Transcript

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

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Bridget Kendall:
I was thinking of going sailing... of course, with your smart phone, if you had global access you perhaps could go sailing because you could stay in touch from on board which might not have been so easy, say, five or 10 years ago. Sometimes the new technology solves the intermediate problems as well as bringing new problems of its own.

Anyway, we have plenty of time for questions.

Question 1:
My question takes you back to the weekend before the wall went up, and assuming that the same social media were available in the time before the wall went up, might that have had a significant effect on what was then a fairly established dictatorship? What would have been the impact on that side? And does that not, to some extent, account for the silence of Mr Putin in recent months? It's significant that before the last presidential elections, Putin was quite a lot in the media. I regard it as quite significant perhaps because of the social media that he's playing it cool.

Philip Seib:
Well, I think that it's true that politicians are now seeing that they are increasingly vulnerable because of social media. We've had cases in the US, most notably involving Mitt Romney a few months ago, where politicians have been speaking at events they thought were closed and somebody – in Romney's case, a bartender at the event – had a mobile phone and got a video where Romney was talking about the '47 per cent'. That is not a unique case. That has happened a number of times.

I think what you're going to see will be politicians much more sensitive to those new realities. In terms of the week before the wall went up, that's an interesting question. It sounds like the beginnings of a Tom Cruise movie to me. But the idea is that people might have been tweeting. Some East German policemen might have said, ‘I don't know why we have all this barbed wire here, but we do.’ Intelligence services might have done something with that.

But you can see just how different, if we move that forward, how different that makes doing policy. There are a lot more eyes out there. There are a lot more
ears listening. A lot more pictures up on the web. And I know that the intelligence services are trying to figure out how you get through all this stuff. They've just figured out how to monitor all our phone calls. Now they've got to monitor everything else that we do. It's difficult.

**Question 2:**

I think there was a natural conflation in your splendid talk between diplomacy on the one hand and policy-making on the other. It seems to me that diplomacy certainly has to adjust in terms of speed, and probably has already done so. But that politicians, that policy-makers surely also have to educate themselves and their cabinets and their systems and their voters to slow down a bit.

**Philip Seib:**

Well, I think that's right in principle. But for example, the US State Department has been having all kinds of problems about what to do with Twitter. They see it as a valuable tool, but given the events in Cairo a year ago and then the situation that came up just a few days ago, there have been those at the State Department who have proposed a fairly complex vetting process that basically would take a tweet two days to be posted. In which case you say, what's the point?

They haven't reconciled that yet. Actually, two days to clear anything at the State Department is breathtaking speed. But it doesn't work anymore. If you're going to tweet, you have to make it quick. You have to make it conversational. George Kennan would be spinning in his grave at this notion. I don't know how that's going to be addressed.

But there's an expectation, again on the part of the public, that they are going to be communicated with on these new media. I think the idea, for example, what the ambassador ordered in Cairo a couple of days ago, just to pull the Twitter page down... What you got was: 'Sorry this is no longer available.' You can't get away with that anymore. You just cannot do that.

You have to figure out a way to make it work for you, and that's going to take some time. Again, remember all these technologies we're talking about... I guess Facebook is the oldest of them, and that's, what, nine years old? It's going to take awhile to evolve. Just as it took politicians awhile to figure out television.
Bridget Kendall:  
I guess Twitter is a special case, because as you said, it's got to be not just quick, it's got to be conversational and personal. Possibly even a little amusing. If your aim is to have as many followers as possible, then do you want to be like Stephen Fry and make jokes? Obviously if you're in an embassy somewhere, you have to think very carefully about that.

Philip Seib:  
That's right. And the US diplomat who posted this tweet last week said, 'Well, I could say something funny and nasty, but instead I'll let Jon Stewart do it,' and he linked to Jon Stewart. The Egyptian government was not amused. And so that's when they put up their own tweet, which was quite nasty. That's when the American ambassador backed down. The State Department said, 'No, we don't back down.' It really was kind of anarchic. That's an issue that's just going to have to be thought through.

Bridget Kendall:  
Only controlled, boring tweets.

