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Connectivity and Networks Rule: Virtuality, Public Diplomacy and the Foreign Ministry [1]

When USC's Center on Public Diplomacy embarked on its *Virtual Worlds* project a few years ago, I admit to being somewhat sceptical. The undertaking seemed, at the time, just too ephemeral, too abstract, too distant from the machinations of *realpolitik* and the grind of bureaucratic process which I experienced daily as a diplomat.

My thinking, not unlike internet applications, has since migrated.

Since its popular inception in the early 1990s, the epicentre of the internet has continually moved. In less than a decade it has shifted from Web 1.0 — which can be thought of as read/write/broadcast mode — to Web 2.0, today's dominant format characterized by interaction and exchange, content sharing, social networking, interactivity, and downloadable audio and visual "podcasts". We are now in the early stages of Web 3.0, which features a spectrum of new possibilities related to emotion, sensation (through haptic technologies), the simulation of real life experience, and the construction of parallel, virtual worlds. Research and development activity in these areas is ongoing and the application of *virtuality* will undoubtedly evolve further, and rapidly, in the coming years. The full advent of Web 3.0 will send it into warp speed, and it is time that diplomats and foreign ministries got fully with the program.

As an increasingly large proportion of the world's population looks to the web as its primary source of information and communication, including e-mail, video conferencing, social networking and telephony. As higher transmission speeds and greater bandwidth expand audio and visual streaming choices, communications media are converging on the internet. It is edging out newspapers, TV, radio, and conventional telephones as the primary communications medium.

The power and pervasiveness of these media can be striking. To offer just a sampling: campaigns on the web were critical to publicizing and catalyzing the anti-globalization movement; they stopped the Multilateral Agreement on Investment in the late 1990s; they changed the outcome of a Korean presidential election; they have provided unprecedented profile to consular cases. And anyone with a webcam and a digital uplink can become a reporter — think of footage of the first images of 9/11 in 2001, the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, the 2007 pro-democracy uprising in Burma, or the anti-Chinese rioting in Llahsa, Tibet in 2008. Almost none of that visual content was provided by journalists. Most of it is unmediated. And almost none of it could be suppressed by local authorities.

The immediacy and interactivity that characterize blogs — not quite the equivalent of face-to-face contact, but certainly closer to "live" conditions than documents posted on static Web sites — make them especially effective at breaking down cultural barriers. Blogs from the Iraq war and elsewhere in the Middle East have brought the human toll of those conflicts to desktops around the globe: executions have been streamed live on anti-occupation sites, and

the Abu Ghraib prison pictures spread faster than Seymour Hersh's writing in the *New Yorker* could ever be distributed. Those images have effectively branded the US occupation. In the wake of developments such as these, it is not entirely surprising that RAND Corporation analysts have recommended that the US military try Internet marketing techniques to win hearts and minds in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Diplomats are great generators of information, knowledge, and intelligence about the world and its workings, and foreign ministries represent the institutional repositories for that kind of material. Neither diplomats nor foreign ministries, however, have adapted easily to the challenges of globalization. The militarization of international policy, persistence of conflict, and proliferating numbers of unaddressed global issues — most rooted in science and driven by technology (climate change, pandemic disease, genomics, etc.) — testify convincingly to this end. In part as a result, managers, analysts, and diplomatic studies scholars have been pondering questions and issues surrounding how to adapt and use the new media, especially the Internet, in this context with increasing frequency and intensity. And in both government and the academy some progress has been made. Diplomacy, and especially public diplomacy is adopting the new media and migrating toward the web.

In the late nineties, Singapore and Hong Kong were way out in front in establishing web-based identities for their city-states. Since then many more have joined the party. The Swedish and British Foreign Ministers blog, certain US and UK diplomats are encouraged to do so as well. The Republic of the Maldives, Sweden, the Philippines, Estonia, Serbia, Colombia, Macedonia, and Albania have established virtual embassies in the web-based, 3D virtual universe which is *Second Life*. The US State Department has established an Office of eDiplomacy (responsible for knowledge management, e-collaboration, and IT decision-making), created a network of virtual presence posts, and is hosting a wiki-like intranet application called *Diplopedia*. Secretary Rice has her own Web page and former Assistant Secretary for Public Diplomacy Karen Hughes was the first official at that level to do the same. The FCO runs a highly interactive web site featuring bloggers and links to YouTube, Flickr, and specialized resources such as their new volume on public diplomacy. The UK is also now actively recruiting "digital diplomats." The theme of diplomacy has attracted the attention of on-line game players.

