Technology and Public Diplomacy

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Overview

My core argument is that we are guilty of:

- Massively under-estimating the rapidity, depth and impact of technological change.
- The influence this has had on global society and the practice of international relations.

And that a better understanding of power and potential of technology has to be firmly at the heart of any attempt to create a transformational public diplomacy. I am going to focus in particular on the social technologies that are transforming the world's media, but also highlight the impact of broader technological changes that are the central drivers of globalisation.

New technologies and public diplomacy

Let me start by saying a little about my own experience of experimenting with new technologies for public diplomacy.

I am not entirely sure that I can prove this claim, but I think I ran the first blog to report live from a major international political event – at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002.

Then, I was part of a press pack that numbered in the thousands. Apart from some of the savvier journalists I met from the United States, none of the other media people I talked to had heard about blogging. And when I explained, they were convinced within a few minutes that *it would never catch on*, and that 'amateurs' like me would certainly never have an impact on the professional media sphere.

Three years later, when blogging was very much the rage, I set up another one called World Bank President that existed for one purpose only: to cover the gossip and intrigue that surrounded the selection of a successor to James Wolfensohn (as you'll remember, Paul Wolfowitz was chosen, but soon got the boot – so we had to take the site out of mothballs to cover the search for his successor).

This time our site was used widely by the media as a source, indicating the influence that even a niche website can have. In three years, journalists had gone from pooh-poohing the new trend to making extensive use of it.

But we only realised the impact of the site when James Wolfensohn himself told his staff: "I should tell you I took to the meeting with the [US Treasury Secretary John Snow] a print out of World Bank President and we used that as the basis of our discussion. So if any of you want to be up to date on the inside scoop, check World Bank President, and you'll probably know as much as I do."

It was clear that the media was changing. This was how Jeff Jarvis, a new media pioneer, described our second outing with Daily Summit in 2003:

> "Citizens' media meets bulldog journalism; finds the future of news. I'm witnessing the future of journalism unfold over at DailySummit.net. There, a bunch of

> webloggers…are covering the U.N. World Summit on Information Society with a vibrancy, immediacy, passion, imagination, doggedness, and openness you simply won't find in big media...
>
> This is what journalism is meant to be. This isn't some new form of journalism. This is the result of a few centuries of the evolution of journalism. We, the readers, get to ask the questions we want to ask of those in power and we get answers. That's what it's all about, isn't it?"

Social technology

It shouldn't surprise us that it's taking some time to realise the full impact of the social technologies of course. There is nothing new about a prolonged unwillingness to recognise the implication and potential of a new technology.

By way of example, let's look at the story of powered flight.

The Wright brothers were regarded as tinkerers, not proper engineers, or (god forbid), scientists. The first published eye witness account of their groundbreaking flight was not in any learned journal or leading newspaper. Rather curiously, it appeared in the 1905 edition of *Gleanings in Bee Culture*.

A year later, a distinguished American scientist went on record to say that:

> "The demonstration that no possible combination of known substances, known forms of machinery, and known forms of force can be united in a practicable machine by which men shall fly long distances through the air, seems to the writer as complete as it is possible for the demonstration of any physical fact to be."

Despite the fact that pioneers were already flying, he could not accept the existence of something so disruptive to his preconceptions. And then, even when the *existence* of flight was accepted, it took much longer to realise what the transformative implications of being able to fly would be.

Because technologies are not really just technologies, they are forces that *enable unfamiliar types of social organisation*. That is the route of their particular, peculiar and pervasive power.

We see this very clearly in the open source movement, whose implications are still unfolding. Again, many experts were long convinced that large scale, decentralised networks could not create complex and successful pieces of software. Then came Linux, the operating system that now runs on around one in eight of the world's servers and, incidentally, half of the world's supercomputers.

It, and similar open source projects, were built around a reversal of the basic concept of what it took to build secure and effective software. Rather than tightly control development through small teams located in the centre, why not distribute responsibility as widely as possible? This is best summed by what is often known as Linus's Law – after Linus Torsvald the 'father' of Linux:

> "Given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow."

The content revolution

Once we'd accepted that collaborative creation of *code* was possible, we remained resistant to the idea that the same trick could be pulled for *content*. I remember giving a talk in a setting just like this one, in the early days of Wikipedia. The audience just *knew* that it wouldn't work.

Love it or hate it, no-one would say that now. To quote from the Wikipedia article about Wikipedia:

> "As of April 2008, Wikipedia attracts 684 million visitors annually reading over 10 million articles in 253 languages, comprising a combined total of over 1.74 billion words for all Wikipedias. The English Wikipedia edition passed the 2,000,000-article mark on September 9, 2007."

Let me add a few more figures – because I want to illustrate how light the central control of this effort is. If I asked you to create a top ten website, what kind of budget do you think you'd need? I think most people would be looking to venture capitalists for tens of millions just in seed funding.

Now let's look at the Wiki model. I was looking at the accounts for 2006/2007 for the Wikimedia Foundation, which operates eight other major websites in addition to Wikipedia. It costs just over $2m to run in the year. As those of you who hold budgets will know, that is peanuts. And even then it represents substantial inflation – operating costs for the previous year were just $700k.

All of this money has come from private donation. The whole innovation, in other words, has happened without the participation of the traditional economic system.

Brain shift

Now I want to turn briefly to a second and very common type of objection to new technologies – that they are a terrible waste of time. This question was addressed with great gusto by Clay Shirky recently, who had been asked 'Where do people find the time?' (by a TV producer, of all people).

Enraged, Shirky sat down with an engineer from IBM and tried to work out how long it had taken to create Wikipedia. It's a rough calculation but Shirky reckons it's right within the order of magnitude. The estimate: 100 million hours of human thought.