Question 3:  
A couple of quick points. Firstly, you talk about how wonderful these technologies are, but you didn't talk about the abuse of them. We had riots in the UK which were started on BBM (BlackBerry Messenger). To say the government wasn't too pleased about that is an understatement. So we do have abuses of them. Secondly, with all this technology, does that mean we're going to have an end to all these summits that cost a lot of money to taxpayers? Are we going to have politicians video commenting in the future?

Philip Seib:  
Or tweeting. The tweet summit, that's pretty alarming.

No, I don't think that these social media are going to take over diplomacy. I think they are going to be supplemental to the traditional diplomatic practices. I think there will still be summits, whether that's wise or not. But I think to a certain extent, as you mentioned about Mr Putin, that politicians will be aware
that the tone for those summits can be profoundly influenced by the social media.

Again, this whole idea, it's not just the diplomats or the politicians; it's also the external forces, the non-state actors. I mentioned the ‘We are all Khaled Said’ Facebook page. That was there, it had over a million followers in Arabic, about 300,000 followers in English. It provided context that only a foolish diplomat would ignore, even though it was unofficial. It was from a player, but a non-state player. I think those are the kind of factors that will influence the context of summits and everything else.

**Bridget Kendall:**

There is an argument you could make that says summits will be more valued. I mean, G8 leaders always say, don't they, ‘Oh we still need our G8 summits because it's so useful to have these informal get-togethers where we see each other face-to-face and can have those conversations which aren't minuted.’ In an era where everything can be tracked – texts, tweets, whatever – perhaps that will become more valuable.

**Philip Seib:**

I think that's right, and there's the whole sensitivity in the era of Wikileaks, too. It might be that the face-to-face communication, making sure that nobody is wired, who you're talking to, will be of greater value.

**Question 4:**

I just wondered about your comment about ‘diplomats will adapt to the new media’. Are you seeing any evidence of diplomats receiving any additional and special training in these social media? If so, what form?

**Philip Seib:**

Yes, they are being trained, both by governments and by some of the organizations themselves. Facebook, for example, trains governments and individual political leaders on how to use it. I don't know what the FCO does exactly, but I know at the US State Department, one of Hilary Clinton's senior aides was a gentleman named Alec Ross who had worked on social media in the Obama 2008 campaign. Came over to work for her, and really with her
firmly behind it, got into this idea of 21st century statecraft, which includes the use of social media.

There is training for State Department employees. They also provide – what was being done under Ross's leadership were tech workshops around the world as part of US public diplomacy. So not only were US diplomats being trained, but also people elsewhere in the world knowing that even if they don't have pervasive US technology at the moment, they will be getting there soon. It has been, during the past four years I think, pretty fully integrated within the US Foreign Service operation.

**Bridget Kendall:**

Do you think it will, to some extent, take over from traditional diplomacy?

**Philip Seib:**

No. Not any time soon. It's still kind of anarchic – which I guess regular diplomacy is too sometimes. But I think that there's still a sense of people wanting to retain a fair amount of control, the actual policy-makers wanting to retain control. They'll say, 'We'll listen, we'll communicate, but when it gets right down to do it, our policy toward Russia or Egypt or South Africa or whatever is going to be determined not by some sort of democratic social media confluence, but rather by us.'

**Question 5:**

I'm from the Foreign Office. It's actually more of an answer to your question, in that we have about 150 officials, including ambassadors but not all ambassadors, using Twitter on an official basis. We are training every single ambassador over the next few weeks to learn to use these new technologies. Quite a lot of them are quite adept at it already. And then courses to train every single policy-maker, particularly in the listening skills that you referred to.

There's quite a few people lurking unofficially to do some listening on things like Twitter in particular. We have over 250 embassy Facebook sites now. We don't have the budget the State Department has for this.
Philip Seib:
That means you have nothing.

Question 5:
We have nothing. But we do have a lot of goodwill around it.

Bridget Kendall:
Can I just ask you, where's the red line in the training? What's appropriate to tweet and what isn't?

Question 5:
Well, we tend to say that it's exactly the same as being at a reception with a journalist.