Why should public diplomats and foreign ministries make a priority of virtuality? The business case is compelling:

> • Effectiveness: in an increasingly network-centric world, foreign ministries must find ways to better connect and communicate with new actors in international society – NGOs, business, think tanks, universities, the media

> • Efficiency: to pool e-diplomatic resources, foreign ministries can capture scale economies and benefit from the move from bricks to clicks

> • Leverage: as a key component in any grand strategy to maximize a nation's comparative advantages in a competitive environment, virtuality can play to the strengths of national image and reputation while minimizing the constraints associated with capacity limitations

Public diplomats can use the new media to connect directly with populations; finding better, more creative ways to do this will be one of diplomacy's new frontiers, in part for the reasons

set out above, and in part because the internet can play a crucial role in helping diplomats overcome the increasingly severe constraints on personal contact imposed by security considerations in an increasing number of locales.

ITCs (Information Technology and Communication), for instance, can help to overcome such constraints by facilitating the development of *virtual* desks, organized according to a thematic or geographic association, which would use the new media to create networks of expertise extending far beyond the foreign ministry. The Afghan "desk" at headquarters, by way of example, in addition to its immediate links to South and Central Asian country desks, could include a shared site in cyberspace connected to professors, non-governmental organization representatives, recently posted staff, businesspeople, citizens working in Afghanistan, and anyone with knowledge and expertise which they were prepared to contribute. In addition to advancing knowledge on issues such as the practice of PD in asymmetrical conflict zones and the public diplomat as counterinsurgent, the virtual desk model, which features multi-party, horizontal issue management, would also help to improve performance in functional bureaux across the range of highly distributed S&T challenges: resource shortages, energy supply, and weapons of mass destruction to name a few that have come to dominate the diplomatic agenda.

Not all e-diplomats will be young, but many will be born of a generation that has grown up with the new media. For members of this cohort, the full interactive potential of the medium, and the applications related to PD and branding, will seem second nature. In this respect, just as the military needs *rules* of engagement, e-diplomats need *tools* of engagement. These e-diplomats with their new tools could become active in *virtual* worlds, using 3D graphics, haptic technologies (simulated sense experience), and real time voice communication to do things in cyberspace which could not easily be replicated on the ground. Examples using life-like avatars with digital identities might include testing high risk negotiating strategies, running alternative scenarios for conflict resolution, talking to the Taliban, whatever. As the lines between the real and the virtual worlds become less distinct, the momentum already evident in various diplomatic cyber-options is likely to accelerate, with a range of still unclear consequences.

Still, the use of the internet for public engagement, let alone the more far-reaching applications of e-diplomacy, remains in many foreign ministries somewhat of an untested, even suspect concept. The *blogosphere* is exploding with content of interest to diplomats, but it is largely ignored by foreign ministries. Because the norms of the new media favour the immediate and most traffic is unmediated, there can be a cultural clash with the management culture and conventions of traditional diplomacy. Some senior officials are suspicious because the pace is so fast-moving and the public input unpredictable. Others just don't get the revolutionary significance of the new media *per se*. Many governments, it should be added, are not yet ready to cede centralized control over communications and policy development.

The result is a paradox. For the very reasons that the internet is so popular with youth and the non-governmental organization community, its role and place in the foreign ministry — as a policy instrument? communications vehicle? technical service? PD and branding tool? — remain unsettled. The full potential of the internet has yet to be realized by diplomacy.

Redoubled efforts to connect through the new media, and better designed, more user-friendly and interactive websites are an obvious starting point here; the ever-widening possibilities associated with the ICT universe represent one powerful tonic for many of diplomacy's ailments. Blogging is now over a decade old; responsive foreign ministers and some senior

officials are doing it, and so too should more ambassadors, especially those posted to trouble spots. It is time to ventilate fully the structure and content of diplomacy, to democratize the inputs into decision-making and to push accountability upward while devolving responsibility for decision-making downward. Hierarchic, authoritarian structures, like the Cold war era thinking which produced them, have been rendered obsolete by ITCs.

With the lines between the real and the *virtual* worlds becoming increasingly indistinct, the scope for diplomatic experimentation with the new media will continue to grow. The technological hardware and software available for transnational interaction and advocacy have already become so powerful that scepticism — including my own — over the potential for meaningful crossover between the real and virtual domains has diminished in recent years. There is certainly room for attempting to accomplish objectives in cyberspace which would be difficult or impossible to achieve on this side of the screen.

Much more analysis will be required on the issue of how public diplomacy can make better use of the possibilities inherent in the digital universe. The scope for experimentation, like the medium, is limitless.