The Primacy of The Personal Touch

By Hyun Cho

IN A RECENT article in The New York Times sketching the meteoric rise of a new wave of electronic musicians, DJ prodigy Porter Robinson explained the decreasing dependence of artists on traditional career paths. “It’s not the 90s,” he quipped, “we have the Internet.”

Indeed, network-based communication has had a dramatic impact on social and economic activities around the globe. Today, information technology exerts a force that is nearly as ubiquitous and difficult to resist as gravitation and electromagnetism. New forms of interaction and social relations have been created that affect the lives and livelihoods of billions of people, impacting the careers not just of electronic musicians but those in more traditional fields as well.

Diplomacy is no exception. While the traditionally conservative practitioners of diplomacy are rarely early adopters, technological advances have always been used as a means to diplomatic ends. In light of the fascination with social media, it is worth considering how the combination of information technology and social interaction will affect the future of diplomacy.

Among today’s young and tech-savvy populations, diplomacy may connote a staid and inherently analogue world; the word’s Latin root, diploma, refers, after all, to an ancient communication medium — the paper document. Of course, diplomacy is far more than the exchange of official notes. In its broadest sense, diplomacy is the employment of persuasion to find mutually acceptable solutions to common problems. In a narrower sense, diplomacy concerns the practice of international relations, or the art of implementing foreign policy through negotiations. These are typically conducted among nations by official representatives charged with securing the national interest through finding win-win solutions. In this context, Sir Harold Nicolson succinctly defined the role of a diplomat in the 20th century as representation, negotiation, the protection of nationals abroad and information gathering and reporting.

While these roles remain essentially intact in the 21st century, the spread of information technology has brought about important changes in the way that diplomats conduct their business. An argument can be made that globalization and social media may even be eroding our notions of Westphalian sovereignty, “that the normal order of the world looks more like a shifting network of influences that operate across and within borders.”

Nevertheless, the core of diplomacy and the diplomat’s role — official representation, negotiation of win-win solutions, and the protection of nationals — is still in place. What the advent of new technology and social media has changed is how diplomacy is conducted, not its objectives. Information gathering and reporting, for example, has changed substantially but remains as important as ever. Rather than competing with Web sites, diplomats today are focused on qualitative reporting where personal contacts and direct information from a source cannot be replaced by social networking and crowd sourcing.

Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that social media has achieved relevance as a political tool. Recent history has given us two examples — one revolutionary, the other evolutionary — that illustrate the impact of new media on old structures.

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The first, the Arab Spring, illustrates how social media has decreased official influence over public debate and policy while increasing the number and diversity of relevant political actors.

In his analysis of the relationship between media and diplomacy and the role of media in the 2011 Arab revolutions, Philip Selby notes:

Information will reach people, and when it does, it will — in many cases — prove to be liberating and empowering. Even more so is the ability to disseminate that information. The communications-based networks of shared interests that have evolved in recent years are powered by information for which there is growing hunger. Some of these networks are used for disruptive purposes ... But many more are helping to bring about constructive change through democratic mobilization.

Social media provides alternative venues for previously marginalized individuals and groups to make their voices heard, which facilitates wider participation and can result in greater democratic influence over the development of public policy as two-way communication between the government and the governed grows. Social media likewise facilitates the creation of communities of interest from which new stakeholders may emerge to take part in international affairs.

In the context of the Arab revolution, social media provided a virtual public square, comparatively unhindered by physical and political obstructions, that amplified and channeled pent-up frustration with the status quo, contributing to a dramatic reordering of the political structure of at least four countries and serving as a catalyst for change in many others.

The impact of social networking technologies is not always as dramatic. In the case of Rio+20, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development marking the 20th anniversary of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, change was more evolutionary, as measured in participation. The 1992 summit was well attended — 172 nations attended alongside 2,400 representatives from non-governmental organizations. Twenty years later, government participation increased by a healthy margin to 192 countries, but the real story is the boom in attendance by over 40,000 participants from NGOs and more than 1,000 representatives from business and industry at Rio+20.

Of course, social media is not the only explanation for increased participation in international conferences — the rise of public-private partnerships as a viable model for providing certain serv-

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ices has also contributed — but there is no doubt that advances in technology have made it easier for like-minded groups to form, co-ordinate agendas and participate in the policy-making process. It should be noted, however, that while social media may facilitate participation, it does not mean participants will be on an equal footing. Top-level negotiations have always been conducted through carefully orchestrated diplomatic efforts, and it is not hard to imagine that diplomats would still be instrumental in organizing Rio+40 two decades from now. Indeed, it is unlikely that new and emerging media networks are or will be in a position to transform the fundamental nature of diplomacy for three related reasons.

First, the easy access and unfiltered nature of social media networks render the content they produce an unreliable basis for policy-making decisions where careful analysis of information is needed to ensure peace and stability, especially in an increasingly interconnected world where the potential for unintended repercussions is great. To do otherwise could lead to a disastrous outcome. The Franco-Prussian War, for example, was ignited in 1870 by a Prussian misinformation campaign centered on the so-called Ems Dispatch. In a manner designed to provoke France, Otto von Bismarck edited a report on an informal meeting between King Wilhelm I of Prussia and the French ambassador. The telegram was released to the media and subsequently misinterpreted by the French public, which demanded war with Prussia, a hasty decision the country would soon regret.

The second reason is related to the first — social media tend to amplify a problem that Sir Harold Nicolson termed “popular perplexity,” or the state of being that arises when a public’s interest in foreign affairs is as great as it is uninformed. With popular ignorance of foreign affairs caused by a general lack of knowledge, both of “foreign facts” and “foreign mentality,” Nicolson notes that the real problem is not ignorance per se, but “the mental uneasiness created in the public mind by the unfamiliarity and complexity of foreign facts and feelings which precludes them from placing in the expert that confidence which is essential if he is to work with certitude, patience and calm.”

The mental effort to acquire the necessary knowledge to place foreign things into their proper context is significant. Although the use of social media by no means precludes participants from precisely obtaining the kind of knowledge needed to understand and participate in foreign affairs, the fast-paced, unconstrained and self-referential nature of social networks tends to spread rumors and facts with equal aplomb. In a sea of opinions and unchecked facts, one may seem as good as another.

The final reason is that social media simply cannot supplant personal contact as an integral and essential element of official channels of communication between states. Because the stakes are high, international relations have developed over the centuries into an orchestrated form of interaction that produces a kind of certainty crucial to negotiations in good faith — an assurance that what the representatives do and say is binding. Since the dawn of time, rituals with a physical component have developed to provide these assurances — a handshake or signature before witnesses, for example. Even as technological advances create new media for the exchange of ideas, face-to-face encounters will remain the modus operandi of the conversations that affect us most.

The diplomatic community should take social media seriously as a new means of facilitating interactive dialogue. Social network services have changed people’s perceptions and expectations of their governments, introduced new demographics to political processes, and contributed to dramatic social and political change in various parts of the world. And there is no question that diplomats should leverage the networks and technologies of social media to complement traditional foreign policy tools.

Nevertheless, a medium, even an ultra-modern one, can neither replace the objective of diplomacy — securing the national interest in an international order defined by nation states — nor bring the profession to its knees. Just two years after Wikileaks triggered commotion worldwide by releasing over 250,000 classified US diplomatic cables, the diplomatic community has returned to business as usual, albeit with greater appreciation for the pitfalls and potential of the Internet age.

Hyun Cho is Korean Ambassador to Austria and Permanent Representative to the International Organizations in Vienna. He is also President of the Industrial Development Board of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization and Chair of the Hague Code of Conduct against Ballistic Missiles Proliferation.