation of the conduct of traditional diplomacy. It defines changes both in structures and processes of ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs). ICTs revolution resulted in the control of the way information flows everywhere, making the dissemination of information fast and wide, enabling people to make their own judgments, express their concerns and feelings, and even influence policymakers. Consequently, the way governments interact is faster and reaches more in almost every part of the world.

Thus, digital diplomacy brings with it both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, the social media, especially, is providing countries with more information to solve social problems. For instance, people in conflict areas use social media to garner support, organize protests, communicate, and inform the world of events in their countries especially where their media is often subjected to blackouts and censorship. Digital diplomacy and Internet activities as a whole can greatly assist in projecting a state's foreign policy positions to domestic and foreign audiences.

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