Bridget Kendall:
In other words, keep it bland.

Question 5:
Whatever common sense would dictate in the normal conversational circumstances, it's the same as having a conversation on a different format.

Question 6:
This could go to either of you. I was wondering in your opinion, do diplomatic and political channels still provide the best path for NGOs to create traction? Or should we look to social media?

Philip Seib:
Well, I think NGOs have already proved that they are using social media and other internet-based media greatly to their advantage. One organization that comes to mind is Doctors Without Borders, who are able to provide content using their website, provide video and statistics and that sort of thing, that news organizations and individuals may take. In other words, no longer does Doctors Without Borders have to rely on the BBC covering a particular case.
They can get that information out on their own. Perhaps not to as large an audience, but if they make enough noise presumably the BBC and others will pick it up.

I think, getting back to that whole issue of empowerment, this is a tool for NGOs and others to use that is really unprecedented. And letting you reach out directly to the public, and people who are interested in what you’re doing now know to look for you online, to look for your product. You don’t have to sit around any longer saying, ‘If only we could get the news media to cover this.’ You can generate on your own. That’s really important.

**Bridget Kendall:**

That is an interesting issue, isn’t it though, making enough noise. Certainly we’re very aware in the media that if you think about all the noise there was in the various parts of the Arab Spring, the media spotlight was only on some of them. So there was quite a spotlight on Bahrain, for example, until the uprising got going in Libya. Then the light switched and it wasn’t so much on Bahrain anymore. Whoever you are, you have to find a way to make enough noise and then to keep that noise there so that the traditional media give you that amplifying voice.

**Philip Seib:**

And they don’t always do it. I don’t know what the British media have been doing, but I happen to get a lot of Twitter feeds that have news about Bahrain. And much, much more information than I get from the American news media. The situation is presented as much grimmer with casualties, this cloud of tear gas, that sort of thing.

I don’t think it’s having much effect on even the *New York Times* or anybody else. I can’t remember the last time I saw a story or at least a series of continuing coverage in the *New York Times* or *Washington Post* or *Wall Street Journal* about what’s going on in Bahrain. So sometimes you can shout and shout and shout and nobody will pick up on it.

But again, to use the case of Neda as an example, there was this little bit of video that got put on YouTube and somebody spotted it and then the major television networks around the world started picking it up. So you went from an audience of one or three or four people who were at the scene, to the couple of friends who saw the video, very quickly to millions. There’s no absolute rule that that’s going to happen at every case, but it can happen.
**Question 7:**

You described listening as possibly one of the most underrated of diplomatic skills. I wondered what advice you would give, if you were in a room full of diplomats and you wanted to encourage them to think about how they listen more effectively, and how they demonstrate they're acting upon what they're hearing.

**Philip Seib:**

Well, it has become actually more difficult because it is impossible to do a full scan of all the social media. Those numbers I was giving you just show it defies any capability, probably even any technological capability at the moment. But there are stand-out sources. The Egyptian Facebook page that I've cited a couple of times is one example.

In other words, you shouldn't just listen to the official sources anymore. You shouldn't just do a scan of conventional media. It used to be you'd get clips from local newspapers. It requires more work and it's going to require more personnel, which these days are very hard to come by. But at some point... the regimen within embassies for example, is going to have to change.

There's going to have to be a great deal of attention paid to these non-traditional sources of information. Systematizing that is the challenge right now. It's easy to identify these Facebook pages that have more than a million followers. You can find those easily enough. But there might be some that are smaller that have very important information in them. Those are the ones that need to be found out.

[On the second point,] I think their diplomacy and larger scale policy needs to be responsive to those things. I'll go back to Bahrain for instance. I would argue that – based on my admittedly small sample of information that I'm getting – that the United States is not being adequately responsive to all the voices coming out of Bahrain. For very good, strategic reasons.

