Diplomacy in Era of Digital Governance: Theory and Impact

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Abstract

Relationship among nations is not isolated from the rising impact of digital technology. The wave of digital revolution across the globe has introduced new thinking in the relationship among comity of nations. This thinking reflects concern on e-diplomacy as new tool for nation to nation engagement. The preponderance of digital technology in this process is collapsing walls of barrier that ever restricted interactions and relations among States, International institutions, organisation (governmental and non-governmental) and leaders especially in foreign relation and in knowledge sharing. This article therefore argues that while the benefits of digitalization of diplomatic relations and services among nations include integration, improved access and inclusiveness, internet and computer compromised nations and persons are restricted from its full utilization because of digital divide. The Actor Network Theory (ANT) as applied in this study illustrates the interrelatedness in access and feedback associated in foreign relations, The conclusion is that southern nations are peripheral in the network of e-diplomacy

Keywords: E-diplomacy and Digital Communication Technologies

1. Introduction

The world is made-up of many States that operate interdependently sovereign across the globe. These States are characterised by variety of people and culture. The process and efforts by which these States, engage each other to address issues of common interest and concern is achieved through diplomatic engagement. This engagement which includes services and negotiations under the instrumentality of national interest is enshrined in the foreign policy of various State. While these policy directions are strongly conditioned, constrained and influenced by non-state actors, the patterns of international engagement by state and non- actors are changing due to revolution in information and communication technologies. Be that as it may, diplomatic communication is sin the age of an expanding infosphere and the exponential growth of internet use, all these have enabled more people and states to exchange more data and ideas with increasing speed.This study upon this introduction discusses; The nature of Diplomacy and E-diplomacy ,Theoretical explanation of E-diplomacy, Impact of Digital communication technology in Diplomatic relation and Weakness and threat.

2. Understanding Diplomacy and E-Diplomacy

Diplomacy is a way to set and achieve foreign policy goals. In this respect, the basic tasks of diplomats have been to provide information and to negotiate" (Christodoulides, Nikos,2005).It is "the conduct of relations between sovereign states through the medium of officials based at home or abroad". It is "the principle means by which states communicate with each other, enabling them to have regular and complex relations. It is the communications system of the international society" (Berridge and James, 2003). Then e-diplomacy is the new tool of that communication system. Using electronic tools in diplomacy serves two functions: It is a vehicle that enhances communication between states (diplomacy: i.e. diplomatic representation and negotiation), and it is also a vehicle that carries a nation's foreign policy message across, both within and outside its physical boarders (foreign policy: i.e. public diplomacy, consular diplomacy and all the other buzz words) (www.diplomacy.edu/courses/faculty/). These functions are mostly performed by diplomatic mission.

Diplomatic missions are expected to protect the interests of the home country. This may be carried out in various ways. The missions exercise vigilance on the many happenings in the host country in order to ensure that no action or situation could possibly have an adverse effect on the home country. They can attempt to retain a constant level of harmony between the home and host country by taking the necessary precautions to avoid any source of conflict between the countries or remedy any uncomfortable situations should they arise. This function goes hand in hand with another function; to act as a source of information to the home country. The Information may consist of details of the political, commercial, economic or cultural environment of the host country, together with developments and changes.

The electronic component of transmission of diplomatic services is referred as E-diplomacy. Therefore, E-diplomacy as William Assanvo (2010) defines is "a new diplomacy resulting from the association of ICTs and other electronic tools to conduct diplomatic activities. (diplomatic information, communication, representation,

negotiation, etc.).” He says that “in the term 'e-Diplomacy', the key element is not electronic but diplomacy. E-Diplomacy remains Diplomacy not electronics. The e-diplomacy assumes and emphasizes the 'electronic' as a tool that should serve a state's national interests in diplomatic relations.

Essentially digitalization of Diplomatic mission keeps the services competitive as there is increase of diplomatic missions providing services through the internet. To this end and given that traditional methods of diplomacy are being substituted by new ones, greatly influenced by the Internet as a main protagonist, the next section discusses theoretical framework of analysis that explains the characteristics and trends that drive cyber culture in diplomacy.

