


Nov 04, 2016 by [Ali Fisher](#)

Diplomats—Get Into Data ^[1]

"From engaging with activists in closed societies to countering the efforts of Jihadist groups; there has never been a better time for diplomats to get into data."

-Ali Fisher

There has never been a better time for diplomats to get into data and push the boundaries of what is imagined to be possible within public diplomacy. The amount of data available is greater than ever, perhaps 90% of which was generated in the last two years. At the same time, more people globally are communicating in ways that generate data which is publicly observable, for example through the API of social media platforms. Equally, the tools to analyse data have expanded rapidly, allowing users to search large amounts of data quickly and efficiently.


Certainly, as Nassim Nicholas Taleb noted during the Moneyball Diplomacy event, there is a need for discrimination in analysis, due to the level of "noise" in data. Identifying what 'signal' is meaningful to the task of diplomacy will require diplomats and scholars to become increasingly comfortable engaging with, analysing, and using increasingly large and often unstructured  data. Engaging in this type of work can open further opportunities for collaboration and to push the boundaries of what is imagined to be possible within public diplomacy.

What are the options for diplomats?


As I have written previously, the opportunity in the era of big data comes not from drowning in a sea of data but navigating the most useful ways to derive insight and develop innovative strategies from that data.

Getting into what can be loosely termed big data does not have to come with a big price tag, at least not until users have begun to develop fairly large-scale projects. One way diplomats can get into data and gain comfort with the approaches and research questions to which big data lends itself, is to participate in the growing amount of open source projects, use the software programs which result and experiment with the range free web-based software-as-service.

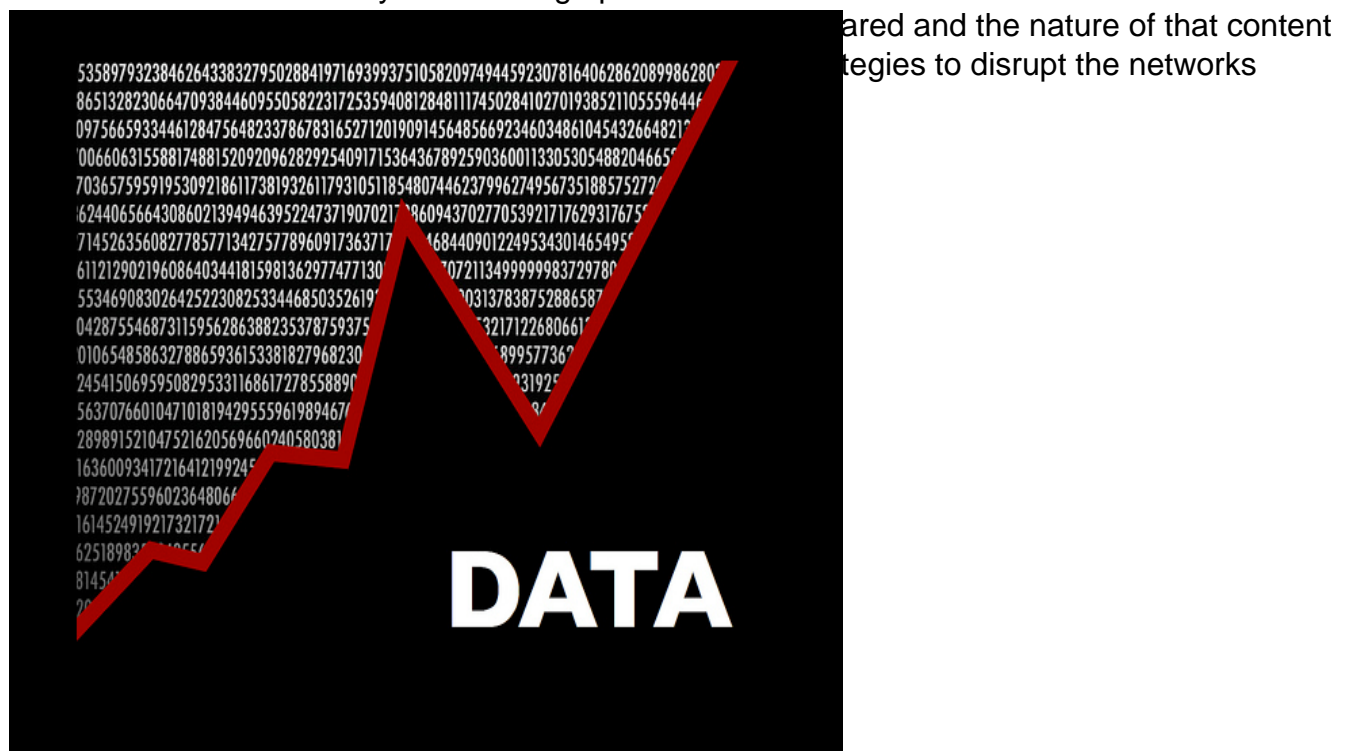
Today is a good time to get into data as recently there have been the updates to Scraperwiki, Sparkwise, and SwiftRiver. In addition, there are tools such as Gapminder which seeks to be a "fact tank" that promotes a fact based world view by providing time series development data. Moreover, the recently launched Google Databoard allows users to build custom graphics based on Google research studies. These tools and data such as GDELT (Global Data on Events, Location, and Tone), if used effectively, can enable diplomats to integrate big and unstructured data into their current tools and processes for planning, monitoring, and evaluating their specific projects.

