



Digital Diplomacy: The Impact of the Internet on International Relations

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International relations have always been profoundly affected by technology. The Internet—20 years young—is having just such a profound impact. It constitutes, along with the IT systems it connects, a quantum leap in people's ability to communicate both one-to-one and one-to-many. Just as ocean-going sailing ships enabled the expansion of Europe in the 16th-18th centuries, the telegraph underpinned the empires of the 19th century, and the aeroplane, radio and TV have transformed international relations in the 20th century, the Internet creates a new set of opportunities and risks for the world. The main difference is that the changes will happen faster.

It is still early to identify the Internet's impact on the relations between people across borders and between states. But it is necessary to try. Establishing a framework for analysing the changes—as business has done¹—will help governments and other international actors take strategic decisions based on reality, rather than on an outdated view of how things happen. Prediction is a poor basis for strategic planning, but a more sophisticated risk analysis of how the Internet is changing international relations will help improve strategic decisions, and indicate how to engage better with international actors to achieve the desired ends. This attempt is no doubt what Sir Humphrey Appleby would define as “brave”, but it is a start.

The argument is that the Internet has three fundamental impacts on international relations:

- it multiplies and amplifies the number of voices and interests involved in international policy-making, complicating international decision-making and reducing the exclusive control of states in the process;
- it accelerates and frees the dissemination of information, accurate or not, about any issue or event which can impact on its consequences and handling;
- it enables traditional diplomatic services to be delivered faster and more cost-effectively, both to ones' own citizens and government, and to those of other countries.

The Internet introduces changes of form that create changes of substance. The effect of the first two points above is to enhance the importance of *ideas* that influence people's actions and organisations' decisions, and of the *networks* that carry these ideas. Actors in international relations, including governments, will have to take greater account of both in the future. They have no choice but to make full use of the opportunities the Internet offers if they are to remain effective. How to do this remains a challenge, but some proposals for a possible approach are set out at the end.

¹ There is an extensive literature on how business has responded to the Internet. One recent, stimulating guide is Don Tapscott, *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* (New York, 2007). For a recent assessment of how it impacts on government, at least in the UK, see: *Transformational Government, Enabled by Technology* (HMSO, 2005, and subsequent annual reports for 2006 and 2007 on implementation—on <http://www.directgov.gov.uk/>). For recent academic research on this, see the website of the Oxford Internet Institute (<http://www.oii.ac.uk/>).

The Internet revolution

For the purposes of this paper, the Internet may be defined as a means of communication that enables the publication, exchange and storage of information. Global communications and information flows already exist; what the Internet does is bring them together and make them instantaneous. It enables simultaneous person to person or group communication, and universal publication. It is important not to confuse the Internet itself with the content that is exchanged or accessed over it, through the World Wide Web, or the networks set up by individuals or organisations that use it for transmission. The technology creates the means. The people that use it define the ends to which it is put.²

The speed of development and spread of the Internet has been a market driven phenomenon. Supply has been delivered primarily by the private sector to meet ever-increasing public demand. A consequence is that access to the Internet is patchy, as is its impact. A digital divide exists not merely between rich and poor nations, but between people within one country. Nevertheless, the rapid spread of mobile telephony in even the poorest countries, and the convergence of Internet and mobile technology, is closing that gap. Use of the Internet has evolved as rapidly as its spread. In Britain, for example, there have been significant changes in its use by business and people over the past five years (Dutton and Helsper, 2007). But globally there remains a long tail of late adopters, limited users and those without any access at all.

Thomas Friedman argues that the Internet has played a crucial role in levelling the playing field across the globe, enabling anyone, anywhere, to have access to the same information, to connect to and do business direct with each other. This enables an ever more efficient international division of labour to take account of the comparative advantage of different markets. This makes the world, in his term, increasingly flat. It creates tremendous economic opportunities. But it also has a dark side, illustrated by its use for fraud, pornography and terrorism. The Internet is a vehicle in which eBay and Al Qaeda are fellow travellers (Friedman, 2005).

As such, it reinforces the trend towards what social anthropologists have defined as the growth in *scale* of society. 'Primitive' human societies were small in scale: people lived in small groups who knew each other well, lived cheek-by-jowl, and rarely travelled far from their home. People from further afield were strangers to be distrusted, especially if they did not speak the same language. Improvements in transport and communications and the associated commercial activity led to an expansion in the scale of society. Communities were more affected by external events; people travelled further; encounters with strangers multiplied. An individual would come to interact with many people over a wide geographical area, but know few of them well. This growth in scale is reflected in changing ideas, social and political structures, rituals and religion (Wilson and Wilson, 1945).

The Internet allows regular and close, even intimate and trusted, relationships between people who may never have met face to face. Those relations may be closer than with many people living more physically close. It enables communities to build or maintain themselves without physical proximity, whether these are

² There is a vast literature on the Internet. For handy guides see the entry in Wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org/>), or the summary in Friedman (2005), 59ff. On the origins of the telecoms revolution that enabled it, enjoy Hundt (2000), *passim*.

“traditional” communities, based on nationality, family, town or tribe, or “modern” ones based on interest, issues, faith or sport. These communities are lateral and dispersed, but able to act collectively. This has two effects: firstly, individuals are freer to choose what determines their identity, as they have easier access to those that share their views or values and are less bound by the majority views of their local community (eg the one in which they live or vote). Secondly, they can project that identity more forcefully using the means the Internet puts at their disposal.

The communications revolution of which the Internet is an integral part has also transformed how people communicate. Text and email have replaced letters and faxes; websites are supplementing, and in some cases replacing, printed and broadcast media—though the relationship between them is evolving rapidly. Given the critical role of communication in the way communities are organised and states managed, this creates a fundamentally new dynamic.

