

Nov 04, 2016 by [R.S. Zaharna](#)

The Ironies of Social Media in Public Diplomacy ^[1]

On Thursday, May 17, 2012 I attended the discussion on “Digital Diplomacy: A New Era of Advancing Policy” at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington and on Twitter at [#DigiDiplomacy](#). Carnegie had already posted video and audio of the event by early afternoon. USC MPD alumnus Matthew Wallin [blogged](#) his assessment of the discussion shortly there after.

Being the academic dinosaur that I am at heart, I came home typed up all my notes. Then, as an exercise to help me develop my social media skills, I compared my notes to the Twitter feed. My next step was to construct a theoretical framework around that comparison. Yes, I really am an academic.

And, having had the luxury of further scholarly reflection, I was struck by several ironies. Some of the ironies are captured in the tweets.

Irony #1: Social media -- the antithesis of diplomacy?

Yesterday’s ambivalence about the use of social media was palatable. On the one hand, there was a sense of excitement. Martha Boudreau, of Fleishman-Hillard and co-sponsor of the event, opened by capturing the promise of what the buzz of new media is all about.

Martha Boudreau [@FHDC](#): Social media is a broader way to practice statecraft & create relationships [#DigiDiplomacy](#)

Boudreau shared some of the mind-numbing numbers on social media, but said its relevance to diplomacy goes beyond numbers. For Mexico’s [Ambassador Arturo Sarukhan](#), social media was not just about relevancy, social media was a necessity. He shared his adaptation of an old Mexican saying to underscore his point. It used to be, “If you moved, you were not in the picture.” He up-dated that saying for Twitter:

@Arturo Sarukhan: "if you don't tweet, you are not in the photograph." meaning if you aren't using social, you aren't relevant diplomatically #DigiDiplomacy

On the one hand, there was excitement. Like the new toy on the block, all the kids are asking, what is it? Can I play with it too?

Then, on the other hand, there was the wariness. Alert to the apprehension, or perhaps skepticism, the panelists seemed on the defensive from the get go. Alec Ross, the guru of social media @State and first of the panelist to speak, immediately introduced what became the mantra echoed among the discussants: "social media is a TOOL." He emphasized that by saying he was a Medieval History major. He wasn't interested in technology, but in advancing policy interests. Using social media was a tool for advancing policy interests.

All the panelists repeated the mantra at least once or twice each time they spoke: "social media is a TOOL." Nevertheless, the very first question from the audience was a not so much a question but a statement about the failings of social media as a substitute for personal contact in diplomacy.

Why the mantra of "social media as a tool" may fail to resonant or have difficulty taking hold with the diplomatic community may be because of the contrasting images of social media as a tool of the fast and furious and the image of diplomacy in unhurried lap of pearls and dark suits. Both images may need updating or refocusing. However, the contrasting images that linger were captured in a statement by panelist Sarah Wynn-Williams and a reflective observation by discussion moderator Tom Carver.

"Another motto at Facebook: 'Move fast and break things.'" -- Sarah Wynn-Williams, former New Zealand diplomat and current manager of public policy at Facebook

To which, Tom Carver of the Carnegie Endowment, who was moderating the discussion observed: "That's the opposite of what diplomacy is: "Move slow and be careful not to break anything."

Viewed in this light, the ambivalence of social media makes sense. Social media could be seen as the antithesis of diplomacy.

Irony #2: Social media -- promoting anti-social behavior?

@AlecJRoss "Social media tends to punish moderation." #DigiDiplomacy

Ross made the comment in the context of speaking about the tension between representative democracy (i.e, Congress) and direct democracy, or citizen using social media to make their voices heard. Ross remarked, "Social media punishes moderation – those who seek compromise – and amplifies extremism on both ends."

On the surface, that sounds true. In a crowded platform, the extreme voices stand out. They get the visibility or listened to. Moderate voices are easily drowned out. Several researchers have been studying how the media tools/conventions are contributing to a more polarized atmosphere in U.S. politics.

Which, going back to diplomacy, may be another reason to be leery of social media. If diplomacy about building relations, compromise and accommodation to others is at the core. Also, compromise and learning to modify one's behavior in relation to others is at the core of social behavior. Also, while moderate voices may be easily drowned out, they nevertheless tend to resonate with the widest audience. How ironic it would be if social media is promoting anti-social, uncompromising behavior.

Having pondered these ironies, I am now the more curious about social media's evolving role/s in public diplomacy. Yes, Phil Seib, your new book on social media and public diplomacy is next on my reading list.