In addition, given the relational nature of public diplomacy, tools which allow the analysis of relational data  and networks, provide further opportunities to track whether an organisation is engaging with specific communities, to understand the position of a user in the 'greater network' or to navigate the information landscapes of communication around an issue. A recent article in Forbes highlighted some of the ways NodeXL has been used and further examples of network analysis can be seen in the Gephi gallery on Flickr.

What use is big data?

Previous examples of using, for example, network analysis have been discussed in relation to identifying meaningful networks in public diplomacy and specific events. Examples can be seen during events like President Obama's trip to Brazil , information sharing during the Arab Spring, or the protests following the 2009 Presidential Election in Iran. Studies such as these can allow diplomats to understand the 'greater network' to identify individuals or communities with which to engage, understand the nuance in their discussion, and find ways to collaborate. For example these studies could facilitate the achievement of their objectives where they intersect with the aims of diplomats.

Equally, there is an opportunity to use data to analyse the strategic communication of groups a diplomat is responsible for challenging. This can give diplomats an edge over adversaries in contested environments. For example, an article I wrote with Nico Prucha published in the CTC Sentinel showed how Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) is using Twitter as a beacon for sharing shortlinks to content dispersed across numerous digital platforms. This method means videos shot on the battlefield in Syria are being uploaded onto YouTube and shared with followers via



Tom Woodward, Creative Commons

To take full advantage, diplomats will need to be able to leverage genuinely interdisciplinary approaches, which combine in-depth knowledge of big data techniques and network analysis,

with rich multilingual understanding of the ideological, religious, and cultural foundations of the groups they seek to challenge.

Avoiding Misconceptions

Identifying the opportunity which big data presents is not to suggest that diplomats are currently without knowledge, great nuance, and understanding. Equally, as Kate Crawford highlighted in a recent Foreign Policy article, the numbers do not speak for themselves. Data needs interpreting by those with a nuanced understanding of the context and the imagination to identify insights and develop innovative strategies.


It would be as absurd to suggest that diplomacy should be conducted only on the basis of big data. However, it would be equally absurd to conduct public diplomacy without using big data when it is available. The greatest opportunity for influence comes from the synthesis of big data insights with the nuance, experience and understanding developed by generations of diplomats.

Making it happen

While the technology can be disruptive for authorities, diplomats, and scholars, these technologies can also be empowering for those seeking to understand behavior within complex environments. One of the biggest problems in making this happen is the gap between diplomats and the current big data tools. This is a physical gap, given the restrictions on what software can be run on computers available to diplomats, but it is also a cognitive gap, a two-way lack of understanding between big data and diplomatic communities.

While there are some examples of data visualization tool, Public diplomacy has not (yet) spawned a community of interest to the extent development has through ICT4D of Data for development. As a result there are fewer individuals experienced in coding and big data analysis who also have an understanding of public diplomacy. Equally, there are currently few individuals becoming diplomats with a rich understanding of the opportunities which big data can bring.

To address these gaps, public diplomacy can learn from its own practice. Public diplomacy brings individuals together to help them bridge between their respective communities and allow them to gain greater understanding of the interests and issues important to other communities. There are a range of opportunities for developing greater understanding between data and diplomatic communities:

- Hands-on experience: diplomats and scholars of diplomacy can spend time taking part in hands-on experimentation similar to the tech camp attended by Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study (YES) Program alumni.
- Integration into university level courses: benefits may emerge if university level courses focusing on public diplomacy include greater emphasis on big data tools, coding languages, techniques, and software which underpin networks analysis and GIS (geographic information systems).
- Challenges: Competitions such as 'Reinventing Public Diplomacy Through Games  Competition ' or the recent D4D challenge using Orange mobile data, provide opportunities to harness the creativity of research groups, to push the boundaries of what is imagined to be possible within public diplomacy

Combining big data analysis and visualizations with the nuanced understanding of context, already central to diplomacy, can open opportunities for collaboration and to push the boundaries of what is imagined to be possible within 21st century public diplomacy.
