

**Thumbnail Image:**



Nov 04, 2016 by [Corneliu Bjola](#)

## **Practicing Digital Diaspora Diplomacy** <sup>[1]</sup>

On May 20, 2016, the Oxford Digital Diplomacy Research Group (#DigDiploROx) convened by Prof. Corneliu Bjola together with Jennifer Cassidy and Ilan Manor (both doctoral students at Oxford) held a one day seminar at the University of Oxford focused on Diaspora diplomacy in the digital age. Attended by representatives from 20 embassies to London and the Ethiopian MFA, the seminar aimed to analyze the impact digital tools have on the relations between diaspora communities and MFAs/embassies. The workshop combined presentations on the topic with a roundtable on digital diaspora engagement and two diplo-hacks addressing the issues of crisis communication and online backlash. In this blog post we offer a series of policy recommendations that arose from the seminar's deliberations.

### **A Conflict of Interests**

The global proliferation of ICTs have had a conflicting impact on the practice of Diaspora diplomacy. On the one hand, digital tools enable migrants to maintain close ties with their country of origin. Migrants can use affordable application such as Skype and WhatsApp to continuously communicate with family members, friends and communities. As such, it is possible that migrants are less reliant on Diasporic communities, and embassies, as they

once were. On the other hand, Diasporic communities may use digital tools and social media to self-organize and create vibrant virtual communities which are independent of embassies and MFAs.

These conflicting effects necessitate that embassies adopt new strategies when practicing Diaspora diplomacy. First among these is online outreach to virtual Diasporic communities. Embassies now need to become active members of virtual communities through writing posts for popular Diasporic websites, engaging in online discussion forums, offering analysis with regard to events happening in the country of origin and making embassy staff available for virtual Q&A sessions. Secondly, embassies need to demonstrate the value of their own digital platforms for migrants. Embassy websites and social media accounts can serve as hubs for Diasporas only as long as they supply valuable information and services. Third, embassies need to migrate to the digital tools employed by Diasporas. WhatsApp or Telegram, for instance, can be utilized by embassies to create groups of interest. One group can consist of the embassy spokesperson and Diasporic journalists while another can include the trade officer and migrant business owners.

Finally, MFAs need to realize that the growth in Diasporas will accelerate the migration of power from the ministry to the embassy. As Diasporic communities grow, so does their potential impact on their host countries and the strain on embassies who service them. Utilizing Diasporic communities to achieve diplomatic goals therefore requires an investment in an embassy's digital skills and the digitalization of embassy services.

## Diasporas & Crises

The use of social media platforms during times of political crises was a topic also discussed at length. During the DiploHack, Embassies discussed possible crisis scenarios, where social media could be used as a tool to connect with citizens abroad, as well being viewed as a method to engage with relevant political actors and to have their foreign policy positions heard online. The primary points discussed were as follows.

- **Choose the Online Channel appropriately:** A MFA and an Embassy must assess the crisis and decide on the social media channel deemed most appropriate for achieving their communication aims. Assessment should take into account which channel is the most popular amongst the citizens and political actors involved in the crisis, how much information can be posted on the channel (140 characters on Twitter versus extended status post on Facebook), and what is the level of engagement and dialogue creation on the channel itself (Instagram low levels of dialogue creation versus Twitter high levels of dialogue creation). Embassies and MFAs can use numerous channels to achieve a variety of aims but must be wary of the purpose and power of each.
- **Check facts internally:** Before any information is put forth on social media channels, all information should be checked internally prior to online communication. If the information needs to be in real-time (such as consular service numbers, and emergency details) this should be regularly updated and checked so it is ready to go if a crisis is to occur. Regarding a MFA's political leanings and their online publication, all Embassies should be briefed on these positions and facts should be checked and double checked before published online.
- **Over posting:** In today's online environment, it is a constant task to compete for views, likes and shares, all of which are shown to be increased by increased output. In times of

crises, there is such a thing as information overload where the user becomes overwhelmed with information, and fails to receive the right information needed. The MFA and Embassy should therefore avoid over posting, instead sticking to a number of key points per day. Emergency and consular information should also be pinned at the top of the user's profile if the channels allows that (Twitter and Facebook) ensuring that the information is not lost to their followers who visit the account.

## Dealing with Online Backlash

The increasing amount of backlash and negative reactions experienced online by Embassies, and Central Headquarters is a growing issue of concern for digital actors. In this instance, backlash was classified as a strong negative reaction towards a policy stance held by the government of the country of origin, carried out by online followers and directed towards online diplomatic actors. This may result from their position regarding a conflict, unpopular domestic policies, or simply as a result of their communication activities online.

During the DiploHack, Embassies discussed possible scenarios where backlash could occur from diaspora communities and suggested a number of key points which a MFA and Embassy should stick by when such situations might occur. The points are as follows:

- **Avoid reacting swiftly:** Online diplomatic actors should avoid immediately reacting to negative reactions, instead taking time to consider them in a measured manner, preferably by directly correcting any false information spread and by engaging with the audience where possible.
- **Don't ignore:** Linked to the point above, Embassies are advised not to ignore completely posts that are inflammatory by nature, false or regarded as abusive to the Embassy, MFA or other actors online. Ignoring such comments may allow false or incorrect information regarding the MFAs to remain online, and assists in distorting the MFA's intended message
- **Counteract bad news:** if dealing with increasingly negative posts online crises, an Embassy may seek to counter balance this with sporadic additions of more positive news online. Positive news stories from back home may also be dispersed through the online feed. One thing to consider however, is that these posts shouldn't be seen as 'too positive', or making light of the situation, but simply there to keep the online feed as positive as possible.

Further details on #DigDiploROx activities and future events can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/DigDiploROx/>

---