Globalisation and the state

International relations—as the term implies—have revolved predominantly around the interactions between nation states, at least for the last century, and diplomacy and war have been the means of conducting those interactions. But international relations have always gone beyond states alone. Diplomacy, as defined by Hedley Bull, is “the conduct of relations between states and other entities with standing in world politics by official agents and by peaceful means.” (Bull, 1977:162) This begs the question of what constitutes “entities with standing in world politics”, and indeed, what is a state?

The nation state has, since the 17th century, become the most convenient way for people in a reasonably homogeneous society to assure their security and prosperity. It has provided a unit that enables (though does not guarantee) the installation of a legitimate and accountable government to decide and enforce laws, raise taxes, and defend its citizens. It usually provides a way for the exercise of authority to be accountable, and thereby marries power with legitimacy. To fulfil its evolving role, the state has often become a supplier of services and information, as well as justice and security, to its citizens.

States have always had to deal with each other over land, people and commerce. Globalisation has progressively eaten into the autonomy of the state, and the evolution of multilateral and international fora, particularly since the Second World War, has been necessary to enable states to continue to provide what their citizens need. Many of the issues thrown up by a globalised economy—from climate change and the spread of infectious diseases to the distempers of the capital markets—can only be dealt with in cooperation with others. Institutions and diplomatic practices have evolved to manage them, whether in the EU, G8, IMF, WTO or the UN and its many offshoots.

The economic and social forces driving globalisation, from the exchange of goods and evolution of markets to the migration of people, are reflected in the growth of multinational companies and the flourishing of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) focussed on specific international issues. The diffusion of power (both outwards and downwards) and the growth of international interest groups, more interested in their cause than in their nationality, has weakened the nation state as an

autonomous entity and complicated diplomacy. Sovereignty increasingly means having a seat at the international table, not maintaining autonomy within ones own borders. And at that table, a growing number of non-state actors have growing influence, even if not always a seat or a vote.

State structures still exist, and in many countries national identities remain strong—even passionate. But in some developed and long-established states (Belgium is the classic example) the national structures continue to exist primarily for international, not domestic purposes. The evolution of international structures and a globalised economy have also enabled mini-states, such as those in the Baltic, to become viable where they were not before. They have thereby sustained the fragmentation of some formerly centralised states that held together diverse social groups, such as the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Elsewhere, particularly in the developing world, the dissolution of colonial empires in the last century left behind a patchwork of geographically and ethnically disparate entities, some of which have struggled to become viable as nation states. Some of these have become wholly dysfunctional or begun to disintegrate, posing difficult issues for an international order based on a presumption of effective states.

Although state structures still exist, in places they are becoming disaggregated or hollowed out. Most people still vote in national elections and pay taxes to national revenue authorities; but their interest, loyalty and activities are becoming more focussed at a global, as well as local and national, level.³

In enabling dispersed communities to communicate freely and act collectively, the Internet can both reinforce and undermine the nation state. Societies and individuals still want to live within a framework of law, security and political accountability. But, as suggested above, the Internet does have an impact on how people identify themselves. Many people will associate more closely with other causes or identities than that of the state in which they live. This has always been the case with nationalities—Britons feel just as much British whether they live in Framlingham or France. But for Kurds, who have not had their own state, or Armenians who were scattered across the globe, the Internet enables them to mobilise in a way not possible before. And for those who believe in the universal nation of Islam, or the primacy of tackling climate change, it provides a platform for knitting the cause together, exchanging ideas and planning action, whichever country they are living in.

The Internet can therefore contribute to the weakening of the traditional nation state as a primary focus for political loyalty, by enabling communities to coalesce and act across national boundaries. But many nation states are equally alive to the potential the Internet has to deliver services more effectively to their citizens, reinforcing their loyalty. Other regimes are not above trying to manipulate the virtual world as much as the physical one to prop up their own rule—though more of these see the Internet as a threat than an opportunity because of its inherently open nature.

The Internet is thus an inseparable part of the process of global political change. It affects what states do and how they do it, how they relate to each other, and who is involved in that relationship.

³ There is a growing literature on globalisation and the state. Amongst the most intelligent recent contributions are Cooper (2003) and Hobsbawm (2007), though Friedman (1999 as well as 2005) has some illuminating stories to tell. What is happening in Scotland is a good example of the impact in a developed country; as is Sudan of the impact in a developing one.

A few examples will illustrate the role of the Internet, from which we can extrapolate some of the broader implications.

Diasporas

People have always migrated. National borders may have made it more complicated, but they cannot stop it, and migration remains one of the most dynamic contributors to global growth and social change. Most migrants want to retain links with their original communities. The Internet makes this easier than ever, and developments in Internet and mobile banking are facilitating the remittance of earnings which is one of the main motivations for migration in the first place. Zimbabweans abroad can use a website—mukuru.com—to buy goods for their families at home which they cannot obtain for themselves.

The Internet, however, also enables dispersed communities to become actors in national and international politics. A number of developing countries, such as Ghana, are considering giving the vote to expatriate nationals, often a wealthy constituency. Sarkozy wooed the French expatriate community in the UK during his Presidential campaign, through his website as well as in person. Dissidents and asylum seekers, forced into exile, also find it easier to communicate amongst themselves and with friends at home through the Internet. The Chinese pro-democracy movement has an active web presence, despite efforts to monitor it and block access to it from within China.

