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Uncovering Logics of Technology in U.S. Public Diplomacy [1]

In 2012, Fergus Hanson released two reports covering the scope of "e-diplomacy" within the U.S. State Department. He provided a broad view of how the State Department had adopted social media and other IT platforms to accomplish the business of diplomacy. Facebook pages for U.S. embassies, tweeting ambassadors, and new forms of knowledge management were among the examples cited to illustrate a larger trend towards the incorporation of information technology into the practice of statecraft. Yet Hanson's reports raise a number of questions about the lessons to be learned from the cases of technology adoption. One question, in particular, seems to stand out for me. It is drawn from the title of his second report, "Baked in and Wired: ediplomacy@State". What exactly does "baked in" mean?

The question I pose implies a more general interest regarding the significance of such technology in the service of statecraft. How does the evidence Hanson points to reveal some sense of change in the institutional logics that underscore the practice of public diplomacy and, more generally, that of U.S. diplomacy? "Baked in" suggests that technologies and their use have settled into more legitimated practices, been incorporated into institutional norms, and otherwise become a part of the common-place material "equipment" of diplomacy. I'm not sure if they have—or how such technologies bring to light potentially competing justifications for public diplomacy, since social media technologies may be better at some kinds of public diplomacy, and less appropriate for others. This is the key question that motivates my current research and manuscript project: how have the institutional logics of U.S. (public) diplomacy changed or transformed around the integration of technology?

It is not my intention to argue that technology is changing everything at the U.S. State Department. The technological evangelism of Alec Ross, however, suggests that there are norms, attitudes, and practices about the business of diplomacy that are in question. State is historically a tradition-bound institution. Debates about technological usage are driven by a perceived exigency that some feel, and suggestive that that there are potentially competing agendas that underscore the incorporation of technology into diplomatic practice. Put another way, when advisors such as Alec Ross argue about the necessity of technology to deal with a changing field of practice for diplomacy, he is also making an argumentative claim about inadequacies within institutional norms, traditions, and indeed foreign policy. These moments raise bigger questions about the conceptual relation of public diplomacy to diplomacy more generally.

Clearly, there is recognition among diplomacy and public diplomacy scholars that at a global level, the institution of diplomacy is facing a potential crisis of redefinition and adaptation. A comprehensive report by diplomacy scholars Brian Hocking, Jan Melissen, Shaun Riordan, and Paul Sharp on "Futures for Diplomacy" survey a transforming global context for diplomacy, that necessitates rethinking the training, practice, and indeed purpose for diplomacy. In their vision of "integrative diplomacy," diplomats will function as facilitators and

conveners among complex networks of trans-national and domestic actors. In their view, diplomats may eventually play the role of a kind of social entrepreneur for issues of global governance, as much as carrying on traditional burdens of representation, negotiation, and communication.

Their claims parallel a similar body of thinking on the shifting institutional grounds for diplomacy. Ole Sending, Vincent Pouliot, and Iver Neumann argue that diplomacy may increasingly reflect a changing conception of practice that accommodates new social relations among international actors. They move beyond identifying new diplomatic actors (see Kelley, Wiseman), to suggest more substantive changes in the role and function of diplomacy - a shift from traditional obligations of representation toward the role of governance, and the increase of deterritorialized obligations (e.g. the rise of issue-specific diplomatic posts, rather than posts to a country).

In both of these cases, the authors point to institutional transformations. They raise questions about the norms, practices, and commonplace assumptions that sustain diplomacy. But what does this mean? As Robin Brown noted, there may be a steady convergence of traditional diplomacy with public diplomacy. Their burdens and purpose are increasingly aligned. A quick read of the U.S. Quadrennial Review of Diplomacy and Development and its numerous references to an imperative for engagement confirms this trend (at least in the U.S.).

Most of the tectonic shifts that warrant claims made by diplomacy scholars about the *institution* of diplomacy as somehow changing can be traced to the affordances of information and communication technology. Peel back the layers of diplomacy and international relations theory-amending that inform the aforementioned writers, and you get claims about communication and technology. This is not to endorse some kind of blanket determinism. Yet it is impossible to ignore the material consequences of technology. New forms of agency, participation, and indeed power are seemingly inextricable from technological ubiquity, as Manuel Castells and others have extensively argued. Ministries of foreign affairs confront these contexts and must adapt. But what kind of institutional "equipment for thinking" do they have?

James Pamment's comparative analysis of U.S., U.K., and Swedish public diplomacy provides a good point of departure for addressing this question. Pamment's lucid work specifically targets the consequences of institutional orientation and indeed, "logic" - that has consequences for practice. Much like my own study of comparative approaches to soft power, Pamment notes that logics of communication (what ideal kinds of communication are perceived to "work" for influence) manifest in a constrained vision of public diplomacy in practice. For Pamment, this is most obvious in the increasing evaluation imperative that governs institutional orientation toward public diplomacy. The need to measure impact in specific ways artificially constrains what public diplomacy can look like.

Likewise, I am interested in the consequences of attitudes around the practice and purpose of technology. This involves examining what Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2012) call an "institutional logic." Drawing from organizational and neo-institutional theory, their perspective entails examination of the "assumptions, values, and beliefs by which individuals and organizations provide meaning" to their work and experience. A institutional logic represents "[f[rames of reference that condition actors' choices for sensemaking, the vocabulary they use to motivate action, and their sense of self and identity."

When Fergus Hanson claims that e-diplomacy techniques are "baked in" to the State

Department, he is making a tacit argument about institutional logic. This does not mean that there is a *singular* logic, but rather that the at-times skeptical and uneven embrace of new media technologies at the State Department signal the presence of conflicting perspectives and traditions. These logics have different priorities and demand competing resources.

What does this analysis look like? First, it means examining (like Hanson) exemplar programs that represent the convergence of technology with practice. Second, it requires finding strategic documents and public statements that reflect the frames and narratives that support the use of technology, especially in ways that might transform the purpose of public diplomacy. Finally, it necessitates getting the perspectives of practitioners - former and current - on how they perceive the role of technology for the purpose of statecraft.

The State Department has been lauded for its comprehensive approach to information technologies, but it is not without criticism. There has been some incisive commentary and critique of the State Department's approach to information technologies and public diplomacy. But as communication scholar Phil Howard's rebuttal to Evegeny Morozov's skepticism suggests, it's not as if these technologies are going to go away, or that publics crucial to U.S. foreign policy objectives are not going to be using them.

The question remains: what are the public diplomacy practitioner attitudes towards new and social media technologies, and how do these attitudes reflect potential institutional transformations that have larger implications for U.S. diplomacy? In subsequent blogs, I will share my findings and try to situate my arguments in relation to claims and critiques that continue to emerge on the subjects of e-diplomacy, public diplomacy, and digital "engagement."