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Transcript

Real Time Diplomacy: Power and Politics in the Social Media Era

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Philip Seib:

It is an honour and pleasure to be back at Chatham House, where such valuable work in international relations is being done every day.

The world has changed immeasurably since I last spoke here. It was almost exactly three years ago, in spring 2010 – a time when the Obama administration was still feeling its way along and numerous countries, especially in the Middle East, could be considered restive but not rebellious.

My book, *Real-Time Diplomacy*, on which this talk is based, grew out of the events that took place in the Arab world in 2011 and the media-related consequences of those actions that have affected all parts of the globe.

As I watched the United States government and others react with disbelief to what they were seeing during the Arab Spring and try to digest the information that was pouring in from so many sources, I asked myself, 'How can a foreign policy that is both substantive and nimble be designed and implemented when Twitter is faster than the CIA?' Also, how can communication-based public diplomacy be conducted when there is so much pressure to respond at high speed and make yourself heard amidst a cacophony of competing voices?

To give you an indication of where I will be going with this topic, let's consider how one form of social media, Twitter, can alter diplomatic processes in this real-time era.

In 2012, when the 'Innocence of Muslims' video appeared, the US embassy in Cairo responded to anger among Egyptians by issuing a statement on its website and tweets criticizing 'misguided individuals' whose efforts 'hurt the religious feelings of Muslims'. Later, after demonstrations began at the embassy and the embassy's wall was breached, the tweeter in question was accused of sending messages that were too soft and not representing official US policy.

Just a few days ago, a tweet from the embassy linked to a video from Jon Stewart's *Daily Show* that defended Egyptian comic Bassem Youssef and criticized President Morsi. The Egyptian presidential Twitter feed responded with an angry tweet, and the US ambassador in Cairo ordered the embassy Twitter page taken down. In Washington, the State Department decided this was a bad move because it seemed to be backing down in the face of pressure. The page went back up.

Once again, a conflict between tweeting and diplomacy.

Beyond the Egyptian cases is the question of how social media, such as Twitter, should be used. Tweets are most effective when they are quick, conversational, and have a personal touch. But is it the business of a nation's embassy to be effective on social media or to be effective on official diplomacy?

The answer is more complicated than it may seem, because diplomacy and media – no strangers to each other – are becoming entwined in new ways.

To establish context for these matters, I want to address terminology related to the political role of social media because some terms have been adopted by journalists and others without proper regard for their real meaning.

Some people have called the events that began in the Arab world in early 2011 'the Twitter Revolution' or 'the Facebook Revolution'. I strongly reject those labels for two reasons.

First, when you look at the levels of access to internet-based technologies in early 2011 you will see that relatively few people in that part of the world could use them. In Tunisia, for example, about 30 per cent of the public could access online content, a relatively high figure for the region, while in Yemen, internet access was three per cent. Most of the other Arab countries fell somewhere in between.

Second, and more important, technology does not make a revolution; people do. To give credit to mere tools is to insult the people who went into the streets and put their lives on the line. These were not the Twitter or Facebook revolutions; they were the Tunisian revolution, the Egyptian revolution, the Yemeni revolution, the Libyan revolution and so on.

Looking at terminology on a broader spectrum, another word needs careful definition: 'empowerment'. This is a term that is tossed about without much thought being given to what it means and why it is important. Considering this takes us to the heart of the real-time world.

'Empowerment' in this context means individuals taking control of how they get information – whether you must rely on gatekeepers (some benign, some not), or whether you can determine for yourself what information you will gather, when you will do so, and what you will do with it.

During the good-old-days (or maybe not-so-good), we received news when news organizations wanted to give it to us. They dropped the newspaper in our driveway at five in the morning. They gave us a television newscast at six in the evening. Radio offered a sprinkling of all-news stations, but basically, when we got news was not our decision.

Then, Ted Turner had the notion that people might like getting news when they wanted it. So in 1980, CNN was born, and television news was forever changed. Here in the UK you've seen similar evolution, with Sky News launching in 1989 and BBC News 24 beginning service in 1997. What all such channels have in common is opening the door to accessing the news. We the public can get news when we want it. This is empowerment.