In other cases, the Internet reinforces the active role that diasporas already play in a country's foreign policy. The Armenian diaspora is particularly energetic in defending its country's interests. In 2004, a slight change of nuance in one western government's public line on the massacres of 1915 in Eastern Turkey, though explained to the Armenian foreign ministry who understood the context and raised no objection, elicited a flood of protesting emails from Armenians around the globe to the western foreign ministry within 24 hours of the statement, when it was posted on one of their websites. The audience now for any public information is always global; and diasporas, as well as foreign ministries, are capable of taking collective political action at a global level.⁴

Trade negotiations

Recent experience in three areas has illustrated the effect of the Internet in strengthening the influence of non-state actors on international negotiations.

⁴ On diasporas, see *The Economist*, 28 July 2007, p.65-6; information from OII-FCO Conference on the Internet and diplomacy, July 2004; <http://www.armeniadiaspora.com/> (accessed 27 Dec 2007); annotated list of Internet resources on Chinese human rights and democracy at <http://newton.uor.edu/Departments&Programs/AsianStudiesDept/china-rights.html> (acc. 27 Dec 2007).

A recent study by He and Murphy (2007) has demonstrated the importance of the web in enabling NGOs to challenge the liberal basis of WTO agreements and bring the concept of global social contracts into play. They used it in three ways—as a means of advocacy on their own websites, targeting and mobilising their supporters and those interested in the issues (eg through Google searches); as a means of coordinating amongst themselves, both in the message they were giving and the action to be taken; and as a way of exerting pressure on the state actors at the negotiating table. The conclusion of this case study is that NGOs were able to get their point registered in the Doha round negotiations more effectively because of their ability to use the Internet.

Even more recently, the negotiation of Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) between the European Union (EU) and the former Afro-Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries have been the subject of fierce argument and vigorous lobbying, much of it conducted through the medium of the Internet. The Lome and Cotonou conventions allowed ACP countries privileged trade access to EU markets, but the Cotonou agreement of 2000 has been ruled incompatible with WTO rules on reciprocity and non-discrimination and has to be replaced. The substance of the proposed agreements is complex and contentious, and does not concern us. What matters is that civil society groups and the development lobby, based mainly in EU countries, have conducted a powerful campaign to influence opinion within the EU and amongst ACP governments against the European Commission's proposals for EPAs. Some ACP governments have eventually opted for pragmatism in signing up to some form of agreement by the 31 December 2007 deadline. But others were reinforced in holding out against a deal by the support and arguments of non-governmental actors, who mobilised more effectively than the authorities. The agenda for the debate was set as much by the development lobby as by the EU and ACP governments themselves, and the debate itself was conducted online as much as in conference halls, negotiating meetings or the traditional print media.⁵

Terrorism

Abu Musab al-Suri, the *nom de guerre* of Mustafa bin Abd al-Qadir Setmariam Nasar, is one of the foremost ideologues of militant Islam. His lectures, writings and training manuals are a vast resource for the international jihad, much of it brought together in the 1,600 pages of "The Global Islamic Resistance Call". Long sought by the authorities, he was finally arrested in Pakistan in October 2005. Before then, however, he had taken the precaution of hacking into commercial websites in America and placing on the Internet for all to see the books, lectures and letters that he had previously been circulating privately. Thus his influence has not only continued, but expanded through use of the Internet. He has even attracted a full scale biography by a western academic (Lia, 2007).

⁵ See for example <http://www.stopepa.org/>, some of the NGO websites (<http://www.actionaid.org/>; <http://www.oxfam.org.nz/>; <http://www.foeghana.org/> (Friends of the Earth, Ghana), including a southern African-based one, <http://www.tralac.org/>). The EU's online response has been weak, but the British Department for International Development (DFID) has at least tried to conduct an online defence ('Ten Myths about EPAs' at <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/aboutdfid/organisation/economic-partnership-agreements-myths/>) (all acc. 28.12.07).

Islamic terrorists have been assiduous users of the Internet, as well as the more traditional media, to spread their message to the faithful and the profane. Terrorist websites have become a vital resource, both for supporters and the targets of the jihad. Their dispersed global community is sustained by email, instant messaging and access to dedicated websites, which is ideally suited to the kind of non-hierarchical, decentralised system of local cells that al-Suri advocated.⁶

Audrey Cronin of Oxford University has recently examined the ways Islamic jihadists use the Internet to raise money, preach their cause and publish propaganda, including of bombings and executions:

“Blogs are today’s revolutionary pamphlets, websites are the new dailies and list-servers are today’s broadsides.” (Cronin, 2006)

It is easy to keep the images of Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo constantly before the public by posting them on the Internet. Images have power, and that power is multiplied by ease of access through the world wide web.

The Internet and international relations

Al Qaeda is not unique. It mirrors the way many global movements are evolving, whether focussed on solving poverty, global warming, human rights abuses or civil conflict. What the Internet brings is the ability to link such groups more effectively, and make their global voice more powerful. This has created a multiplication of actors in the previously exclusive world of diplomacy.

Previous studies of the Internet and diplomacy have identified that the Internet enables more and different actors to get involved in political and diplomatic processes (Bollier, 2002; Christodoulides, 2005; Soloman, 2007). Richard Grant, a New Zealand diplomat, describes the process as the “democratisation of diplomacy”:

“Diplomacy has become democratized. The technology allows more people to play, increases the size of the playing field by an almost exponential amount, and it changes the rules every day.” (Grant, 2004)

This shows itself in four ways: the multiplication and diversification of actors, and the simultaneous growth of collaboration and polarisation between them.