3. Theoretical Framework: Analysis and Linkage to Diplomatic Relations

The study adopts **Actor-Network Theory (ANT)** as an explanatory framework of analysis.The Actor Network Theory (ANT), also known as enrolment theory or the sociology of translation emerged during the mid-1980s; primarily with the work of Bruno Latour (1987), Michel Callon (1986), and John Law (1992).ANT is also broadly referred as the Social Shaping of Technology (Williams and Edge, 1996). ANT is a conceptual frame for exploring collective sociotechnical processes, whose spokespersons have paid particular attention to science and technological activity. ANT suggests that the work of science is not fundamentally different from other social activities. ANT privileges neither natural (realism) nor cultural (social constructivism) accounts of scientific production, asserting instead that science is a process of heterogeneous engineering in which the social, technical, conceptual, and textual are puzzled together (or juxtaposed) and transformed (or translated).

At the root of this theory are the 'actor' and 'actant' who form relationships with each other. The 'actor' in this theory refers to the agency of non-humans (machines, texts, and hybrids, among others). Actors are combinations of symbolically invested “things,”“identities,” relations, and inscriptions, networks capable of nesting within other diverse networks.

The 'actant” is any agent, collective or individual, that can associate or disassociate with other agents. Actants enter into networked associations, which in turn define them, name them, and provide them with substance, action, intention, and subjectivity. In other words, actants are considered foundationally indeterminate, with no a priori substance or essence, and it is via the networks in which they associate that actants derive their nature.

By this, the ANT network is conceived as a heterogeneous amalgamation of textual, conceptual, social, and technical actors and actants. The actors represent 'digital technology' while the actants represent the state agents (diplomats), individual and organization. Therefore the ANT includes within it, components of, hardware and software, the people who designed these artifacts, the people who have built and assembled them and the large groups, organizations, and bodies that maintain these networks. ANT, therefore, is theory that provides the elements that are used to understand and reconstitute the social space. This framework operates on an interactive relationship based on nested level of analysis; international, national, institutional and individual.

The international analysis focuses on how macro level socio-economic and political environment determines the diffusion of the internet within the country and its application for state – state or, state-international organization/institutional relations. This level provides structure of opportunities mediating between state and state, citizens and state or institutions using digital information and communication and technologies by governments, citizens and civic societies. The network of relationship between actors and actants examines the motivation that determines who participates within the virtual system. The ANT aptly explains and illustrates how the actors and actants link and reflect international relations and services especially how Diplomats and diplomatic apply internet and associated digital devices to network as well as achieve common purpose and interest in international scenes. All these form a systematic vicious cycle of input and output of internet engagement required in delivering international and diplomatic services. It can therefore be said, based on the overriding relevance and application that the ANT adequately illustrates the internet as a social phenomenon rather than technological tool.

4.Digital Communication Technologies and Diplomacy

Digital communication technology is considered significant and has potentials of enhancing nations' participation by inputting into foreign policy provisioning mechanisms that address state challenges and satisfies diplomatic interest. The use of electronic input and output analysis that illustrates international engagement as provided by digital technology is referred as internet engagement.

Diplomacy covers all of these aspects and justifies the ubiquitous nature of internet driven technology in international engagements. Along this thought, we link e-diplomacy to what Hirst and Norton (1998) notes as electronic delivery strategy. This strategy encompasses three critical transformations; internal, external and relational. Internal transformation refers to the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of internal functions and process of government by interrelating different departments and agencies. Thus, information can flow much faster and more easily among different governmental

departments, reducing processing time, paperwork bottlenecks and eliminating long, bureaucratic and inefficient approval procedures. It equally facilitates storing and collecting data, reduction of labour costs and information handling cost and the speed and accuracy of time processing.

As Costae (2007:171) notes "the Internet and the world wide web has reached the point when nobody can afford to ignore it, at their own loss".E-diplomacy as a new communication tools powered by the internet, allows free flow of content and information. As a result information is no longer limited to privileged government officials but is accessed by the general public. This has led governments losing the monopoly of information they once enjoyed. The information revelation by 'Wikileaks",the publisher of Global Intelligence Files, over five million e-mails from the Texas headquartered "global intelligence" company Stratfor is a very case of information liberalization and demystification of diplomacy . The e-mails date between July 2004 and late December 2011, reveal the inner workings of a company that fronts as an intelligence publisher, but provides confidential intelligence services to large corporations. This and similar situations diminish the secret characteristic of the diplomacy while new characteristics emerge. It is imperative to add that the world has never witnessed this Information Revolution that makes news immediately available as it is happening. The digital communication technologies make development in any part of the world become more visible and creates a situation for the general public take part in the conduct of diplomacy. This is made possible by cyberspace which has led to a particular flavour of diplomacy, referred to as public diplomacy in diplomatic representations.