But while these changes were taking place, people in much of the world were dependent in another way, relying on Western media giants such as CNN or the BBC if they wanted news that was not passed through various forms of censorship imposed by their own governments.

Then in 1996, the Arab world began to watch Al Jazeera. A quick example of why this was so important: during the Gulf War of 1991, Arabs' best sources for information were non-Arab – the BBC, CNN and such. But by the time of the 2000 intifada, there was an Arab broadcaster delivering the news.

Understand the importance of this to Arabs. They could say, 'Now we are seeing events in our world that affect us through our own eyes.' Western media hegemony was weakened, and the 'ownership' of news moved closer to the consumers of the news product. This is empowerment.

Also, Al Jazeera's talk shows were addressing long-forbidden topics: corruption in Arab regimes (although not Qatar's); the role of women in Arab society; how Arab publics, not just Arab governments, saw the world. Borders between states became far less relevant, courtesy of the satellite dish. This is empowerment.

Let's jump forward in time again, to yet another new stage of technology. By 2011, increasing numbers of people throughout the world discovered that they were no longer the 'audience', passively receiving whatever was provided them by news organizations. Using new tools such as YouTube and Twitter and Facebook, they were now 'citizen journalists', disseminators of news – 'news' as they defined and discovered it. The traditional gatekeepers were becoming irrelevant. This is empowerment.

For policy-makers, this new assertiveness of citizens changes the balance of political power. Governments have long been able to rely – to varying degrees – on their ability to control information. That power has been dramatically reduced, even for governments as obsessed with control as that of Iran. Here is a case.

On 20 June 2009, Neda Agha-Soltan left her parents' Tehran home to join the protests against Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory in the presidential election.

Neda was by no means a hard-core radical, but she had voted eight days earlier and was angry about the reported results. With a friend, she ventured into the chaos of the politically charged streets.

Then, a single gunshot. It was apparently fired by a sniper on a rooftop. Neda slumped to the ground, bleeding profusely. As she lay there, blood flowed from her chest, then from her mouth and nose.

Someone nearby used a mobile phone to capture video of Neda as she went to the ground and as she died, less than a minute later. The images are gruesome and gripping; a close-up shows the blood running in streams across her face.

The Iranian government had blocked access to YouTube, but not email. Within moments the person who filmed the murder had emailed the video to several friends, one of whom was in the Netherlands and beyond the Iranian barriers. Minutes later, it appeared on YouTube, shortly thereafter on CNN and elsewhere, and soon the whole world knew Neda.

Like many other internet tools, YouTube disseminates information globally and at lightning speed. With millions throughout the world already paying attention to events in Iran, the 'viral' spread of the Neda video was no surprise. It appears in numerous versions on YouTube, some of which have been viewed more than a million times.

The video transformed the world's perception of the Iran uprising. Before, for most of the world, it had been a remote event, with anonymous demonstrators protesting something most people outside Iran did not care about. It was just more politics. But now, there was a name and a face; a beautiful young woman dying in full view of millions. Even people who knew nothing about the Ahmadinejad regime (or even about Iran) became angry about the murder of Neda.

That sounds simplistic, and it is. But high-speed, global media can transcend conventional political reasoning. Watch Neda's death – the video is still available on YouTube – and see how you react. This was a person, not an issue. She was Neda, and YouTube brought her close to millions. Although some argue that video can touch the heart while bypassing the brain, as a matter of practical politics dramatic images have innate power that cannot be disregarded.

In earlier years, Neda's death would have passed unremarked except by her family and friends. But because of one person with a mobile phone, Neda and her fate became known to the world. That one person became, for the

moment, a journalist, and the gatekeepers were powerless to stop him from reaching the real-time world.

I am certainly not trying to elicit sympathy for the Iranian government, but I do sympathize with policy-makers who must work in this new environment, this era of social media. Consider some basic numbers illustrating the scope of these new media:

- Twitter, born in 2006; in 2007, 130,000 tweets per month; by 2012, 340 million per day.
- Facebook, born in 2004; it now has more than a billion users – [it would be the] third-most populous state – more than half of whom use it on mobile devices.
- YouTube (now owned by Google), born in 2005; 72 hours of video uploaded every minute; 4 billion hours watched per month; in 2011, 1 trillion visits.
- Mobile phones; 6 billion for 7 billion people on the planet. By 2020, every mobile phone that is sold will be a smartphone.