The *multiplication of actors* is evident in all three examples above, as on almost every current global issue. The Internet alone has not made this change, but it has reinforced the capacity of non-state actors to participate in the debate and outcome. The Make Poverty History campaign in 2005 exploited the Internet to bring together diverse groups (and a few rock star activists) into a coalition that helped Tony Blair push Africa up the agenda of the 2005 G8 Summit at Gleneagles, and secure commitments to increase aid for the poorest countries. The outcome was broadcast not only through Government channels but across the Internet by multiple NGO websites.

⁶ See the excellent article on “Internet jihad” in *The Economist*, 14 July 2007, and the review of Lia’s book on 3 Nov 2007.

NGOs have been swift to adapt to the potential of the Internet to increase their influence in international affairs. Communication and advocacy is their core business, and they devote significant resources to making best use of the Internet. Amnesty, Oxfam, Greenpeace, Human Rights Watch—all have had a powerful web presence for years and are regularly used as a primary source of information by the web-surfing public. But the Internet has facilitated an even wider diversification of actors by enabling groups without a collective voice hitherto to find one. As shown, the Armenian diaspora has become an actor alongside the Armenian Government. The already-significant influence of AIPAC (the American Israel Public Affairs Committee) in the US has been amplified by its ability to mobilise the Jewish lobby through the Internet. And any individual can now find a platform for their views. No longer is there a need to take a soapbox to Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park. Far more effective to launch a website, publish a blog, or grab some space on YouTube. And it is remarkable how swiftly support can be gathered for a campaign from the like-minded through the viral networks of the Internet. In 2005, the worldwide Internet-connected population was estimated at around 1.1 billion; two years on it is probably nearer 2 billion. Finding someone with the same views is not hard. Advertisers know this. Activists know this. But Governments have been slow off the mark.⁷

Collaboration between these new actors creates a new dynamic. Collaborative working to a collective end has been one of the underpinning principles of the Internet, one of the very reasons for its creation initially as an academic network. Its effectiveness is illustrated by the success of both Linux as an open-source software, and the Wikipedia as a store of open-source knowledge. This has given rise to what Don Tapscott has called “wikinomics” —the commercial value of giving information away free and collaborating across the Internet (Tapscott, 2007). The same applies in public affairs. One of the biggest changes has been the ease with which hybrid alliances can now be put together on specific issues. Make Poverty History brought together development NGOs, church groups, rock fans, and schools and education networks in a formidable, focussed alliance. The variable geometry of world affairs has become more varied still.

But the same capacity that promotes collaboration can lead to *polarisation*. Given a free choice of where they seek their information, many people will seek it from sources that share their views. The Internet can serve just as easily to reinforce prejudices as to challenge them; and it is a gold mine for conspiracy theorists. No longer does anyone have to persuade someone with editorial control over existing media—newspapers, journals, publishers—to publicise their views. The Internet makes publishing one's views free and easy. And once connected to those who share similar ideas, it becomes easier to act on them. It has led to what one commentator has called the “globalisation of grievance”.⁸ Anyone with an extreme view, be it libertarian, terrorist, racist or whatever, will find on the Internet ample “facts” and opinion to reinforce their view, whatever steps are taken to try to limit access to such material. Such people can live within an “echo chamber” where all the views they hear reinforce their own (Sunstein, 2007).

A consequence of these three factors can often be to make reaching a consensus *more* rather than less difficult. At Gleneagles, the outcome was beneficial, as it also appears to have been in pressuring the US Administration to accept the proposed roadmap on climate change in Bali in December 2007. But on EPAs and trade

⁷ See <http://www.makepovertyhistory.org/> (acc. 19.6.07), supplemented by conversations with those involved in Gleneagles. Statistics on the multiplication and use of websites can be found on <http://www.clickz.com/stats/> (acc. 19.6.07).

⁸ Gideon Rachman, *Financial Times*, 30 Jan 2007.

negotiations generally, as illustrated above, it has deepened differences and made agreement more difficult to reach.

Politics and states

In international as in domestic politics, the Internet provides a new platform for the old practice of persuasion. Three things are crucial in exploiting the new medium: a *presence*, *participation* in debate, and the extent of *connection*. Those groups that assure all three will wield more influence in the debate.

Connection is a pre-requisite. People with regular access to the Internet, at home or work, are in effect enfranchised internationally. Those who are not are disenfranchised, even locally. Where effective national telecoms suppliers exist, connection is mainly a matter of choice and income. Where they do not, in many developing countries, it is the spread of mobile telephony that promises the fastest enfranchisement of the greatest number. This is already evolving rapidly and will continue to do so. It will, like radio, give a huge boost to the growth in scale of these societies, and hence the pressures for change. Even if use will be, as in the West, predominantly for social and economic purposes, the potential to use it for political ends will exist. Internet penetration rates are often still low, from 1% of households in Afghanistan to 7% in Zimbabwe, compared to well over 40% in the UK and 60% in Scandinavia (in 2005). But already it can have a surprising impact: recent tourists camel trekking in the Sahara found their Taureg guide had a hotmail account, to keep in touch with his cousins in Belgium. And initiatives such as that launched by Nicholas Negroponte to provide One Laptop Per Child and develop a low cost (\$100-200) portable computer could spread access very swiftly.⁹

Connection creates consumers. A *presence* enables one to become an actor. US Presidential elections and British domestic politics have both demonstrated the growing importance of being present on the Internet. What seemed innovative during Howard Dean's campaign in 2004 has now become the norm. Launching candidates, raising money, mobilising the grass roots, and reaching out to new constituencies, for example through YouTube, have become as much the stuff of election campaigns as the stump speech, TV debates and kissing babies. Lobby groups are increasingly using the Internet to try to influence policy, and governments providing for an Internet forum to respond and influence the debate themselves.¹⁰

Internationally, the Internet is also being more widely used as a platform to address and influence world opinion. Examples are proliferating. On 30 November 2006 President Ahmedinejad published on the Iranian government website his letter to President Bush appealing for a dialogue, providing maximum access to his arguments. In April 2007, within hours of Abdullah Gul's withdrawal as a candidate for the Turkish Presidency, the military had posted a statement on its website invoking its role as the defender of a secular state in Turkey. When Nicholas Sarkozy

⁹ See <http://www.clickz.com/stats/webworldwide/>, and <http://www.laptop.org/> for the One Laptop per Child initiative.