The Digital Communication technologies have allowed diplomatic missions to extend their representation to the Internet in order to target and reach larger community. Kurbalija and Baldi(2000:100) notes that "as the pioneering phase of Internet development ends, the Internet is increasingly accepted as a media through which ministries of foreign affairs communicate". Accordingly, information published on the Internet should have the same status as statements given by diplomats or diplomatic note sent from the ministry.This suggests that although virtual diplomatic missions may be virtual representations of their physical counterparts, statements issued through virtual diplomatic missions are not legally binding to the same effect as the ones issued from traditional diplomatic missions. Diplomatic missions must therefore start paying particular attention to target the audience of the host country the online presence is representing by including specific information specific.

The online presence of diplomatic missions is changing the nature and procedure of bilateral and multilateral negotiations. Negotiations as made possible by digital communication technologies, are beyond state to state engagements, rather every individual and organization directly contribute by virtue of online interaction using internet Forums, chat sessions, whiteboards and other similar tools that have emerged as excellent ways to perform certain groundwork in the area of diplomacy and negotiation. .

This, as Royal Pingdom (2010) notes, is the convenience that has also changed the habit of communications through messages, making the users to often downsize the content to few sentences or words even, while raising the common volume and frequency of e-mail message communication to the level of almost 250 billion e-mails exchanged daily around the globe. Unlike the e-mail communication, the use of instant messengers and further voice and video calls over the Internet – such as Skype – has become common low-cost option for real-time communication. Mobile devices that access Internet and allow for voice, video and short messages (SMS) communications – whose number is expected to surpass one billion by 2013 (Resource Shelf, 2010) – are making the world easily connected. Among these "email communication are particularly important for strengthening one on one communication and group networks within established political organizations, as in the corporate world, and local community as well as linking citizens and governments" (Neuman ,R et al 1999).

Against the backdrop of these positive impacts, there are obvious negative impacts with the application of digital communication in diplomatic relation. The next section examines them.

5 Weaknesses and Treats as negative impact

Among them inadequate interpersonal relations. Personal relations on behalf of States as always represented by diplomats or any other authorized persons either in bilateral or multilateral relation make diplomacy a reality. On this, the practice of e-diplomacy reduces the personality and ability to witness event which increases interaction and friendliness. This defect in E-diplomacy invariably creates vulnerability option that predisposes diplomatic missions to attack by unknown person who may be cyber terrorist or external adversaries. Since the e-diplomacy cannot replace the culture of physical relationship in an office and interaction in the embassy, correspondence emanating in some case can mislead or generate wrong perception or interpretation of diplomatic action resulting from lack of identity verification. In this regard, such diplomatic action as negotiation and information management may be compromised. As Kurbalija, Jovan, (2002a) notes "a diplomat as diplomats have the best understanding of the nature of the information presented, the target audience and the context of information in relation to the government's policies and objectives. Moreover, diplomatic websites have legal and political importance, and are used for diplomatic signaling. All of these points make diplomatic websites too important to

be left in hands of designers or technical specialists"

The complexity associated with e-diplomacy creates digital gap among persons with low competence in the use of internet. This is because the policies such electronic Visa processing by most missions ignores the fact that some people lack competence because of inadequate digital knowledge. To this extent   Kappeler and   Dietrich (2002) remarks that " basic information must be provided in English and possibly additional vehicular languages accessible through corresponding links. The buttons for those languages should be easily identifiable. Navigation on the site and attached links should be made easy by allowing the links to appear on all major pages"   While these have made   pessimists to doubt the potential of digital technologies for reshaping diplomatic   relations especially in access, flow and exchange of information, the avalanche of new actants, emerging issues and changes can be tolerated and allowed to flourish. This as we is   inevitable but amenable because new technologies as in e-diplomacy come with new challenges and benefits especially in developing nations as Africa.

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