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An Optimistic Research Agenda for Digital Public Diplomacy [1]

Last week I had the pleasure of serving as a discussant on a panel that explored new research agendas in digital diplomacy. The panel, chaired by Professor Emily Metzgar, was part of the 2018 International Studies Association annual conference. Notably, the majority of the participants on the panel offered research agendas that focused on the negative impact digital tools have had on diplomacy. From the threat of cyberwarfare and the need to regulate the lawlessness of cyberspace, to the use of digital public diplomacy to craft counternarratives, the promise of digital tools to enhance diplomatic practices was all but absent from the panel. This negative prism was also evident in other panels and discussions held at the conference.

In the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, and in light of recent attempts to weaponize social media as a tool for strategic misinformation, it is easy to understand why scholars are increasingly focusing on the negative aspects of digitalization. However, there is still a need to

explore how digital technologies can be used to facilitate diplomacy. An optimistic research agenda is necessary as it may demonstrate that digital technologies are still used by diplomats to promote rather than disrupt diplomacy. Moreover, a positive agenda may highlight digital best practices that can then be adopted by a host of diplomatic actors ranging from MFAs (ministries of foreign affairs) to NGOs and multilateral organizations. In this way, the research agenda can influence diplomatic practices in the field. Lastly, an optimistic research agenda escapes the trappings of digital determinism and elucidates that digital technologies may be used either to promote understanding or drive wedges between societies and nations.

More than any other field, public diplomacy may serve as a fruitful domain for a positive digital research agenda. Indeed, it was in the field of public diplomacy that digital technologies first debuted, and early uses of ICTs (information and communication technologies) by the Israeli, U.S. and Swedish MFAs all focused on utilizing technology towards facilitating dialogue across societies. Early studies of digital public diplomacy offered an optimistic outlook on digital diplomacy. For instance, Emily Metzgar evaluated the State Department's Virtual Embassy to Iran which was meant to build bridges between Americans and Iranians despite the absence of bilateral ties. Similarly, James Pamment evaluated Sweden's Virtual Embassy to Second Life meant to foster dialogue with a globally connected public sphere. Yet, as is the case with other fields of diplomacy, contemporary studies of digital public diplomacy have also adopted a negative prism in which public diplomacy is reduced to a tool for contesting narratives, fighting disinformation through recruited networks and influencing the world views and behaviors of audiences.

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A positive research agenda for digital public diplomacy may focus on four areas. The first is the use of digital technologies by relatively small or less affluent states. In light of limited resources and small diplomatic networks abroad, such states may be utilizing digital tools to reach online populations and promote their foreign policy objectives through engagement and dialogue. For instance, the Baltic States are increasingly investing resources in their digital outreach via social media, websites and even messaging applications. Similarly, African States are increasingly turning to digital platforms to reconnect with their national diasporas so as to facilitate their economic growth and strengthen their bilateral ties. Few studies to date have examined how these states utilize digital tools and if ICTs still offer innovative ways to enhance one's diplomatic outreach.

Second, scholars may focus on diplomatic institutions tasked with managing public diplomacy activities in tense environments. For instance, Israeli diplomats in Jordan have limited opportunities to engage with Jordanian society. It is thus possible that the Israeli Embassy to Amman is increasingly relying on a range of ICTs to communicate with Jordanians including social media, Skype and web forums. The same may be true of U.S. Embassies in

Afghanistan and Pakistan which see limited physical outreach by U.S. diplomats.

Third, digital public diplomacy studies may focus on the listening aspect of public diplomacy. The incorporation of ICTs in public diplomacy was meant to facilitate dialogue between diplomats and connected publics. According to Emily Metzger, listening refers to the process of analyzing audience comments and feedback and integrating such feedback into the policy formulation process. Few scholars have thoroughly examined if and when online feedback influences a country's foreign policy or its policy priorities. If listening does indeed occur, then it may demonstrate the manner in which online publics are increasingly impacting international affairs and that diplomacy has indeed become more democratized.

Finally, an optimistic research agenda may focus on the future technological landscape and examine ways in which innovative technologies may enhance public diplomacy activities. For instance, it is estimated that by 2020 the number of individuals connected to the internet will increase from three to six billion. This means that the possible reach of digital public diplomacy will increase exponentially. How can MFAs best prepare at the present to reap the benefit of the future? It is also estimated that by 2025, telepresence will replace video conferencing software such as Skype. Telepresence could enable every individual in the world to virtually attend university classrooms in another country. How should MFAs alter their exchange programs in anticipation of telepresence? Equally important, will telepresence enable small states to compete with the exchange programs of dominant states?

Current affairs often influence the research agendas of academic scholars. The weaponizing of social media, the threat of election tampering and the rise of cyberwarfare have all brought about a pessimistic zeitgeist in the field of digital diplomacy. Yet there may still be many ways in which digital technologies positively impact diplomatic practices. Public diplomacy scholars are well situated to examine such a positive impact and offer a more balanced view of the digitalization of diplomacy.