¹⁰ Good accounts of the changes in campaigning are given in *The Washington Post*, 4 May 2007 and *The Economist*, 17 March 2007. Generally, see Sunstein, 2007.

won the French Presidential election in May 2007, Tony Blair posted his congratulatory message (in French) on his YouTube site.¹¹

From the point of view of traditional political actors, Internet publication is not that different from publishing material in the press or broadcasting it on TV. In fact news of material released on the web often reaches people first through more traditional media, enabling the interested to search it out on the web for themselves. But Gordon Brown has pointed out the subtle shift in power that the Internet involves:

“A few years ago the debate was about whether the media controlled politicians or whether politicians controlled the media. Now it is about how we are all responding to the explosive power of citizens, consumers and bloggers. The new focus on the environment is a product of that. The Make Poverty History campaign was the result of that. Citizens are flexing their muscles.”¹²

It is non-state actors who are using the Internet most creatively to draw attention to their cause or collaborate to achieve their ends. For them it provides the greatest opportunities, particularly where access to information has previously been tightly controlled.

As governments have found, simply being present is not enough to influence. *Participation* in the online debate is the critical factor. The “Google test” is a crude but effective means of measuring this. In the commercial world, success is measured by assuring your presence on the first page of a relevant Google search. How do actors in international relations measure up?

Two tests were conducted, in June and November 2007. Rankings will change on a daily basis, and vary according to the profile of an issue at the time, so currently live issues were selected: the Doha Trade Round, Darfur, Burma and the EU Constitution/Treaty.

- On the *EU Treaty* (searched during the June 2007 European Council and the run-up to the December one), the official presence was overwhelming—No 10, FCO, EU and German Government websites dominated the first page of hits, with one Euro-sceptic website (‘Democracy movement survey’) creeping in.
- For the *Doha Round*, the first page featured the WTO, EU and US Department of Agriculture, alongside Wikipedia and several US think tank websites (IEE, Carnegie Institute and a one-man show called globalissues.com). The media (FT, Guardian, the Chinese People’s Daily) and NGOs (Oxfam, ODI, Chatham House) were consigned to later pages. The first British Government presence was on page 8 (no.86), a note about GATS from the DTI website.
- on *Darfur*, the first page in June was dominated by the media and NGOs such as Oxfam and Medecins sans Frontiers. UN agencies, led by Unicef, got onto the third page along with the US State Dept, the EU onto page 6. There was no British Government presence at all in the top 250 sites, though the UK Parliament came in at no.181 with a House of Commons research paper, and no.189 with a recent debate on Darfur (though accessed through the Theyworkforyou.com website, not an official one). By November, things had barely changed: State

¹¹ Reports in *The Economist*, 27 Nov 2006, *The Observer*, 29 April 2007, *The Guardian*, 9 May 2007.

¹² Gordon Brown speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, cited by Jackie Ashley in *The Guardian*, 29 Jan 2007

Dept was up to page 3, the British PM was quoted (on the Daily Telegraph site) on page 12, and the No 10 website squeezed in at no.198.

- *Burma* in November proved rather better for governments. NGOs, the BBC and Wikipedia dominated page 1 along with the US State Dept, but the FCO at least made it onto page 2, albeit with a fact sheet rather than policy statement.¹³

The Google test only gives an idea of access, not of influence. But it raises the important question of where people now seek their information and what influences their opinion. Anyone (journalists, lobbyists or foreign diplomats) who wants to know the British or US Government views on anything can access their websites directly (though it is interesting that the FCO, DFID and Directgov websites all came up with completely different information and statements about Darfur when searched on the same day). But for the interested member of the public, Google is the most likely route they will take to finding information.

Crucially, the Internet removes the barriers to providing information and participating in debates which existed through traditional media and networks. Some governments have sought to use this by launching online debates. In the UK this has been done for education policy, and in July 2007, the Foreign Secretary invited members of the public to contribute to the refresh of Britain's foreign policy strategy.¹⁴

Elsewhere, it has been used to challenge state domination of information and discussion. In Egypt, for example, the self-styled *pyjamahideen* have in the past year started using public blogs to expose corruption, scandal and women's harassment where the traditional media would not do so. This has raised the profile of these issues in the public political arena. In China, despite attempts to control and monitor access to the Internet and censor "secret" or "reactionary" material, it has provided a new means for dissidents to post critical articles in the public domain and maintain contact with each other. Internet access has grown from an estimated 26 million users in 2001 to 111 million in 2005, just under 10% of the population. What is important in these countries, however, is not so much how many people, but *who* has access that matters, and what they use it for.¹⁵

Managing the information

The Internet poses three key questions about the use of information: how can users manage the vast quantity of information it makes accessible; how much of it can be trusted; and how secure can you keep your own information and systems?

The Internet has multiplied the amount of publicly available information by an exponential amount. In the early days, as the science fiction writer Isaac Asimov has

¹³ Searches conducted on 24 June and 14 November 2007. A whole industry exists on how to manipulate Google's algorithms, which are designed to prioritise the most popular websites, with Google seeking to keep them objective enough to keep consumers' confidence.

