Guest Editorial

WikiLeaks, public diplomacy 2.0 and the state of digital public diplomacy

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It happened in November. The world was weary of war and crisis when he stole the headlines. He was charismatic. He was radical. He had a point to prove. He defied years of diplomatic convention and laid the secrets of great power diplomacy before the world. His revelations captured the headlines and shocked the establishment. In laying bare these secrets he proclaimed a new approach to international affairs and – implicitly – the arrival of a new power. Julian Assange? November 2010? No. That vignette describes events in the now distant autumn of 1917 and the actions of Leon Trotsky, then the newly appointed People's Commissar for International Affairs for the Bolshevik government of Russia. In November 1917 Trotsky published a number of secret treaties which had been found in the archives of the Tsar in the aftermath of the Russian revolution. In a statement of 22 November 1917 Trotsky argued that ending the system of secret diplomacy was an absolute duty of the Bolsheviks: 'The abolition of secret diplomacy is the primary condition for an honest, popular, truly democratic foreign policy. The Soviet Government regards it as its duty to carry out such a policy in practice.'¹ The documents that Trotsky published revealed a sorry tale of the backroom deals in which belligerent powers of the *entente* (Russia, France and Great Britain)

promised various concessions of territory to the neutral nations that they sought to draw into the Great War on their side. Diplomacy swiftly adjusted to compensate for Trotsky's gambit. On 8 January 1918 the US president Woodrow Wilson replied in kind. His 'fourteen points' on which he claimed an equitable peace could be based included 'open covenants openly arrived at.' Others tried to give the new regime a taste of its own medicine with revelations of collusion between the Bolsheviks and the Kaiser's Germany. In time the Soviet state learnt the value of secrecy in diplomacy, and reinstated the traditional approach, reaching new heights of double dealing in the pact with Hitler of August 1939, but for a season it enjoyed the fruits of its defiance of convention in the minds of many working people. Trotsky's revelation was a symbol that the Bolshevik state represented something new in world affairs. It was public diplomacy by leak.

The analogy with 1917 is not wholly academic. The coming (or is it a springing?) of WikiLeaks is just as indicative of a 'game change' as Trotsky's gambit was ninety-six years ago. As then, while the information itself is important what is crucial is the context. In 1917 the leak required an earth-shattering revolution. In 2010 all it took to challenge the diplomatic order of the day was a single individual with a well-placed

accomplice and a little technical know-how. That technical know-how is – of course – the crux of the matter and the product of earth shattering revolution of a different kind: the revolution in communications technology. WikiLeaks not only required a flash drive and surreptitious data dump to acquire its trove of material, but also needed the facilities of an easily accessible worldwide web to make it instantaneously available. That technological revolution has given one individual the communication power that was the monopoly of the nation state in the previous century. Any individual potentially has this power. Assange is merely the individual with the will and wit to use that power to attract the public attention. Trotsky's leak was symptomatic of the power of a social class organized by a single-minded party. Assange's leak is symptomatic of the power of an individual communicating across a network. In the wake of the Trotsky leak the great powers faced a prolonged struggle to reassert their legitimacy in some quarters and did do in part by shifting their behavior to a greater openness with institutions such as the League of Nations. In the wake of WikiLeaks the powers of our own time will have to consider again the dangers of double dealing, and work to ensure that there is a minimal gap between what is claimed in public and what is practiced in private. For all its regrettable corrosion of the principals of confidentiality on which so much diplomacy rests, the shadow of WikiLeaks may play the classic role once memorably claimed for an Australian opposition party and thereafter embraced by the investigative press: 'keep the bastards honest.'

Despite being an undoubted indicator of the power of the new media, WikiLeaks also provided a small testament to the enduring influence of the old. Assange carefully reached out to the *New York Times*, the UK's *Guardian*, Germany's *Der Spiegel* and so forth – to partner in the publication of his documents, seeking perhaps to piggyback on their reach and gain the credibility of their brands and sources of information for the world. Yet despite this role for the old media, the winter of WikiLeaks is

an appropriate moment to examine the wider march of the web and more specifically the digitization of public diplomacy and state of the much heralded Public Diplomacy 2.0.

