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Published by the Council on Foreign Relations

April 5, 2013
SNAPSHOT

Social Diplomacy

Or How Diplomats Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Tweet

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(Regis Duvignau / Courtesy Reuters)

Soon after protests erupted outside the U.S. embassy in the Egyptian capital last September, inspired by the posting on the Internet of an American-made anti-Islamic video, the embassy posted a statement saying, “We firmly reject the actions by those who abuse the universal right of free speech to hurt the religious beliefs of others.” The statement appeared in two forms: a three-paragraph press release, e-mailed to various government officials and journalists, and a 123-character tweet.

The tweet made waves first. The conservative Twitter-watching website Twitchy posted it under the headline “US Embassy in Cairo chooses Sep. 11 to apologize for hurt Muslim feelings.” Republicans quickly called the embassy’s actions an example of the Obama administration’s appeasement of U.S. enemies, and the Romney campaign denounced it as “disgraceful.” The White House soon disavowed the statement, saying it “was not cleared by Washington and does not reflect the views of the United States government.” @USEmbassyCairo deleted the tweet

within hours, and, according to media reports, within weeks the senior public affairs officer on duty in Cairo that night was recalled to Washington.

The Cairo incident wasn't the first time that a diplomat's tweets have sparked a firestorm. Sometimes even apparently benign or accidental use of social media can lead to diplomatic discord. In February 2012, for example, the Canadian ambassador to China, David Mulroney, posted a tweet with a photo of his official car on Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter. Chinese citizens expressed shock at the discovery that a prominent Western ambassador would drive a plain old Toyota Camry; the tweet threw the ubiquitous use of luxury cars by even mid-range Chinese officials into sharp relief and led to a storm of posts on Chinese bureaucratic excesses.

WHY IT'S WORTH IT

In a profession where inappropriate, unclear, or careless phrasing can undermine countless hours of painstaking negotiation, it might seem like a huge risk to send public messages limited to a paltry 140 characters that can go viral almost instantly. Yet today hundreds of diplomats around the world have official Twitter accounts, and the numbers are growing weekly. Diplomats are not only permitted but encouraged to tweet, especially by the U.S. government, which has touted social media engagement as a key part of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's 21st Century Statecraft initiative.

Tactics vary by country, agency, personality, and individual tolerance for risk, but some generalizations can be made. Diplomats' tweets are almost always intentional and carefully considered, for example. The general public often uses Twitter for casual communication, but that's not how government officials use it. They know that anything they say, out loud or online, can be construed as a statement of policy, and the smart ones among them act accordingly. Very few diplomats pocket tweet or blithely tap out messages en route to the parking lot or in line at the grocery store. On the rare occasions when an egregious tweet has sunk a career, the message was only the tip of the iceberg -- a particularly public expression of a more general pattern of poor judgment.

The most common form of diplomatic tweeting is routine dissemination of condensed versions of official statements, often with links to a full-text original. These may not be sexy or glamorous, but they provide useful insight into day-to-day diplomatic activity and expose policy statements to casual users not likely to seek out or come across official communications. If there was any problem with the Cairo tweet last September, it had to do with the message, not the medium.

Diplomats willing to tolerate a bit more risk occasionally use their feeds despite the possibility of upsetting their host country. The U.S. embassy in China, for example, posts hourly updates on the air quality in China's notoriously polluted capital at @BeijingAir. The practice, State Department spokesman Mark Toner explains, is intended "to convey what we believe is useful information to our citizens abroad." However, Chinese officials have claimed that the tweets violate the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. Nonetheless, the embassy and the consulates continue to publish air quality data from their monitors as a resource for the health of the Mission community and for the American community in China.

Diplomatic Twitter accounts can also serve smaller strategic functions. For instance, Joseph Torsella, the U.S. ambassador for UN management and reform, had been pushing for UN budget committee meetings to be webcast since shortly after he took office in April 2011. Webcasting is seen as a gold standard for transparency, since it makes the inner workings of agencies responsible to the public in real time and provides a historical archive of past

meetings. Webcasting has been standard practice across the U.S. government for several years, and the United Nations had started to implement it, but the UN Fifth Committee, which handles the agency's \$5 billion annual budget, had been dragging its feet.