¹⁴ See <http://www.fco.gov.uk/> (acc. 30.9.07)

¹⁵ Egypt: *The Economist*, 14 April 2007; China: an excellent, if now dated, article in *The Economist*, 27 April 2006, and material on the Human Rights Watch website, <http://www.hrw.org/background/asia/china/> (acc. 21.6.07)

said, getting the information you wanted was like trying to get a glass of water from Niagara Falls. That was before the search engines, and above all Google, put in the plumbing. Now it is increasingly easy to navigate to whatever public information you want on the web—indeed, this article would have been impossible without it.

More critical now is whether the information you find is trustworthy. Trusted information and trusted advice have always been critical to the effective conduct of international relations. The Internet provides an unprecedented abundance of information, but much of it of dubious provenance and doubtful veracity. It can, in fact, greatly increase the impact of the well-placed lie, as many celebrities know. Sorting the wheat from the chaff and providing the value-added analysis that is essential for governments to take decisions on global issues, or deal with difficult neighbours, will continue to provide employment for diplomats for many years ahead.

The trade example above illustrated how the provision of information and analysis from non-governmental sources could influence the negotiations. Another example will illustrate some of the challenges the Internet poses for governments in making foreign policy on the basis of information on the Internet which may or may not be true but which influences public opinion.

On 13 May 2005, a mass protest in the town of Andijan, Uzbekistan, was forcibly broken up by Uzbek security forces. Shooting occurred and some protestors were killed. The Uzbek authorities and media said little, but news that the killings had been extensive, and that they had amounted to a massacre of unarmed civilians, began to be spread on the Internet by NGOs. Human Rights Watch, citing interviews with 50 eyewitnesses or participants, reported that hundreds had been killed. Other reports grew this to thousands. Another independent authority who had visited the scene raised questions about the reliability of some of these reports and, while recognising that casualties had occurred, questioned the evidence that so many had been killed. Speculation was fuelled by the Uzbek Government's hostile reaction to any investigation, and the subsequent eviction of a number of NGOs from the country. Media reports of a massacre were complemented by material appearing on the Internet. Foreign governments were required to respond, as so often, on the basis of incomplete, contradictory and uncertain information. The Internet helped and hindered: some information was more easily made available. But allegation swiftly became treated as fact, recycled from one website to another and to the broadcast media, and the pressure to respond swiftly (before the truth could be established) became overwhelming. In this as in many other cases, the Internet makes it almost impossible not to respond instantly to events, as was seen in the reaction Benazir Bhutto's assassination on 27 December 2007.¹⁶

Securing the information and systems

We drew a distinction at the outset between public and private information on the Internet. There are no reliable estimates of the total volume of information stored on

¹⁶ The Wikipedia article on the massacres appears reasonably balanced and is fully and scrupulously referenced. Other information from <http://www.hrw.org/>, and others. David Miliband, British Foreign Secretary, posted his reaction to Bhutto's assassination on his blog. For a handy guide to the impact of Internet comment, see *The Guardian* online and print editions for 28 and 29 December 2007.

systems connected to the Internet, but rough estimates suggest that three-quarters of it is unpublished, sitting in closed systems such as company or government databases or on individual computers.

To some extent we have been living through a digital dark age, as much of this data is dormant or unsorted; even some originators of material cannot reliably trace or recover it. Data mining and information management technology is developing fast, but there remains an enormous backlog that may never be made systematically accessible. On the other hand, hackers have demonstrated how easily material can be found, even when an organisation does not want it to be; and recent scandals over the loss of personal data from British government systems show how easily information can be lost.¹⁷

In practice, there are no secrets on the Internet. Anything sent over the Internet, even encrypted, is potentially compromised. That has always been the case for information transferred from one place to another: messengers are captured, bridges blown up, telephones tapped, goods hijacked; and spies or whistleblowers will always find ways to spring information securely held. But the Internet brings a new dimension to the security of information, with implications for international relations.

Firstly, private information, when made public, may have a swifter and more profound impact on the conduct of world affairs. Abu Ghraib is a striking recent example of how appalling images received an instant and global circulation through the Internet. The effect was permanent damage to the reputation of the US, weakening its moral authority in the world and fuelling jihadist attacks in Iraq. This would probably have happened without the Internet, but the Internet *amplified and extended* the impact. The same applied to the steady trickle of leaks about the British Government's policy and legal opinion on war in Iraq, which so damaged the reputation of the then Prime Minister. All this material is freely available world-wide on the web.¹⁸

Secondly, diplomatic rivals, including both state and non-state actors (such as terrorist organisations), may try to hack into government systems and extract information of use to themselves. That this happens should surprise no-one. After prostitution, spying is reputedly the second oldest profession in the world. At one extreme, the Internet makes it possible for the teenager in his bedroom to hack into government systems. At the other, to break into seriously secure systems requires the full resources of a state apparatus to manage the scale of attack and sophistication of software necessary for successful attacks. But some state will be willing to make those resources available.

The third implication is that the Internet itself becomes a vulnerable part of every nation's critical infrastructure. Virus or worm attacks can be easily generated. In the past few years, they have brought large parts of the Internet and many of the systems connected to it grinding to a halt. In January 2003, the "Slammer" worm brought down the Internet and systems attached to it in most of Korea and several other Asian countries for up to 24 hours. More worrying was the targeted attack

¹⁷ Official investigations, such as the Scott and Butler Reports in the UK, have shown how much time and effort is needed to trace even recent exchanges of emails that are part of the public record. In some cases the only traceable copies were paper print-outs. Recent scandals on the loss of two disks with child benefit data, and British government information from a data centre in Iowa have been extensively covered in the press.