THE FOUNDATION: PUBLIC DIPLOMACY 1.0

The web-based revolution in public diplomacy has been a long time coming. As far back as the late 1960s some public diplomats had been anticipating a golden age of communication made possible by a network of computers. In February 1968 America's chief public diplomat, the director of the United States Information Agency, Leonard Marks, predicted that it was coming and it would be good. He argued that a world information grid of linked computers would be 'a fundamental step toward lasting world peace... The culture of all lands must be circulated through the houses of nations as our technology permits.'² The dawn didn't really break until the mid 1990s when the Mosaic browser system made it possible for the personal computers which had spread in the 1980s to access data platforms in the rapidly growing World Wide Web. For public diplomats the implications of this were slow to sink in. Web technology where it was used was an alternate platform for press releases and one-way top-down communication. The pride of US public diplomacy was its system for making Voice of America available on-line, initially in script form but eventually as an audio stream. At last they had an alternative to shortwave radio or yet more deals with local stations for an FM rebroadcast. Journals became available on-line (cheaper than print) and the so-called 'wireless file' anthology of 'useful' American news and views which had been sent to embassies since the early 1930s became a website.

In the case of US public diplomacy the revolution was slow to trickle down from a small core of enthusiasts. Amazing as it sounds now the terrorist attacks of 9/11 found a number of US embassies still without websites. Other players around the world were more canny, realizing the value of a well-managed

on-line identity. Cyber-image and, by extension, cyber-diplomacy became a tool in the public diplomacy toolbox.³ What seems to have been largely missed was the shift of power inherent in the new technology. Governments focused on how swiftly they could do what they had always done. Militaries looked to occupy cyber-space as if it were simply modern equivalent of the prized high ground of old. Treasuries looked to save money by going 'paperless.' But the new technology meant more than that. It was empowering the individual in a new way.

While the great powers continued (and continue) to broadcast their speeches, press releases and so forth into the ether and across the web, the audience was no longer as likely to listen. Part of the change was rooted in the sheer number of voices suddenly speaking on-line and the range of choices available. But as the number of websites proliferated it became possible to seek out a source closely matching one's own sense of identity, and even to develop an identity based on an on-line connection. Technology had played this role before. Historians have argued that the printing press promoted national identities two hundred years ago because it made it possible to 'imagine' a national community.⁴ Many different imagined communities emerged on-line built from shared enthusiasms, perceptions and/or perversions. Some had little pull on their adherents but others had the potential to supplant national identity. On-line communities based around radical Islamism were a case in point.

This proliferation of communities had one massive implication for public diplomacy and that was in the area of credibility. Public diplomacy relies on being credible to an audience and but in this new environment polls revealed that credibility now rested not with the traditional generators of information – governments and news organizations – but with whoever seems to be 'someone like me.'⁵ To some extent governments and news organizations who wish to be credible had always sought to present themselves as

'someone like' their audiences – politicians have long cultivated a 'man of the people' image – but that requirement has now multiplied, for in cacophony of cyber space a leader has to rely on that audience to actually pass their message along their network. This dimension was further emphasised by the coming of the technologies and practices of Web 2.0.

THE COMING OF WEB 2.0

By 2004 it became clear that the internet was changing and that a new term was needed to describe the quantum leap from the old world of web-pages and e-mail to that of social media and sites based on user-generated content. The English-speaking internet community seized on a term first coined in the specialized literature in 1999 which drew an analogy to the release of the new version of a program: a version 2.0 (two-point-oh).⁶ The term Web 2.0 was used fairly loosely to discuss the explosion of user-generated content on-line including blogs, the crowd-sourced encyclopedia site Wikipedia (founded 2001), and social media sites including Facebook (launched 2004), file-sharing sites like Flickr (launched 2004) and YouTube (launched 2005). By the end of 2006 the new trend was sufficiently established that *Time* magazine to perceptively name 'YOU' as the person of the year – an honor whose previous recipients include a parade of American presidents and world statesmen including Winston Churchill. The special issue dated 25 December carried a reflective surface mounted on a computer screen and the headline: 'You. Yes, you. You control the Information Age. Welcome to your world.'⁷