Two weeks after joining Twitter in October 2011, Torsella, who tweets at @USJoe_UN, posted a link to an official letter he sent to the UN Department of Public Information (DPI) requesting that budget meetings be webcast. The tweet, which read, in part, "multi-billion \$ budgets should be negotiated publically," included a link to the letter sent more than five weeks earlier. The letter had prompted no response. Yet just six days after the tweet, DPI began webcasting UN budget meetings for the first time.

In another series of tweets, Torsella called the UN's report on air travel rules to the attention of those interested in UN reform, tweeting on February 29, 2012.

29 Feb Joe Torsella @USJoe_UN

Reformers Ambien: UN's recent report on air travel <http://goo.gl/CXCFm> [1].

The link goes to a PDF of United Nations General Assembly report, "A/55/676 Proposals for a more effective and efficient utilization of resources for air travel." In the 21 pages of bureaucratese that follow, one point stands out. It reads:

When travel is authorized for individuals who are not staff members ... the standard of accommodation for air travel is currently based on the standards for staff members ... It is recommended that travel at the class immediately below first class for flights exceeding a duration of nine hours be maintained for staff members.

Torsella interpreted the passage into plain English in a series of tweets:

29 Feb Joe Torsella @USJoe_UN

Good news: Big props to UN managers for plan to spend \$74 mil airfare budget better (many perks were added over years by member states).

29 Feb Joe Torsella @USJoe_UN

Bad news, in some not-so-fun facts: ½ of UN air budget goes to "non-staff" travelers! Now boarding: mtg participants, experts, members

29 Feb Joe Torsella @USJoe_UN

Senior UN officials can fly biz class any flight, others if 9hrs "travel" (not flight). So two 3hr flights + 3hr layover=biz class. Ouch.

At the time of posting, perhaps due to Torsella's relatively small Twitter following of around 1,500, the tweets got little notice beyond a few retweets. So during the next meeting of the UN budget committee, Torsella beat the drum again, posting:

15 Mar Joe Torsella @USJoe_UN

Fly Me to the Moon ... in Business Class: Air travel rules up today in #UN's Fifth (Budget) Committee.

15 Mar Joe Torsella @USJoe_UN

With 3 billion living on less than \$2.50/day and 12.8 million Americans unemployed should even UN interns be flying business class?!?

Again, no real acknowledgement on Twitter. Finally, during the next round of budget meetings in which reform on this issue went particularly poorly, Torsella posted one last time:

2 Apr Joe Torsella @USJoe_UN

Sad day for UN. It's still permissible for #UN interns to fly biz class and #G77 attempts to tie hands of #UNSG Ban's efforts at #UNReform.

The next day BBC United Nations correspondent Barbara Plett, with a notable 12,000-plus followers on Twitter, as well as the coveted blue verified check, posted on her own account the next day:

3 Apr Barbara Plett @BBCBarbaraPlett

#US highlights "astonishing" fact that \$54 million of \$74 million #UN Sec't NY-Geneva air travel budget spent on business class

Almost a full year later, after several rounds of tweets on the issue when relevant, when air travel came up in budget negotiations, Torsella again turned to Twitter. Noting that a new pope had just been installed in the Vatican, he attempted to inject some humor into what is normally a rather dry discussion topic.

14 Mar Joe Torsella @USJoe_UN:

As budget committee considers excessive #UN biz class travel, attn delegates: new pope takes the bus & flies coach. Habemus Good Example.

The tweet promoted a public exchange between American University law professor Kenneth Anderson and Hillel Neuer, executive director of the watchdog agency UN Watch:

17 Mar Hillel Neuer @HillelNeuer

Go, Joe! US rep: "@USJoe_UN: #UN biz class travel is excessive. Attn delegates: new pope takes the bus & flies coach. Habemus Good Example."

