SMALL STATES IN A NEW ERA OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: NEW ZEALAND AND DIGITAL DIPLOMACY

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In the globalising world, states compete with each other and with non-state actors to project positive messages of attractiveness, credibility and capability. The brief explores New Zealand's current approach to digital diplomacy and its potential for diplomatic outreach.

Key findings

- NZ's MFAT's use of digital diplomacy is proactive and developing.
- Due to the increasing limited nature of resources in foreign policy, creative and out-of-box solutions are required
- Diversifying digital media campaigns results in diversifying "brands/images/narratives" of New Zealand: New Zealand is moving on from not only cultivating a "clean and green" image, but is committed to creating new images such as being open, innovative and attractive to business.

Executive summary

What is the problem?

Traditionally small states have been seen as suffering from a 'power deficit' (Goetschel, 1998, p. 15) in the globalising world. In this analysis, we argue "new diplomacy" (Heine 2006) – i.e. diplomacy that accounts for globalisation and technological innovations, which navigates relations through networking between diverse targets: state actors; non-state civil society actors; media; elites and experts; and ordinary citizens – allows even small states to overcome the tyranny of their size and their perceived powerlessness. The challenge for small states in shaping international politics is to create and secure networks with other actors at state and non-state levels and to project attractive and credible images/narratives to the target audiences globally. Yet, small states' foreign ministries typically access only a small pool of resources in order to conduct effective diplomacy in a multistakeholder setting.

Small states and new media: What should be done?

Digital media offer opportunities for small states in this respect – their immediacy, easy access, global outreach and in-built interactivity suggest a chance to cleverly combine cost-effective strategies with the widest outreach to key state and non-state stakeholders targeted by diplomatic production. We

argue that a range of digital channels and frequency of appearing in them are only a part of successful outreach. Digital media outreach is of impact when it 1) formulates, 2) communicates and 3) ensures reception of a convincing "narrative" about an IR actor – as an actor that finds its place in a world order, an actor that has a distinct identity in the word (ideally emulated), and an actor who is able to produce policies that are recognisable and followed.

It is important that digital diplomacy is conscious about carefully crafting its messages with these three dimensions in mind, ensuring alignment between them and being recipient-orientated. To ensure the reception of such messages by external counterparts, a smart digital diplomacy strategy will also ensure its local/cultural resonance and emotive charge, in addition to visibility and narrative alignment. We also argue that being coherent, consistent and credible is important in making sure the conveyed message is heard. Ultimately, effective digital diplomacy is aimed at establishing a two-way *dialogue* between senders and receivers, potentially leading to *meaningful collaboration*, rather than getting stuck in a *monologue* mode, which is argued to be not as effective if used exclusively. It is here where the benefit of interactivity of the digital channel becomes critical for assessment and measurement.

Analysis

In the modern age, the quest for image and reputation challenges traditional diplomacy. Changing global paradigms require a critical reflection on the public's contribution to international relations as "International relations today have […] become public" (Andrlić, and Gustović-Ercegovac, 2012, p.6). For Andrlić, and Gustović-Ercegovac, it means that "many groups within the public … demand their say in decision-making processes" (Ibid.) and "politicians who wish to see their foreign policies materialized need the support not only of their own citizens, but also of the foreign public" (Ibid.).

This situation leads state actors in IR to face the need to "re-engage popular support and understanding" (Odins, cited in van Ham, 2008, p. 129) – a demand that prescribes nation-states to "use the power of branding to deliver a message about their value and values to the widest possible audience" (Ibid.). One medium that warrants such large-scale audience is the Internet. According to some sources, by the end of 2015, the number of users reached almost 3.5 billion, providing access and potential outreach to about 46% of the world's population (We are Social, 2016).

The Internet has irrevocably changed the environment in which diplomacy functions. According to DiploFoundation (2016), "new topics from the ICT field have found their place on the agendas of international meetings. … [D]iplomats increasingly use new ICT tools to facilitate their everyday work. And … the Internet and other technologies have created a whole new environment in which diplomacy operates" (p. 139).

This is of special interest for our study. The Internet has "boosted the number, variety and influence of multiple non-state actors in world politics" (DiploFoundation, 2016, p. 140), meaning that there is a cacophony of voices competing to be heard on the world stage. These include "non-governmental organisations (NGOs), diasporas, corporations, interest groups, academics, influential activists including bloggers and tweeters, hactivists and terrorist networks" (Ibid). This polyphonic, and often instant, input into diplomatic affairs and international relations presents an opportunity – and a challenge – for the international policy- and decision making.

With e-diplomacy becoming a mundane part of the diplomatic portfolio, state-level diplomatic practitioners are challenged with ensuring adequate resources and training for regular and meaningful communications on various internet platforms, in a time of increasing cost-cutting in foreign affairs. Arguably, the world leader, the United States in 2012 ""had more than 150 fulltime personnel working on internal and external e-tools such as social media and wikis" (Hanson, 2012, cited in DiploFoundation, 2016, p. 143). Such a high level of resources is impossible in the MFAs of small states, yet there are financial benefits of employing social media. E-tools may present cost-saving opportunities for small states.

Why does this matter to NZ?