As the web became a domain for user-generated content a variety of sectors coined varieties of the Web 2.0 formulation for their own use including Library 2.0, Medicine 2.0, Government 2.0 and even Porn 2.0. Public Diplomacy 2.0 – a sub-set of Government 2.0 – was a late entrant in the field and owed its genesis to James K. Glassman, an American journalist and commentator who served as Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy

for the final half of 2008. Although Glassman had a relatively short tenure in Washington DC he was a great enthusiast for the new media and led American public diplomacy into that realm, with multiple initiatives. He spoke a unique opportunity to engage world opinion as never before and challenged the US Department of State to embrace the new technology. Other ministries around the world underwent similar awakenings. Some were early adopters. In the spring of 2007 the Maldives and Sweden opened the first 'embassies' (or cultural centers) in the 'virtual world' of Second Life (launched in 2003).⁸ Many more people read about it in the old newspapers that actually visited on-line but that hardly dimmed the public diplomacy objective. An energetic Israeli diplomat posted to New York City named David Saranga dealt with the unviable task of selling his nation's offensive against Gaza in late 2008 by organizing a press conference on the social networking site Twitter (then just two years old).⁹ The herd thundered in behind them, but to what effect is still not clear.

THE FACE OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY 2.0.

The essential challenge of the Web 2.0 world is that it enabled the preferred source of 'someone like me' to become the principal point of contact for all information. In this regard it is a return to a village environment where ones key interlocutors and sources were the hundred or so 'like you' who made up the village. Now each person could gather their personal 'village' of friends in cyber space without regard for the limitations of geography.¹⁰ This poses a problem for the public diplomacy agency seeking to utilize new media channels. As each individual's cyber domain becomes more tailored to their own tastes and settled into a comfortable niche, the intervention of an outsider will seem increasingly incongruous. Both the US Department of State and Department of Defense have digital engagement teams

participating in on-line discussions and 'correcting' misunderstandings of their interlocutors. This may be counterproductive if the intervention is seen as too at odds with the identity of the site.

The early successes of cyber diplomacy and Public Diplomacy 2.0 were in the eye of the beholder. There were the high profile activities like the US creation of a official State Department blog – DipNote – in 2007; the launch of virtual posts on-line to provide niche information and services for places that lacked a real State Department presence. There were the initiatives to use new media to get information out, such as the hard work to distribute President Obama's Cairo speech of June 2009.¹¹ But the scale of successes is difficult to gauge. The number of friends on an organization's Facebook page became the immediate measure of success rather than any consideration of whether real engagement was taking place as a result of the link. Success in the new media environment is about more than numbers. The site soon accumulated several thousand members though the nature of traffic on the site was of mixed value. More interesting perhaps was the use of You-tube. The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs has launched a number of competitions for user generated films including a contest for the best short film on the theme of 'Democracy is.' Young film makers from around the world took part and their films were seen and circulated on-line. Winners of the first year's competition included film makers from Iran and Nepal. The strategy was empowering voices who could be 'someone like me' and hence credible to the audiences that the US really needed to influence. In a similar vein James Glassman launched a project to assist young international activists of exactly the sort who the necessary credibility in their homelands. He drew together a remarkable range of young people, the most famous being Oscar Morales who in the spring of 2008 had used Facebook to initiate what became an international wave of protests against the FARC guerillas in Colombia. Their conference

resulted in the creation of the Alliance of Youth Movements: a support structure for young people seeking to use new technology to transform their world. Its activities include a website with clear instruction on how to set up a blog or social media campaign.¹² The most elaborate use of the new media was the creation of full blown joint projects in cyber-space. The State Department funded a remarkable collaboration between a school of architecture in California and one in Cairo during which the students worked together on joint projects. When they eventually met they already knew and trusted each other. It was an indication of what was possible. Yet there have been problems. They are clearest in the US official use of Twitter.

TWITTER

Twitter – like Barak Obama – swept to prominence in 2008. The micro-blogging site seemed to offer an ideal technology for engaging foreign audiences. Its 140 character format required the discipline of brevity but was – by design – short enough to be read on the sort of handheld devices that much of the developing world used to access the internet. The United States and many other public diplomacy actors hurried to be part of the Twitter-revolution.

