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The Rise of Migrant Digital Influencers: Bypassing Authoritarian Media to Drive Change ^[1]

Digital influencers are increasingly bypassing authoritarian media structures to appeal to large sections of their countries' public. Bloggers, vloggers and social media influencers living abroad share stories about their lived experiences that can catalyze change and challenge established regressive channels back home. Take, for instance, vocal Nigerian vlogger in the United Kingdom, Mc Akonuche, who has over 1 million Facebook followers; or Twene Jonas, a Ghanaian vlogger in the United States with more than 1.3 million Facebook followers. Many foreign digital influencers often have more followers than their countries' heads of state and have the tools to appeal more directly and intimately to local audiences.

These influencers are often denounced or written off in their countries of residence. However, they are highly influential in bypassing authoritarian, corrupt, and inefficient governments in their home countries. They share thoughtful content in their native languages that resonate with citizens at home and in the diaspora. This makes digital influencers a special class of public diplomats with tremendous impact within their niche communities.

Is there a policy to tap into these migrant communities to influence people in their home countries? During the Cold War, there were a number of policies for mobilizing migrants from countries considered to be crucial to the spread of desired ideologies. The U.S. and the Soviet Union had mechanisms for admitting and granting privileges to people from strategic locations to naturalize and integrate them into their societies. In the U.S., one can identify specific hubs for Cubans, Iranians, Vietnamese, and Russian/Eastern European migrants.

Classic diplomacy from medieval times to the 20th Century involved heads of state, senior members of government, and career diplomats engaging internationally to attain their states' best interests. The old state model typically had a centralized media system that the sovereign authorities controlled. Thus, a typical media house with a license to operate in an authoritarian state is expected to comply with the official position of the government and dominant personalities. Many countries continue to maintain authoritarian systems that abuse individual citizens' rights. However, migrants from these countries are able to see more advanced and effective systems and broadcast these to fellow citizens back home.

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After 2001, changes in the international order shifted the focus of major nations to security, immigration control, and the pursuit of external soft power. In an era where free market systems have proven the best way to build sustainable economies, some of the poorest countries of the world need capacity building. Many migrants from smaller countries can share ideas and insights about the lived experiences and successful systems in their host countries. This can challenge locals, provide them knowledge, and set the parameters for faster development and technology transfer.

To mobilize and prepare migrants to engage in public diplomacy, the following actions can be beneficial:

1. Encourage migrants to appeal directly to local populations using objective truths and their own lived experiences
2. Enhance direct policy engagement and consult with migrants on how they think their host country might contribute to their home country better
3. Recognize and mobilize the interests of migrant communities
4. Develop soft power within the community
5. Empower influencers with developmental and technology skills

These five actions can provide answers to the new public diplomacy challenge that major countries and international blocs face, as well as provide a basis for the empowerment and growth of less developed nations. There is, of course, the risk of the politicization of such actions in the international community. Hence, such an initiative must be monitored closely to ensure that vital goals are achieved efficiently and effectively.

In conclusion, direct diplomacy and formal foreign aid injection can often be ineffective in reaching people in poorer and less developed countries. However, the conditions in the 2020s and beyond indicate that some emerging countries have the structures for greater development. These countries need new ideas and innovative suggestions to catalyze their developmental processes. Migrant digital influencers can lead this process. The new public policy system, which allows people to engage, listen, and build bonds around the world, can be used by migrant digital influencers to accelerate this. Such a process will require a conscious effort to encourage and empower migrant influencers to appeal to their home population.
