

Embracing Uncertainty: diplomacy and disruption

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Freedom Fighter?

Authority hates uncertainty. Big business and government feel safest when life is predictable and stable. Change implies a risk that your grip on power will be weakened. And unexpected change is the worst kind of all. But if uncertainty is permanent, can systems adapt?

That is one of the underlying challenges to American diplomacy in the Digital Age according to a US State Department official who held a Chatham House rules seminar at POLIS/LSE.

For the advocates of digital diplomacy in the State Department, and that includes Hillary Clinton herself apparently, the recent uprisings across the Middle East were a welcome distraction from the flak they had been getting over WikiLeaks.

Assange's revelations published through the Guardian and New York Times did not bring US diplomacy to a halt. 'Cablegate' did not actually expose any deep contradictions or criminal acts in US foreign policy. But it was 'hugely damaging to the integrity' of America's diplomatic service. It ruined individual careers but more importantly it disrupted internal systems and external relationships. No wonder many in the US political establishment were cursing the power of the Internet.

The State Department official told us that Wikileaks reveals the brittleness of the balance between necessary secrecy of government and the freedom of the press. He said, memorably, that WikiLeaks was like 'a cartoon grand piano dropped down upon that arrangement'. A lot of noise and not a little chaos.

But what happened in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere in early 2011 was more profound and even more unexpected than WikiLeaks. These technology-fuelled protest movements show the power of new technologies to disrupt economies and power. The American politicians who hated the Internet holding them to account now found a new global reason to like online democracy.

The State Department is not a cyber-utopian institution. But it is convinced that this is different from previous technological challenges to the status quo. The Internet is more powerful at amplifying political forces because it connects personal, mass and economic communication networks to one connected communications system – the Internet. This makes these networks more powerful but also more complex, vulnerable and unstable. Whether its WikiLeaks or Wael Ghnomin on Facebook, The Internet is the Uncertainty Principle in Global Relations.

So if you can't close down the Internet, what do you do, as a diplomat?

[In a previous post](#) I discussed how difficult it is to intervene in the way that governments previously would have done to control the influence of a critical factor in foreign policy like this. You can put your embassies on Twitter, you can have a State Department Facebook page. But how do you understand, let alone influence the global flow of political communications online?

The paradox here is that it is actually in the interest of the USA to protect the uncertainty principle, if it really believes in the free market for ideas. If it did shut down WikiLeaks, then China and Iran would be given carte blanche to censor whatever offended them online, too. So instead you spend millions on helping share technologies that allow people to circumvent censorship. You work to come up with agreed standards for countries and corporations to keep the Internet free.

But above all, you accept that life will never be certain again.

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The digital diplomats in Washington have worked that one out. However, my guess is that the guys handling trade or military issues will still feel hostile to online transparency or accountability. Will it mean that systems like the State Department will become more open? Not much. They will keep fewer secrets but they will be kept better. Modern diplomacy requires rapid, wide distribution of information so there will still be vast exchanges of data and that will remain vulnerable, but perhaps not to the detriment of efficiency. Better managed (i.e. less) secrecy may even make the bureaucracy more intelligent and focused.

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What really matters though for American diplomacy (and every other democratic foreign policy agency) is how it relates to the new information context. Yes, the Internet brings Uncertainty. But it also offers extraordinary opportunities to disseminate messages, to energise political activism and to listen to what people are saying directly unmediated by their governments or mainstream media. For centuries diplomats have sought a way of gathering intelligence in real time, well here it is.

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