¹⁸ For the No 10 memos (and much other interesting material) see <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/> (eg article 8709). For the Abu Ghraib photos, see <http://www.antiwar.com/>

launched against Estonia in early May 2007 which severely damaged business in the country and prevented it communicating or making its case in public for days. The sophistication and scale of the attack and its precise targeting strongly suggested a state-sponsored attack. In which case, assuming the origin of the attack could be traced, would this count as an act of aggression against a country's virtual territory? By accident or design, the target was well chosen. Few countries have moved as far and as fast to put the business of government online as Estonia, conducting even Cabinet meetings online, via the Internet.¹⁹

This gave a taste of the risks run by all countries and governments that rely heavily on the Internet for communications and business. The potential for creating havoc in this way has not gone unnoticed by terrorist organisations or governments (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2002). In March 2007, Scotland Yard reported evidence that Al Qaeda-linked suspects had been planning a cyber attack to bring down the Internet in Britain.²⁰ Since 2001, the Pentagon has been developing a Cyberspace Command to manage the risks of such attacks being launched, and in 2006 published a Military Strategy for Cyberspace Operations. Both the US and UK devote significant resources to monitoring the Internet in an effort to spot threats from terrorists or others. Other governments have also clearly invested heavily in technology in efforts to control or exploit the Internet for their own ends (Hughes, 2007).

Governments can respond to these threats in two ways: build ever more secure systems, more heavily protected or even segregated entirely from the Internet; and/or make a virtue of necessity and make as much information as possible freely available, following the Duke of Wellington's philosophy: "Publish and be damned".

The infrastructure of the Internet has in practice proven remarkably resilient. And since business has as much to lose through disruption of the Internet or loss of private data, security solutions have been keeping just about one step ahead of the hackers, fraudsters and cyber-saboteurs. But this is only achieved through the constant vigilance, innovation and investment of the major IT companies—Microsoft, Cisco, Google, Yahoo and others—often working in close cooperation with governments. Nevertheless, the future threat to the Internet's integrity is likely to come as much from constraints on capacity, with ever more and larger files travelling across it, as from hostile attacks.

The governance of the Internet has also been the subject of international difference. The current US-dominated structure has served it well, but may not be adequate to the challenges of the future. It took many decades to agree an international Law of the Sea, and it may take equally long to agree anything beyond the existing relatively informal (and benign) structures for the Internet.²¹ In the meantime, supply and demand continue to grow exponentially, and there will always remain virtual as well as physical ungoverned spaces, from which Internet traffic and content can be spread.

¹⁹ *The Economist*, 26 May and 8 Sept 2007. Grant (2004) describes the Estonian commitment to eGovernment in 2004 and Hughes (2007) the implications of the attack. The "slammer" worm attack is described in <http://www.computerworld.com/securitytopics/>

²⁰ *The Sunday Times*, 11 March 2007.

²¹ See <http://www.netdialogue.org/> for a brief guide.

Digital Diplomacy

It is entirely valid to ask whether the Internet really makes much difference at all. The Internet is merely a new means of communication that reinforces trends that already existed. Global terrorism and NGOs were a major factor in international relations before the Internet, and though people can more easily participate in foreign policy debate, 80% still have little or no interest in doing so. Diplomacy is still conducted primarily between the governments of nation states, because they hold the levers of law and power that enable things to happen; and the most crucial discussions will still be conducted face to face, because that is necessary to establish the level of trust that allows decisions to be taken. So does the Internet really matter?

I have argued that it does, and that we ignore it at our peril. Those who believe that diplomacy can be carried on in the same old way will lose ground to those who understand the new dynamics and put in place policies to exploit them. This is Digital Diplomacy. It has implications for foreign policy-making in four areas: ideas, information, networks and service delivery.

(a) Service delivery

The Internet affects the services delivered by diplomats and foreign ministries just as it is transforming those of domestic departments and private enterprise. The changes deserve fuller treatment than space allows. But there are three points on the practicalities worth registering.

Firstly, though drastic, the differences are not profound. That is to say that diplomats continue to do the same things differently rather than do different things altogether. Email provides a universal, instant means of communication, and the applications for managing different areas of diplomatic work are increasingly web-based. The need for faster and more flexible working also means an increasing demand for remote access to government systems from laptop or hand-held devices, over the Internet. This poses challenges for security. But the cost of lost or stolen information has to be measured against the cost of inconvenience and delay.

Secondly, this simultaneous global platform has undermined the traditional distribution of diplomatic labour. Easier access to information and the disappearance of physical barriers to the decision-making hierarchies enable the creation of virtual, global structures for putting together information and advice, taking decisions, and taking responsibility for implementation. This had happened in the past, but the Internet has streamlined the process and flattened the hierarchy—allowing fewer people to work faster from dispersed geographical locations. The elimination of duplication of work and expertise between the centre and posts allows a degree of streamlining. But *only* if the challenges of sharing information securely and reliably across dispersed networks can be solved.

Thirdly, like all public services, those provided by foreign ministries and embassies are being made available online. Trade and investment support, travel advice, passport and visa applications, can all now be provided online. Physical documents and a physical presence are still needed for some parts of the process, but this is being minimised wherever possible. The distribution of labour within governments to deliver these services can also be rationalised, with the introduction of common or compatible applications, and work being shared, outsourced and re-located to the cheapest suitable location and labour force. Much of the rationalisation already

achieved by the private sector is being applied in the public sector in an effort to reduce transactional costs and improve performance.²²

The caveat is that introducing such systems in the first place is both time consuming and expensive. IT budgets have risen steadily over the past 10 years, facing Foreign Ministries and diplomatic services with increasingly difficult choices over how much to spend on staff and how much on IT to help those staff do their job. It requires a new level of sophistication and experience in business management that traditional diplomatic services have lacked. Diplomacy—unlike the work of most other government departments—remains a competitive business. Countries (and increasingly other international actors) are competing as well as collaborating with each other, so the game will go to those that adapt fastest to the realities and opportunities of the Internet-connected world.