In 1848, American educator Horace Mann said that education is the great equalizer. It may be today that we should consider social media as the new great equalizer. With these tools, people may participate to an unprecedented degree in the life of their local and global communities.

It is in this context, this time of media-based empowerment, that we should consider the transformation of diplomacy. Keep in mind that one thing these new media have in common is speed of delivery. This speed in itself can dictate the pace of diplomacy, and if you subscribe to the theory that fast diplomacy is usually bad diplomacy, you can see the perils that loom.

For contrast, not nostalgia, I offer you an example of how things used to work.

It is Berlin, about 1:00 am on Sunday, 13 August 1961. CBS correspondent Daniel Schorr was where all good journalists should be at one o'clock on a Sunday morning – in a bar. He received a call from a source telling him that East German forces were closing the border between East and West Berlin with barbed wire and fencing. Soon thereafter, this became the Berlin Wall.

Schorr and his CBS News crew filmed what was taking place and took their film to Berlin's Tempelhof Airport, where it was put on a propeller plane going to London. From there, after sitting for some hours, it was flown by Pan Am to New York. Then it was taken to a film-processing lab. Even with the benefit of the time change, it was now Sunday afternoon in the United States. The film

still needed to be processed, reviewed, and edited. It finally aired on the network's Tuesday night newscast.

Meanwhile, print coverage about events in Berlin was only somewhat faster. The first story appeared as a last-minute addition to the Sunday, 13 August edition of the *New York Times* – an article from Reuters headlined, 'Commuting Ended: Warsaw Pact States Say Allies' Routes Remain Open'. The lead was simply, 'East Germany closed the border early today between East and West Berlin.'

This relatively soft coverage was the media backdrop against which President John F. Kennedy was to shape his response. Vacationing in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, he had been informed about events in Berlin on Sunday morning, more than 12 hours after the barricades began being set up in Berlin. Officials at the State and Defense Departments had delayed contacting the president partly because they were unsure what the East Germans were up to. US policy options had been based on the assumption that any such blockading would be to seal off access to West Berlin, but Allied routes into the city were unimpeded.

Late that morning, Secretary of State Dean Rusk called Kennedy. Following their conversation, the president determined that there was no immediate threat to American interests or personnel and so he decided to take no immediate action. He told Rusk, 'I'm going sailing,' and Rusk said, 'I'm going to a baseball game.'

The apparently relaxed response of the president was in part a signal to the Kremlin that the United States was not going to react rashly and that the 'crisis' was not going to escalate. The president's low-key reaction also bought time for more information to be gathered.

Press interest in the events in Berlin remained low on the news agenda. At the Monday morning White House press briefing, press secretary Pierre Salinger was not queried about Berlin until after 34 questions about other topics had been asked.

By the time that Schorr's CBS footage of the first barricades aired on Tuesday the 15th, US policymakers had a better sense of what Soviet and East German intentions were, and they were not inclined to treat the Berlin wall-building as a major Soviet policy shift requiring a provocative military response. As Kennedy aide Theodore Sorensen observed, 'Not one responsible official – in this country, in West Berlin, West Germany or Western Europe – suggested that Allied forces should march into East German territory and tear the Wall down... Nor did any ally or adviser want an

excited Western response that might trigger an uprising among the desperate East Berliners that would only produce another Budapest massacre.'

Consider how the scenario might have been different had today's communication apparatus been available in August 1961. Daniel Schorr's CBS team would not have been worried about getting their film to the airport; they would have been on the air live throughout the early morning hours in Berlin (which were in the midst of primetime in the United States) and they would have had plenty of company, as the full array of national and global satellite news organizations would have been there with them on the scene. YouTube would feature hundreds of videos taken by spectators, Twitter would flash terse reports from onlookers in West and East Berlin, and cell phone video would attract followers to Facebook's own walls. All this 'breaking news' would be delivered in a steady stream, punctuated by dramatic commentary from television anchors and with minimal context related to larger geopolitical issues.