Is that a lot? Well not of course if you compare it with other activities. It turns out that this is roughly the same amount of time that Americans spend, each weekend, watching *just the adverts* they're exposed to on television. Shirky's point is that we're in the middle of a massive redistribution of the way we use our brains. In the 20th century, in the rich world, unprecedented amounts of leisure time were opened up by better health, smaller families and changing working patterns. At first, we had few choices in what we could do with that time.

In the UK, at least, two main activities have predominated – drinking and TV.

Now the drinking is not new. Shirky points out that the last time we went through a change of this magnitude was the Industrial Revolution. For a period, then, England was awash with gin. TV is new, but gradually it is being displaced as our choices multiply.

I want to quote Shirky at length:

> "This is something that people in the media world don't understand. Media in the 20th century was run as a single race – consumption. How much can we produce? How much can you consume? Can we produce more and you'll consume more? And the answer to that question has generally been yes. But media is actually a triathlon, it's three different events. People like to consume, but they also like to produce, and they like to share.
>
> And what's astonished people who were committed to the structure of the previous society, prior to trying to take this surplus and do something interesting, is that they're discovering that when you offer people the opportunity to produce and to share, they'll take you up on that offer. It doesn't mean that we'll never sit around mindlessly watching Scrubs on the couch. It just means we'll do it less."

Shirky comes up with another very provocative calculation. He reckons people connected to the Internet watch around a trillion hours of television every year. If just one percent of that time were to be freed up, that would be enough to create the equivalent of another 100 Wikipedias.

That's a huge amount of potential for future transformation.

The dark side

Now I don't want to sound like a wild-eyed enthusiast for technology – though in my heart of hearts, I am – so let's inject a note of caution. There's no guarantee at all that this time will be used in a positive and constructive fashion.

Recently I visited the Myspace page of a young American girl who had achieved momentary notoriety for being filmed by her friends savagely bullying one of their supposed friends. On her page, the girl made it crystal clear that she had hardly any interest in television ("I don't really watch t.v. LMAO"). Unlike the teenager of just a decade previously, it was far from the centre of her social life. She was a budding content creator, however. She shared content by instinct. It's just that she did so with shocking and asocial results.

This trend has implications that stretch well beyond American high schools.

In Nigeria, at the moment, the militant Henry Okah is standing trial. According to John Robb – whose website, Global Guerrillas, I warmly recommend – Okah orchestrated the loss of around $30bn of oil production, an unknown proportion of which he stole and sold on the black market. But he did this, in the most part, from the safety of South Africa, where he ran an insurgency in the Niger delta by mobile phone (there are weak signals across the delta) and email.

In Robb's words, Okah "pioneered aspects of a system of warfare that will plague nation-states and their corporate allies for decades."

Okah is part of a new trend of networked insurgents. These insurgents do two things:

- They use new technologies to achieve results.
- But at the same time, they exploit weaknesses in technological systems to achieve their impact.

They show how technological development creates new opportunities for instability – especially in the period when change is very rapid.

The transformational diplomacy agenda

So let me take this back to transformational public diplomacy.

We live in a world where:

- There are growing numbers of people.
- These people are connected to each other in growing numbers of ways.
- The people, increasingly, are located in the poor world.
- The connections are either in the rich world or among populations that are developing rapidly.

The result is already an exhilarating transformation – an unprecedented flowering of human potential and knowledge creation, as tools that were once the preserve of the elite are put into the hands of the many. This transformation is only just beginning. But it is also almost certain to lead to greater instability – as we layer complex system on top of complex system, each one liable to sudden and unpredicted shifts.

To use Robb's words again, individuals and groups are becoming 'hyperempowered' – and they will use that power for good and ill. So how should diplomats react? This clearly provides material for a Wikipedia or two, but let me close with four points.

Technology and transformational public diplomacy

First, it is essential that governments *take technology seriously* as they struggle to invent a new kind of diplomacy. This issue is not about websites or blogs, or what an organisation says in cyberspace. Rather it's about trends that will reorder the structure of global society, the relationship between government and citizen, and the nature of the risks we face.

Second, we need to reconfigure government organisations and *set free the people* who work in them. We live in a world where there's a tremendous premium on the 'human voice', but our organisations tend to be stiff, robotic and inflexible. Often this rests on concerns about who should be 'authorised' to interact with the outside world. David

Kilcullen, General Petraeus's counter-insurgency advisor, shows us a glimpse of what is possible. He blogged on and off throughout his time in Iraq.

Third, we need to increase *awareness of technologies* among serving diplomats, especially the most senior ones. There is only one way of doing this – through direct experience. The military understands this well. New skills can't be taught in classrooms. You need exercises and games. We should be putting diplomats through 'bootcamps' where they get an opportunity to work with social technologies and understand for themselves how low the barriers to entry have become.

Fourth, we should be thinking strategically about the types of objectives we should be looking to new technologies to deliver. In a recent paper for the Progressive Governance Summit, my colleague Alex Evans and I identified three broad categories of objective. These are creating:

- *Shared awareness* – using technology to facilitate conversations across geographical, organisational and sectoral borders that lead to a 'deep consensus' about how global problems can most effectively be tackled.

- *Shared platforms* – using this shared awareness to build a loose coalition that clusters around a preferred palette of solutions and campaigns as a network for change.

- *Shared operating systems* – exploiting the potential that technology offers to develop new types of institution capable of managing global risk more effectively. A stable climate, for example, will not be achieved without the information technologies needed to run a global carbon market, monitor attempts to control deforestation, or regulate national emissions.