In this analysis, we offer a broad scope of New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade's (MFAT) use of social media. Future research intends to focus on case studies on the New Zealand narrative(s) being broadcast in social media. MFAT has recognised the potential offered via 'new' digital media and is quickly adapting to the changing environment. In the last five years, their digital media strategies have evolved, with MFAT currently employing three people for this specific field, including a digital strategist, a digital content advisor, and a digital analyst. In addition, extra people are involved for specific campaigns (e.g. Helen Clark's bid for the UN Secretary General role). In the past five years, MFAT has gone from one social media account to currently having 90. The platforms include: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube (and Yoku (Chinese version of YouTube) in China), Weibo and Youchat.[1]

MFAT is very aware about choosing the right forum for the intended audience they are trying to communicate with. In other words, Twitter may be used in order to interact with diplomatic and business elites, while Facebook is viewed as more relevant for the general public. The two Instagram accounts are from posts in South Korea and the Philippines. The accounts may be connected to both institutional posts as well as individuals (ambassadors) with the latter adding more personality to posts.

We argue that MFAT acknowledges the importance of diversification and the alignment of narratives in order to ensure a coherent, consistent and credible message. For instance, using the services of NZstory in to provide coherency, consistency and narrative alignment, at the same time as acknowledging the importance of local knowledge for informing how information is constructed and distributed.

Multilevel interaction and cooperation was also viewed as currently important and as having potential in the future. First, interaction with non-state actors, including NGOs (Volunteer Services Abroad) and high profile people (Valerie Adams' Pacific tour) was used to positively highlight the role of MFAT. Secondly, sometimes New Zealand was mentioned in tweets by other IR actors (the US, the UK, and the EU in mine clearing). Thirdly, individual New Zealand posts would sometimes cooperate with each other (Navy ship travelling through South East Asia), thus highlighting the importance of having a strong regional identity. All of these levels of cooperation were seen as cultivating an outward looking and connected New Zealand and are important for making New Zealand's voice louder in the world.

Finally, regarding interactive strategies and challenges, Donald Trump's use of social media is demonstrative of how explosive social media posts can be. One acknowledged challenge for diplomats using social media is the speed of communication and the expectation that it will be

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[1] https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/follow-us/.

interactive. For instance, if a negative (or even positive) reaction is garnered, it may take time to go through the necessary channels in order to get a response. This puts pressure on resources and the time.

What should NZ do?

Policy advice points gained from previous research in this field

1. React to the evolution of this diplomacy field
2. Consider internal/external axis for NZ digital diplomacy. MFAT has both an internal and external dimension – it must focus on communicating with both New Zealanders as well as a foreign market. Both areas of reception are important for MFAT's effectiveness and legitimacy.
3. Target priority partners and themes. This is already being done effectively through FTAs, Renewable Energy, Ocean Diplomacy.
4. Target key stakeholders for New Zealand's interests
5. Consciously devise *aligning narratives* on systemic, identity and policy issue levels telling a logical and consistent story "How do we stand out as a smaller state?" in economic field and in policy sphere. However, the consideration "How do they think of us?" must go first when narratives are devised. It must be a recipient-orientated approach.
6. Exercise systematic *listening* to how NZ is perceived -- location-, region-, time- and issue-specific – should be the first input into the any digital (or public) diplomacy campaign by NZ. Otherwise, resources could be misallocated, expectations are over- or under-estimated. Listening activities should scope public and elite opinion and analyse traditional and new media.
7. Use digital media messages to deliver a message with *local resonance* including linguistic skills – e.g. we are looking for the right stakeholders who want to find solutions for the same problems we have; we want find the common ground, and we are committed to define the common ground to do it together. Diversification of the narratives/brand communicated by digital diplomacy. NZ's brand "Clean and green" is still an effective brand for the economic/tourist/environment spheres but in the policy sphere it should be different/complemented by other images and narratives. There are signs of new successful narratives. Ideas include: "clean and green," "open, innovative and attractive to businesses," "reliable credible principled competent IR actor" (through NZ's profile in the UN), "peaceful NZ", "sustainable NZ", "bi-cultural NZ", or "independent NZ"
8. Provide on-going training for HQ and field staff, exchanging expertise within MFAT learning from the best practices, with your own non-state actors/experts as well as with other states and political entities (e.g. the UN, the EU, NATO, etc.)
9. Ensure cost-effective strategies:
    a. While building up your reputation, use existing rankings in order to reinforce your case and story you are telling (e.g. the ranking of "soft powers" by ComresGlobal – NZ is #16 in it; or Transparency International on corruption -- NZ is among the least corrupt countries in the world, etc.).
    b. Take your own non-state actors on board (companies, celebrities, etc.) and explore if you could use their digital tools or explore synergies. The case study of Valerie Adams is a successful example of this.
    c. Use others to tell your story – use your international networks and influential personalities with their digital networks. NZ digital diplomacy experts are doing this already, but only occasionally.

d. Build up your to visual identity and visual content, following a major shift to visual in digital media which is now the preferred medium for communication and reception.

e. Surprise and catch attention (e.g. tweets by a cat in a Dutch embassy in Africa, or a penguin tweeting from the UK's HMS 'Protector' going to NZ from Antarctica, etc.)

10. Use various training opportunities to update skills (e.g. enrol into ASEF's annual DIPLO course "Public Diplomacy" with a section on digital diplomacy. The course is designed for diplomats from Asia-Pacific (including NZ as an ASEM member) and Europe tasked with public and digital diplomacy outreach).

Conclusion

The nature of diplomacy has changed dramatically in the last two decades, with foreign ministries required to adapt to these changes. The emergence of e-technology offers both a challenge and an opportunity for small states like New Zealand. On the one hand, the changing nature of diplomacy and communication in a globalised world means there are now more voices competing to be heard on a world stage. On the other, e-technology allows communication with people previously out of reach of traditional diplomacy. New Zealand's foreign affairs mechanisms have recognised the importance of social media and has implemented some important and necessary changes to the roles of Ambassadors and diplomats.