Digital Diplomacy and US Foreign Policy

Alec Ross*
US Department of State, 2201 C Street NW, Washington, DC 20520, United States
@Alecjross | facebook.com/alec.ross1

Received: 8 July 2011; accepted 11 July 2011

Summary
We live in an era of pervasive connectivity. At an astonishing pace, much of the world’s population is joining a common network. The proliferation of communications and information technology creates very significant changes for statecraft. But we have to keep in mind that the Internet is not a magic potion for political and social progress. Technology by itself is agnostic. It simply amplifies the existing sociologies on the ground, for good or ill. And it is much better at organizing protest movements than organizing institutions to support new governments in place of those that have been toppled. Diplomacy in the twenty-first century must grapple with both the potential and the limits of technology in foreign policy, and respond to the disruptions that it causes in international relations.

Keywords
digital diplomacy, connectivity, mobile phones, technology, people-to-people

Global Connectivity and Changes for Statecraft
We live in a time of widespread connectivity. Much of the world’s population is — and with amazing speed — joining a common network. There are more than five billion mobile phones on the planet today1 — a 20 per cent jump from two years ago. The number of mobile phones in Africa now exceeds the number in Western Europe.2 The mobile penetration rate in sub-Saharan Africa has increased from 12 per cent in 2005 to 42 per cent in 2010.3 Add to this the two billion Internet connections worldwide and the prospect that this number will

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double in the coming years. Mobile handsets and increasingly sophisticated computing devices are proving to be powerful and disruptive tools for economic growth, political expression and social change.

The proliferation of communications and information technology creates very significant changes for statecraft. It is a potential game-changer in the field of development. In addition, it raises a host of new policy issues around Internet governance that must be deliberated in multinational institutions. Moreover, it also changes the principal instrument within international relations: diplomacy. Traditionally, diplomatic engagement consisted largely of government-to-government interactions. In some instances, it was from government to people, such as with international broadcasting in the twentieth century. With the advent of social media and the rapid increase in mobile penetration, however, this engagement now increasingly takes place from people to government and from people to people. This direct link from citizens to government allows diplomats to convene and connect with non-traditional audiences, and in turn allows citizens to influence their governments in ways that were not possible ten years ago. This has been a key characteristic of the Obama administration, dating back to President Obama’s earliest moments in office, when a videotaped message on the occasion of Nowruz, the Persian New Year, became a viral phenomenon in Iran. The video was posted and reposted to more than 60,000 blogs and watched by more than one-third of the citizens of Iran.

Hillary Clinton has made this a centrepiece of her tenure as US Secretary of State, creating an aggressive innovation agenda that she terms ‘21st Century Statecraft’. This agenda complements traditional foreign policy tools with newly innovated and adapted instruments of statecraft that fully leverage the networks, technologies and demographics of our networked world. Networks are a defining feature in the new global power structure. The very clear evidence of recent years demonstrates that network technologies devolve power away from the nation-state and large institutions. And they empower individuals and small institutions. The implications of these shifts are profound, and they will only grow as these tools become more ubiquitous and powerful.

Technology’s Role in Responding to Crises

In some areas, the role of technology is dramatic. Connection technologies offer an important opportunity to improve how citizens and governments can prepare for, respond to, and recover from major disasters. Most concretely, we can see it in the way that disaster relief funds are raised in a crisis. Whereas historically major donations came in from a handful of wealthy sources, today we see the ability for anyone and everyone to be empowered to contribute, to share, and to impact directly those who have previously been unreachable on a global scale.