The first problem that the US ran into was the question of exactly how its personnel would conduct themselves on-line. Would they establish a feed in a formal capacity and use it as a platform to post the links for press releases and statements or would they seek to use the site to present themselves to the world, as a way to humanize US foreign policy. A notable public diplomat who took the second course was Colleen Graffey, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State with responsibility of US public diplomacy in Europe, a political appointee with a reputation for stridency in such issues as defense of conditions at the Guantanamo Bay prison. Her Tweets, however, seemed trivial when set against the events happening in the world. An infelicitous message in which she mentioned purchasing a bathing

suit in the midst of a meltdown in the Middle East drew particular scorn.¹³ The new-media experts who joined the Obama administration's foreign policy operation ran into similar problems. Jared Cohen was criticized after he memorably Tweet-ed about a wonderful Frappachino in Syria in June 2010.¹⁴ The real problem with the explosion of State Department Twitter sites was not their personalization but their neglect of a key dimension of the platform.

The essence of Twitter is that it opens a space not only to speak in 140 character bursts but to listen in the same way also. The State Department has paid lots of attention to how many people were following its postings, but generally forgot to think about following anyone themselves. Those who were 'following' others – the new technology super-stars Jared Cohen, Alec Ross and Katie Stanton – turn out to have been following each other, which is to say other people tweeting in the US new media community, rather than the wider world that they were supposed to be engaging on-line. The fixation with 'broadcast mode' in US on-line diplomacy it is a major faux pas. It is the equivalent of going into a party and shouting about one's self and leaving; a behavior which is intolerable even if one is buying all the drinks, which the United States no longer is.

The first duty of a public diplomat is to listen and the new media have an amazing ability to make that listening both easier and visible. If one of the US embassy Twitter sites or one of the ambassadors presently following no one were to begin to survey the on-line environment and click to follow selected writers and sites in their assigned country, each of those writers receive an e-mail saying 'Ambassador X or US embassy Y is now following you on Twitter.' This might actually encourage that writer to reciprocate and follow, raising the possibility that they would re-tweet an embassy message or two and pass them further along their network with the added boost of their local credibility. It would certainly create a lineup of go-to feeds to help

the embassy understand its country, which would be easily taken up by others in the embassy and beyond. Their Twitter-roll could be passed on to anyone else who cared to scroll down and right click. Fortunately, there are some embassies which have realized the potential of Twitter as a tool of listening. The US embassy in New Delhi, for example, is actively following feeds in its region.

A Tweet – like any other piece of information – is welcome to the extent that it is actually of interest to its recipient. There is a great danger that a Twitter feed will become ‘spam’ if it has too much to say on subjects beyond the precise interest of the reader. It is a mistake to insist on one-size fits all in a made to measure world. Twitter offers the potential for an unlimited variety of feeds and rather than expecting various diplomats to become providers of wisdom on every subject under the sun, it makes more sense to use discreet feeds to distribute information on discreet issues which will be of relevance to an audience. Tweet the issue should be the mantra of public diplomats.

As already note the great strength of Web 2.0 is its ability to connect people to others like themselves. With this in mind it is – perhaps – not wholly surprising that the greatest strides in Web 2.0 at the State Department have been internal to the department. Closed sites within the Department accessible only to State Department personnel provide a platform for tasks as diverse as accumulating and disseminating best practice, the construction of a ‘diplopedia’ wiki with background and policy discussion on particular countries, mechanism called ‘communities@state’ mechanisms to bring diplomats together around shared interests, and on-line sounding boards to feedback to management on ways to improve conditions within the department. Richard Boly, director of the Department’s office of e.diplomacy proudly revealed how online suggestions had yielded the brilliant insight that more people would cycle to work if there were showers were located adjacent to the bike storage.¹⁵