I understand why they don't want to trouble the regime too much there. But at some point, that's going to come back and haunt them. You can't say, 'Gee, we didn't know,' because the voices are there. I think that's something that has to be taken into consideration in policy. You're going to do what you've got to do. And the fact that the Fifth Fleet is based in Bahrain and that the US and Saudis and so on – we don't need to go into all the details of Bahraini politics.
But no longer are you going to be able to say, 'Well, we had this kind of tunnel vision and we're sorry, but there was no way for us to know.' Yes, there was a way for you to know. That's going to come back to haunt the US I think about Bahrain, probably about Syria. And pleading ignorance no longer works. There will be a price to pay for taking that approach.

**Question 8:**

What are the implications for powerful multinational corporations, particularly when collaborating with governments and NGOs, of your thesis? Your thesis on real-time diplomacy – what are the implications for multinational corporations?

**Philip Seib:**

Well, multinational corporations I would think have to equally pay attention to what the voices in their constituencies, as it were, in the countries in which they're operating, what they're saying. They have to listen as well. If they find – for example, let's say that there's a particular employment policy that is generating a lot of negative popular comment, it's useful to know about that before it explodes.

I would urge an international corporation that's located in Country X and Country Y and Country Z, in each of those countries, to be monitoring social media. Some of the stuff that's on social media is just junk. It's just crazy people. But when it's not just junk, trends sometimes become evident. If I'm working in Country X for this corporation, I want to pay attention to what's on whatever the local social media might be.

If Country X happens to be China, I'm not going to be concerned about Twitter and Facebook, because they're not there – at least they're not there in their usual incarnations – but I am going to pay attention to Sina Weibo, which has 600 million people or something like that, to get a sense of what this public is thinking. A multinational corporation is not that different from a government. They have to be concerned about their public, the public with which they're dealing.

I think it's a very useful tool. I don't know what the state is in the business community of taking advantage of those tools, but the same challenge for this corporation exists as exists for the State Department or the FCO or whatever. You've got to figure out a systematic way to monitor these things. It's worth the investment, because it's basically economic intelligence, to some extent.
Bridget Kendall:

It's interesting what you were saying about it being an anarchic arena at the moment. Whether you're trying to work out which websites to monitor and take notice of, or whether you're trying to anticipate what's going to take off, what's going to go viral. Because this is right at the beginning of this revolution. So it could be that in time people will figure out the right ways, the right techniques, to either sound authoritative and as though they should be listened to, or get millions to retweet or pass on whatever might be the latest videos. This can become a tool which isn't just a genuine opinion poll which you can take at face value. You have to be really careful, because certain people along the way will be manipulating it. What do you think about that?

Philip Seib:

Well, I think that that's certainly true and the potential for manipulation of these media is evident. One example is Syria. There are YouTube videos that have been posted that supposedly show force X committing an atrocity against citizenry Y. It turns out the videos weren't even taken in Syria. That sort of thing.

It is a challenge for the news media, too, because if you're relying on social media as sources of information, as tips or anything – who are these people? They don't work for you. You don't have any good identification of a lot of them. How do you vet that information? Do you just discard anything from somebody you don't know? That would be foolish. The Iranian government, for example, their first reaction to the Neda video, for example, was to say, 'This is phony. The CIA did this.' CIA really isn't that clever.

That is a reaction you're going to get a lot of the time, is to say this is phony if it's not in our interests, and if it is in your interests, are you sure it's accurate? Very difficult to do that. I don't think there is a sure-fire answer.

Question 9:

I quite liked your description of diplomats having to be more ‘politician’ as their constituencies broaden. I wonder, given the arc of history that you've been able to study through your career, of great diplomats, of people who are attracted to the art of diplomacy, will this gradually change the type of people in society who are drawn to be their country’s diplomats?

When I think back at undergraduate students who went into politics versus the State Department, for example, in the US, they’re slightly different
personalities and types of people who are attracted. I wonder if this will have an impact.

**Philip Seib:**

I’m afraid so. I’m a reactionary. I still think that all diplomacy should be conducted in Latin. But it’s going to require, maybe not a different kind of skill, but additional skills. I hope we don’t say that it requires a replacement of thoughtfulness with glibness, but I think there’s a temptation to do that now.