How would President Kennedy have responded in those circumstances? Would he have gone sailing or would he have rushed back to Washington as his advisors developed a media strategy for the crisis? Rolling some US tanks up to the Berlin boundary line might make for good video and would be reassuring to Americans made nervous by alarmist news reports. The president might decide he needed to go on television himself and challenge the communists' tactics. Would this be good diplomacy or merely good television? What would the Soviets and their East German allies have then done?

In dealing with the 1961 Berlin crisis, Kennedy was one of the last presidents to enjoy a pace that should not be called leisurely, but certainly was not frantic. His successors found themselves facing increasingly influential television coverage and then the array of newer media. This growth in the supply of information and the speed of its flow changed the political environment in which policy decisions were made.

One of my favourite books about international relations is Harold Nicolson's *Diplomacy*, published first in 1939 and then in a revised edition after the war. Nicolson wrote, 'In the days of the old diplomacy it would have been regarded as an act of unthinkable vulgarity to appeal to the common people upon any issue of international policy.'

Today, it would be an act of unthinkable political stupidity to disregard 'the common people' (more felicitously referred to as 'the public') in the conduct of foreign affairs. With their unprecedented access to information, many people

around the world have a better sense of how they fit into the global community, and they are less inclined to entrust diplomacy solely to diplomats. They want to be part of the process.

With members of the public having rising expectations about participating in this 'democratic diplomacy', diplomats must play more of a conventional political role than they may have done in the past, with constituencies far larger than the traditional foreign policy establishment.

Shrewd domestic politicians such as American secretaries of state James A. Baker and Hillary Rodham Clinton possess skills that have become essential supplements to the traditional art of diplomacy. They recognize that their domestic public is affected by the 24-hour news cycle, as are the publics in many of the countries with which they deal, and so their diplomacy must reflect sensitivity to shifting political currents, at home and abroad. Thanks to new communication tools – from satellite television to Twitter – the world intrudes into more lives than ever before.

A reordering of relationships is underway among those who make policy, those who carry it out, and those who are affected by it. Henry Kissinger observed in a 2011 interview that 'new technologies make it much easier to acquire factual knowledge, though they make it harder in a way to process it because one is flooded with information, but what one needs for diplomacy is to develop a concept of what one is trying to achieve. The internet drives you to the immediate resolution of symptoms but may make it harder to get to the essence of the problems. It's easier to know what people are saying, but the question is whether diplomats have time to connect that with its deeper historical context.'

Balancing recognition of historical context with the pressures generated by new information and communication technologies will require a new approach to the construction of diplomacy and to being a diplomat.

Public diplomacy – reaching out to foreign publics directly, rather than solely through their governments – is today more technologically feasible and more politically essential than ever before. Publics expect to be spoken to and they expect to be heard. This makes listening, one of the most underrated of diplomatic skills, exceptionally important.

If diplomats fail to listen, they will miss important voices, many of them belonging to non-state actors. In Egypt in 2011, the Facebook page of 'We are all Khaled Said' provided real-time insights into the movement that was reshaping Egypt. Intelligence services have come to recognize the value of monitoring the online products of Al-Qaeda and its siblings. On a more benign

level, listening to global publics can provide invaluable insights about social and political attitudes, which can allow diplomats to more precisely evaluate the environments in which they work. The content on Sina Weibo provides useful information about trends in China, and similar examples abound.

Pulling together all these many factors, should we be optimistic or pessimistic about the future of diplomacy? The great equalizer effect of new communication technologies can bring greater closeness to the individual citizen's relationship to her or his state, and therefore enhances the work of diplomats who champion democracy, human rights, and related ideals.

As for speed – a key element of 'real-time diplomacy' – there is no going back to the day when a president could go sailing and feel confident that with the wind behind him he could outpace the news cycle.

Instead we must recognize that a tweet from an embassy can precipitate a political crisis and that a YouTube video can ignite violent mobs. Real-time diplomacy must be developed with full recognition of such new realities.

I remain optimistic about this new diplomatic environment because I have faith in the positive effects of broader dissemination of information to broader publics. Diplomats will gradually adjust to the newest media forms just as they did to the advent of television.

This will not be easy; there will be plenty of bumps along the way. But what is undeniable is that politics and power are being reconfigured as we explore the world of real-time diplomacy.