THE ILLUSIONS OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY 2.0

The world of communications technology continues to evolve at an exponential rate. Science fact outstrips the science fiction of just a few years ago. At the edge of this vortex of innovation we find the practitioners of Public Diplomacy 2.0 in the foreign ministries of the world typically struggling to pull their risk averse and information-protective agencies into the new era. The achievements of Public Diplomacy 2.0 are notable and worthy of scrutiny but they must not be mistaken for offering some mechanism for mastery of the new environment. To think such would be to confuse a surfer with the wave he rides and to ignore the impact of the wave as it reshapes the shore. The traditional actors diplomatic actors are attempting to get their message out and to engage with the world, but their competitors are doing precisely the same – often with the advantage of a local affinity – and the world is in flux, fragmenting and regrouping into new networks. Secretary of State Clinton has argued that connectivity is an absolute good and pledged the United States to work to make the blessings of the information society as widely available as possible,¹⁶ but the voters of the United States will have to accept that the voices they empower will be diverse and will include some that are critical and even openly hostile.

RULES TO LIVE BY

How then should practitioners of public diplomacy – large and small – respond to this world of WikiLeaks and the wider Web 2.0 environment? The first set is to acknowledge the transformation of the world of which this winter’s on-line shenanigans is just one example. Whether in Tunisia or in Tunbridge Wells individuals are inherently more powerful than they have been at any time in history, more especially as they connect across networks. This global and wired public cannot be ignored and communication aimed only at its leaders will necessarily fall short. The new

technology opens a frightening aspect of chaos – the response of the diplomatic establishment to WikiLeaks had all the hallmarks of panic – but it also offers the opportunity for a new kind of politics and a new kind of diplomacy. The first step for the communicator is to acknowledge that they cannot be all things to all people will not be the most credible voice on every subject to every audience they wish to engage. The task of public diplomacy should evolve from one of speaking to one of partnering around issues with those who share the same objectives and empowering those whose will be credible with their target audience. Some nations are recognizing that being seen to be of help in building a network can be as valuable act of public diplomacy in its own right; hence the Swiss government has established its chain of SwissNex offices at strategic locations around the world to connect innovators with one another, and were appropriate with Switzerland.

In planning new technology ventures I would propose the following. Rule 1: Be relevant. Don't assume that what is important to you will matter to your audience: tweet the issue. Rule 2: Be cooperative. Look for partners and be ready to pass on messages from others and by the same token craft your messages so as to make them easy for others to pass them on.¹⁷ Rule 3: Know your audience. Understand the ways in which they use social media and be consistent with that culture as you would if you were physically entering a conversation. Understand the credibility that comes from being 'like' your on-line interlocutor and try match personnel used in on-line engagement with those being engaged. Rule 4: Be realistic. The new media is not some sort of magic built. Public Diplomacy 2.0 can't make a bad policy good any more than its 1.0 variety could. The prime need is not to say the right thing but to actually be the right thing, especially in an era of growing transparency. Rule 5: Listen. Do not let the 1001 new ways to speak that you have discovered on-line keep you from exploring

1002 new ways to listen. In the old media or the new, public diplomacy begins with listening.

NOTES

- 1 <http://marxists.catbull.com/history/ussr/government/foreign-relations/1917/November/22.htm>
- 2 Quoted in Cull (2008).
- 3 For an anthology of work at this point see Potter (2003).
- 4 The classic argument of this case is Anderson (1983).
- 5 This finding was strongly identified in 2006 by the Edelman trust barometer. They noted a global swing towards peers as the most credible source for information. For report as published in *Ad Week* see, http://www.edelman.com/trust/2008/prior/2006/FullSupplement_final.pdf
- 6 DiNucci (1999).
- 7 *Time* magazine, 25 December 2006.
- 8 http://technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech_and_web/article1832158.ece
- 9 <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/04/weekinreview/04cohen.html>
- 10 With the advent of gadgets like Google translate (launched 2007) even language has become less of a barrier.
- 11 <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/03/multiple-channels-for-obamas-cairo-speech/>
- 12 <http://www.movements.org/>
- 13 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/12/09/AR2008120902774.html>
- 14 <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/30/world/30diplo.html>
- 15 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/the-morningside-post/ediplomacy-ushers-in-a-ne_b_517578.html
- 16 http://technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech_and_web/article6996738.ece
- 17 In technical terms on Twitter this means ensuring that you are using the same #tags as your target audience

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