I can think of one US ambassador to a country I won’t name that has made quite a name for himself by tweeting constantly. And a lot of the tweets are very personal. ‘I’m going to a soccer match. I’m going out to dinner.’ He says, and he’s a very bright guy, he says, ‘This helps humanize me. I’m no longer just a sort of institution. I’m just another guy and you people in this country now get to know me much better because if you follow my tweets,’ and he had a huge following, ‘you’ll get a better sense of who I am.’

I wonder how much of that is actually useful and how much is just a gimmick. I think one of the questions is, when you use Twitter, we’re going to have to find out – and probably through a matter of trial and error to a certain extent – to what extent are these social media advancing the interests of your government? From his standpoint, his job is to advance the interests of the government of the United States. Not to become a rock star in his country. He would argue, I think, that there’s a certain connection between the two – that if he’s a rock star, he can better advance those interests. Well, maybe. I’m not convinced of that.

I think diplomatic skills are going to have to expand to include the ability to use these new media, just as they had to expand... A diplomat had to be able to learn, beginning in the 1960s, to be able to go on television and do a television interview. Well, now you’re going to have to learn to do this stuff.

It need not require that substance be cast aside, but it will require a lot of training, and it will be interesting to see how – when we go down the ladder a bit back into the education process – how graduate programmes in international relations and so on, how they deal with this. They’re not dealing with it much yet.
Bridget Kendall:

Well, I think a final thought. This is more about the traditional media you talked about – coming back to speed – and you gave the example of the building of the Berlin Wall. I was thinking, as you were talking about that, about what’s been happening in North Korea. The sense of crisis or possibly phony crisis which has been building, in this era of real-time diplomacy and 24-hour news and tweets and so on.

But I was thinking really, actually, what we also have now, we not only have speed but we also do have space. And so there is the possibility to explain, to deconstruct policies. It’s very complicated, the whole North Korea question. In historical terms, in what China’s role is, the obligations of the United States, and so on. There is the space to explain this now, which there wouldn’t have been before.

So actually maybe it does space to some extent mitigates speed when it comes to some platforms. Online? Plenty of space there. 24-hour news? Plenty of space there. Twitter, maybe not. Maybe there are two different things here. If you’ve got so few chapters and it’s basically bumper sticker politics, then that’s a problem. But if you have also these arenas where you can explain to people why things are difficult diplomatically – and quite a lot of diplomacy is very difficult to condense into short, snappy bullet points, I know that from my own job – then maybe the way that technology is going gives you more opportunity to get a public to understand what’s going on, rather than leave you gasping to try and keep up with events.

Philip Seib:

That gets into the whole issue of media literacy and it’s a discipline that needs to be taught beginning at the primary school level, because five year olds now are beginning to get their information online. What people need to be able to do is take advantage of this great diversity of sources, the fact that we can sit... You don’t even have to sit in front of a computer, just pull out your phone and you can read news sources from around the world.

There’s a lot of space, as you say. Well, if you want to know what China’s reaction is to North Korea – even if you don’t read Chinese, there are plenty of official Chinese sources in English that you can take a look at and get a sense of what they’re doing. You can read what the North Koreans have to say. You can read what the US Department of Defense has to say. Read what the South Koreans have to say. Read what the Japanese have to say.
There’s a lot of room for dialogue there. Lots of information. The trick about this media literacy is trying to decide how you ingest all of that. In other words, people should be trained from the earliest years on, that if they want to be informed about what’s going on in North Korea, you don’t just go to the government of North Korea website. That will give you only one view. But it is designed to do that. You also need to go to the South Korean information and the other countries I was mentioning.

That’s going to take a generation to work with that. I find in my students now, who are mostly graduate students in their early 20s, they do their research exclusively online, but they haven’t picked up some of the tricks of the trade, such as getting balanced information, getting up-to-date information. For example, if somebody does a paper on social media and quotes statistics from 2007 – they’re worthless. I tell them that. They need to learn that there’s this plethora of information out there. They need to be updating their information constantly.

That’s a learning process, which is going to, again, take some time. Don’t expect any of this stuff to be resolved next week. Not going to happen. It will take awhile.