(b) Ideas

In foreign policy, ideas matter. This has long been recognised in terms of the importance of “soft power” in achieving successful outcomes (Nye, 2004). According to many commentators, the present chaos in Iraq is not unconnected to the seriously wrong-headed ideas of US neo-conservative policy-makers about rogue states and post-conflict reconstruction (or nation-building, call it what you will), as well as their failure to understand the Islamic world and the international impact of certain actions and images that have undermined American credibility. Jihadist terrorism similarly reflects a profoundly distorted world view propagated by Islamic fundamentalists, picked up by disaffected Muslims for whom it meets an ideological need (Fukuyama, 2006). These policy or ideological arguments are not won or lost on the Internet. But it provides a medium for active exchange of ideas that we cannot afford to neglect. It is essential to influence world public opinion, not just state actors and diplomats, by being present in the right virtual spaces and calibrating the message to the various virtual audiences.

The traditional diplomatic way of arguing a case or getting ideas into circulation has been to deliver a Ministerial speech or publish a pamphlet, and pass the key messages to the radio, TV and print media (many of which are now, of course, growing fast on the Internet as they gently decline in their traditional fields). The speeches are posted on official websites and downloaded by whoever wants them. Blogs and interactive fora are only just beginning to be used (No 10 established a YouTube site in 2006; the FCO launched its first official blogs in September 2007).²³ It will require some re-thinking of how to manage policy participation in online discussions or exchanges, where it is judged these will have real impact, and whether wider engagement of policy experts rather than just Ministers and spokesmen is desirable. This reinforces the need for flatter hierarchies and swifter decisions within foreign policy establishments, already identified above.

(c) Networks

Finding, and creating, the right networks to exert influence on foreign policy debates and decisions is vital. Some networks already exist on the Internet, others have already been set up by government to bring in key stakeholders and opinion-formers to the internal policy debates. Most successfully this has been done on climate change, where active British government participation, partly through extranets, has

²² See *Transformational Government* reports, <http://www.directgov.gov.uk/>

²³ <http://www.fco.gov.uk/blogs/>

helped move the global debate onto a different path (with a little help from Al Gore). These are not public websites or chat rooms, but that is a necessary restriction to enable trusted participation. Public networks also serve a purpose, but need different handling.

One of the largest public networks, and one increasingly influential with the public, is Wikipedia. As the research for this article has demonstrated, it covers a wide range of contemporary international issues, some in considerable detail. The coverage is patchy, and only as good or reliable as the contributors. But circumstantial evidence suggests that it is increasingly heavily used by non-experts as a first port of call for basic information and a steer on where to find more. What it says, and where it directs them for further information, is therefore important.

Others exist, usually well-known to the experts in each area. Foreign policy practitioners need to make themselves aware of where their issues are being discussed virtually, and find ways to participate.

Being present—and visible—in those spaces is increasingly important if one's case is not to go by default. That is not to argue, for example, that a government should aim to get its views on the first page of a Google search at all times, or that every Wikipedia article should reflect its views—that would be an inefficient use of resources. But the examples above illustrate the difference between a dynamic presence that exerts influence, and a passive one that does not. A more targeted, intelligent and imaginative approach is necessary to achieve a dynamic web presence, building on the comparative advantage in providing authoritative and trusted information. One of the most popular and trusted British Government websites is its travel advice, where it is clearly the market leader, though in a role of service provider rather than policy protagonist. The need is to be equally effective in both roles.

(d) Information

Reliable information and informed analysis have always been at the heart of foreign policy making. The multiplication of sources of information and advice, combined with the involvement of more actors in the process, make it more important to share information and analysis more widely. Putting more of the argumentation behind policy decisions into the public domain runs counter to received diplomatic wisdom. But a gradual shift towards more proactive public disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act, and the need to ensure better public understanding of the drivers of policy (the well-intentioned impetus behind the ill-fated “dodgy dossier” on Saddam Hussein's plans for WMD) are already driving policy-makers to a more open approach.

The cost and inconvenience of security may also increasingly force governments down the Wellingtonian road for the bulk of its information exchange. But what is still required, and is striking by its absence, is an easy means of electronically transmitting secure information on issues of mutual concern between different sovereign states. The EU has been making efforts to achieve this as a foundation stone for its common foreign policy. But it continues to be inhibited by questions of trust—scarcely surprising when some governments are still hobbled by the problem of trust between their own departments and agencies in connecting to each other through secure, trusted networks. The need, however, exists and means will sooner or later have to be found to meet it.

The volume of information that must be sifted and analysed has grown just as the audience that diplomats and ministers must address has changed. Working methods must therefore adapt at the same time. The Internet has become an indispensable tool, alongside official sources, for gathering the information, and the global Internet public has become an indispensable audience to whom to explain the basis of decisions

In short, diplomats need to become masters of the Internet, not just to know where they can best collect the most reliable information to meet the deadlines for decision-making, but also to know how to exert maximum influence on the public debate through that medium. Face-to-face negotiation will remain their prerogative. But the context in which they undertake it, and the forces at work in those negotiations, are changing increasingly rapidly. And the Internet is at the heart of those changes.

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