

Commentary

The world of € in diplomacy and negotiations

By Dr. Nicholas Harkiolakis

One parameter that seems to have been increased nowadays is the number of players in the negotiation games. Creating communities of interest is easy and fast on the Internet and for one thing, now technology controls the way information flows everywhere, making the dissemination of information fast and wide, enabling people to make their own judgments, express their concerns and feelings, and even influence policymakers. This means that the way governments interact is faster and reaches more in almost every part of the world. This requires more accurate and informed responses on the part of negotiators especially in their role as representatives of governments and other establishments.

We shouldn't confuse here the message with the messenger. Although previous technologies like the telegraph, the telephone, the telex, and the fax have affected negotiations and diplomatic practice in their days, they did not have the reach and sophistication of today's and future technologies that are expected to be lightweight, digital, mobile, and highly intelligent. Coming from the post-World War II era when diplomacy was dependent on foreign ministries' agents and their networks, governments and diplomats realize now that there are many more players including non-government players. In a sense, diplomacy reached the masses and allowed experts, non-experts, and interest groups to pursue their individual issues.

A blessing of the increased speed of communication media is that it can bring news fast. Unfortunately it cannot also bring instant comprehension. This means that in cases where the immediacy of information is important, communication speed can be an advantage while in cases where the complexity of an event is high, speed can confuse a decision maker and not provide adequate time to process the information and understand the event. Without understanding, such situations might bring disastrous results. In the case of e-diplomacy, though, one expects that the sooner governments and decision makers know about events, the faster they will evaluate a critical situation and make better informed decisions.

The openness and ease of access to information that the Internet provides also has its negatives. For one thing, governments have to guard their online assets and protect the public from unauthorized sources of information that could potentially hurt their citizens by providing erroneous and unreliable information. This is more difficult to achieve than it sounds because it's almost impossible to effectively police hyperspace (take the case of Wikileaks and the more recent case of the US whistleblower Edward Snowden).

Ruling the Internet is far more difficult and complex than imagined. In the past, centralization was the primary way governments used to control and police states. This is almost impossible to achieve in the virtual world due to the nature of the Internet as a web of interlinked sources, of magnitude that will soon approach the numbers of the actual populations in some states. Nowadays there are even companies that can use the Internet to change the image of ruthless regimes (case of Racepoint Group who took over Gaghafi as client and the authoritarian regime in Rwanda and worked on reversing their bad image) and make them appear progressive and democratic.

In the case of government and media, we now see that the long-standing symbiotic relationship between them is changing in ways that are difficult to predict. In some cases, we can observe strong dependencies between them as the media face increased competition from local and international players, while in others we see a more hostile relationship as the governments are trying to “narrowcast”/personalize information and services to citizens. Professional bodies like bar associations and chambers of commerce, among others, have always had in their agenda to protect and promote their interests with governments. In the case of government and non-state actors, the situation is very different since groups in general tend to be more organized than individuals.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), for one thing, when assisted by technology are much more active in forming opinions and influencing society than in the past. As a result of their participation in the commons these organizations have been able to organize citizens on a global scale and affect the way diplomacy works. NGOs are eager to establish themselves as major players in the formation of policies. In that respect they are strong adopters of the technology and exploiters of its offerings. The reputation of established NGOs attracts governments and public to their online spaces and helps establish and expand electronic communities of various sizes around current issues and affairs. These build-ups of networks form expanding, living organisms that distribute processing and decision making. With the use of technology these organizations can organize themselves locally and internationally to act cohesively to influence the public and organize demonstrations and protests (Greenpeace, against G8, and so on). In conclusion, the environment is shaped by technology and has redefined the primarily hierarchical nature of diplomacy to a more flat organization of players. Everyone involved can have a voice that grows louder by technology’s amplification. One can resemble it with a protest, where instead of a leading person having the speakerphone, we have everybody with a speakerphone.

Because influences are directly affected by what they influence, a loop structure exists that is difficult to predict and control. E-negotiations nowadays can be used as a pressure point to achieve the desired outcome prior to the commencement of actual negotiations. This should be done, though, with great care since any information someone posts can be counterattacked with opposing positions from opponents. First priority is to ensure that information is readily available online, distributed fast, reaches as wide an audience as possible, and is customized to the needs of each audience. Different content should be delivered to parties based on their interests and

their degree of involvement. It makes no sense to send to a wide audience, with a superficial interest on a case, details that do not interest them and will appal them. Contrary to that, in cases where there is great expression of interest one should present more detail and allow for a more interactive form of communication and consider feedback as a valuable source of input to the process and issue at hand. Online participation should be used as leverage to assist other forms of negotiations.