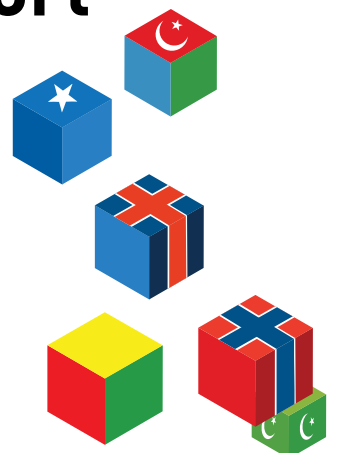


Public Diplomacy in the Information Age

Conference & Workshops

A Report



Time for a new diplomacy

New information and communication technologies have brought changes and challenges to an age-old profession

Fine Print | PN Vasanti

In the history of international relations, WikiLeaks probably signifies the most direct attack on diplomacy as a political tool for managing affairs between countries. Hopefully, it will also trigger open and honest discussion about diplomacy's future role and practice in this new information era.

Earlier this month, the public diplomacy division of the ministry of external affairs, in collaboration with CMS Academy, organized a conference on "Public Diplomacy in the Information Age". In many ways, this was a first-of-its-kind meet in India, and reflected the new wave of changes and challenges that diplomacy faces today.

Primarily, the various speakers and participants acknowledged that the practice of diplomacy needed to change to meet a set of new criteria: the revolution in information technology; the proliferation of new media and 24x7 news media; globalization of business and finance; widening participation of the public in international relations; and complex issues (such as climate change) that transcend national boundaries.

The conference also brought to the fore the importance of public diplomacy in India—at a time when diplomats need to recognize the increasing power of the individual and non-governmental entity in international relations, as well as the new tools available to influence them.

In his keynote address at the conference, former minister of state for external affairs Shashi Tharoor explained how public diplomacy differs from traditional diplomacy, in that the former goes beyond governments and engages primarily with the general public. He elaborated how successful public diplomacy involves an "active engagement with the public in a manner that builds, over a period of time, a relationship of trust and credibility. Public diplomacy is not just about communicating your point of view or putting out propaganda, it is also about listening".

Traditionally, diplomats have served several key functions, including collecting and processing information, relaying and receiving messages, and representing a country in negotiations as well as in the public arena. However, the times and the world are substantially changing. Today, the two key components of diplomacy—information and communication—have been revolutionised.

The types of diplomatic exchanges range from communication between foreign ministries, communication within a ministerial bureaucracy, and communication with foreign populations and entities such as the media and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Information and communication technologies have changed the way that each of these audiences is reached. These technologies have not only revolutionized diplomacy, but they have also drastically changed the settings surrounding diplomacy.

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The WikiLeaks exposes have also demonstrated that the media now has greater access to previously confidential information. Also, in a world where democratization is more closely linked with transparency, foreign ministries are increasingly expected to divulge larger amounts of information to the media. This, in turn, has bolstered the role of the media as the purveyors of information.

Information technology has begun to blur boundaries and territoriality as multinational firms cross borders, transnational networks crisscross the globe, and the Internet allows users to communicate with others in different locales. With this globalization, new types of diplomats—straddling topographies as diverse as businesses, diasporas, activism, NGOs, cities as well as hinterlands, different ministries, media, the intelligence community, academia and research institutions—have been created.

As communication technologies have lowered the barriers for non-state actors to operate, real-time media, corporations and civil society organisations have obtained the capacity to influence foreign governments and peoples. Furthermore, because of the density of networks created by globalization, diplomats now need to deal with more of these new polities.

In this scenario, new media tools such as social media and Web 2.0 are becoming increasingly important for public diplomacy. They provide direct access to target audiences and enable two-way channels of communication to be established. Even the much cautious external affairs ministry has taken the initiative to engage these tools—it started a Twitter account not too long ago.

Participating in the conference, Phillip Seib, professor of journalism and public diplomacy at the University of Southern California, was explicit in stating that nations needed to increase access to the Internet and promote Web literacy. However, he also cautioned: “Web diplomacy, although new and far-reaching, cannot replace traditional, face-to-face diplomacy. It can (at) best be a complement, not a substitute.”

Diplomacy is obviously more porous, less centralized, and more fast-paced now than ever before. Within foreign ministries, diplomats will need to shift from their traditional roles as information collectors, to analytical roles that involve sifting through abundant and instant media in a compressed timeframe. Diplomats need to be trained to respond quickly to crises and use new information and communication technologies to reach their targets faster and more accurately.

Foreign secretary Nrupama Rao encapsulated the diplomat’s new role: “Public diplomacy is also a process of reinvention for many of us as bureaucrats—because of the value it places on communication skills, and the need to feel the popular pulse, the requirements of innovation, using the latest information and communication technologies, of moving beyond precedent-driven approaches, requires us to think out of the box, be alert to countering negative information and stereotypes, and also to be ever-vigilant of information vacuums that will be filled by our adversaries.”

As their traditional responsibilities recede, diplomats have great potential to harness the information technologies that have decentralized the globe. And while their role continues to change in the technology-driven modern era, diplomats will continue to have a major part in navigating an ever more complicated global information space.

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