17 Mar Kenneth Anderson @kennethanderson

@HillelNeuer I am a big admirer of @USJoe_UN. Unsung hero of #UN (saving it from itself) and US foreign policy. Talk about thankless jobs.

17 Mar Hillel Neuer @HillelNeuer

@kennethanderson @USJoe_UN The best friends of the U.N. are those who, like Eleanor Roosevelt and Rene Cassin, speak candidly for change.

In both of these examples, the tweets were no silver bullets. In the case of webcasting, that one tweet was not the sole trigger for the decision to finally start doing so. And in the case of the UN's air travel budget excesses, a journalist's honorable mention and a Twitter back-and-forth between policy wonks hardly constitutes a major exposé. But the practice of publicizing debates that would otherwise be negotiated quietly behind closed doors or buried deep within legalese can bring an added measure of both relevance and urgency to the process, giving the public a window into what their representatives are actually doing -- or not doing.

THE VALUE OF SAYING SOMETHING

Twitter is often criticized for its enforced brevity. Yet it is precisely the medium's immovable character limit that appeals to so many users, since it induces directness and clarity. Twitter posts demand focus and don't leave much room for obfuscation. Not every situation calls for a tweet rather than some other form of communication, and not every diplomatic tweeter is a master of the form. But that says nothing about the medium itself, which is simply one tool among many, and is more useful for some purposes than others.

Public diplomatic messaging today does what it has since the age of airdropped leaflets -- it informs, influences, generates goodwill, and ultimately advances a nation's foreign policy objectives. Social media conversation is already crowded with a welter of voices, from journalists to activists to terrorists, and it represents perhaps the single most lively and important sphere of discussion for the young (and, increasingly, the middle-aged) around the world. For government officials to ignore or disdain it would amount to professional malpractice. In addition, considering the present and perhaps perennial new normal of fiscal austerity, figuring out how to use a free, heavily used communication tool makes good business sense. Diplomats, advisers, and support and technical staff spend an inordinate amount of time translating what ambassadors intend to do, aspire to do, and actually do -- or fail to do -- for the general public. To give the ambassadors themselves an outlet slightly outside the official confines of their office can achieve the goals of making a statement without the endless Sturm und Drang of the memo clearance process. It's a lot easier to get the many chefs of government to sign off on one or a few 140-character comments than on an entire statement. Tweets provide a comparatively big bang for the buck.

To put it bluntly, tweeting is good for governments and for citizens. Diplomatic tweets can make government more interesting, coaxing officials into having real interactions with the broader public: diplomats speak to citizens, and the citizens speak back. Running away from the challenge because it can occasionally lead to trouble or push an official outside his comfort zone is a sign that the official doesn't understand public diplomacy in general, or isn't able to use it to fulfill his mission. And, for ill or good, much of the public expects leadership to be on social media. Twenty-first-century technology means that people -- any and all average, everyday people -- are no longer passive parties to public discourse. While the diplomatic and intellectual elite may still dominate public dialogue, the long tail of everyday folk speaking out online grows longer with each tweet, comment, blog, upload, and stream that they post. Twitter may not always be the go-to medium for public discourse -- at just over six years old, it's already pushing old age by most measures of technology. But for now, it is where the people speak. And while diplomats don't have to say anything themselves or even listen to what others are saying on Twitter, the practice of dismissing the importance of the platform must end now.

As George Kennan observed almost 60 years ago, "A large part of a diplomatic mission's work does not involve or require elaborate secrecy. Diplomacy, after all, is not a conspiracy. The best diplomacy is the one that involves the fewest, not the most, secrets." The point of diplomatic communication has always been to clearly deliver a message. Today, Twitter and other forms of social media are an increasingly crucial way to deliver messages. Incorporating them into the diplomatic arsenal is not some bizarre or childish revolution -- it is simply common sense and contemporary best practice.

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