Diplomacy in a Digital World—Foreign Policy and the Internet

Evan H. Potter, editor. Cyber-Diplomacy: Managing Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century

Review by David Clarke

Il est intéressant d'observer le cheminement intellectuel de John Helliwell à travers les ans, et de le juxtaposer avec les questions que soulève Joseph Heath. C'est un peu comme si John Helliwell les avait anticipées, et qu'il se préparait à y répondre. Paradoxalement, il est fort probable qu'il y aura entre les deux plus de points d'accords que de désaccords.

How can the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) best use information technology (IT) to communicate? That is the key question Evan H. Potter and others raise in Cyber-Diplomacy: Managing Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century.

Millions of participants are creating myriad data flows that often flow right over the floodgates foreign services everywhere build to protect and control information. That doesn’t mean diplomats are done for. It just means diplomats are doing to have to do things differently.

He uses one medium, the book, to discuss others and other how they impact on the conduct of diplomacy in general, while suggesting future directions for DFAIT. Books like this have been around for a while. Don Quixote was in a sense a novel about the impact of the printing press. Marshall McLuhan famously argued the media were creating a "Global Village." Literary critic Hugh Kenner countered with a case that the new phenomenon more closely resembled a "Global City."

This collection reflects Potter’s perspective as both an academic, teaching communications at University of Ottawa, while simultaneously a DFAIT policy communications advisor. The book is of some historical interest as it profiles the thinking of experts during...
the era of the onset of digital diplomacy. The next question is how useful is all the theory it contains. The test will be in how this all plays out in practical terms, starting with how much the suggested program input is accepted by DFAIT.

"Of all the communications technologies, the ones that are destined to be the most democratic and widespread are the new media led by the Internet and new digital media," Potter typically writes in a way that leads the reader in more directions than the DFAIT home page.

The Internet is a digital medium, so presumably this should read "new media led by the Internet and other new digital media." Or are we discussing "the Internet and other newer digital media?" Like what? The Web is indeed evolving from a telecom based network of networks into a digital soup. But discussing the impact of wireless, Web-compatible toasters on diplomacy is getting ahead of ourselves.

For many readers, the practical aspects of what the book has to say about digital diplomacy will be more interesting than the theoretical musings. Especially since digital technology devours its sound, and several of the essays are hopelessly dated. The fact that NGOs use the Web, for example, doesn’t need to be demonstrated any longer. Global broadcasting audiences are turning back to local suppliers of content in another, much newer development, to the dismay of the CNNs of this world and presumably advocates of government participation.

Potter very helpfully makes some "concluding observations based on findings in this volume."

Fundamentally, he argues, "Information technology and the rise of the mass media, while levelling the playing field, do not portend an inexorable decline in the utility of foreign ministries—quite the opposite." That is quite true. Bankers have figured out how to turn the global flow of data to their advantage. Diplomats are doing the same.

"The same technologies that are heralded as ushering in a new age of transparency are the ones that can be used by the state to increase its own surveillance, reconnaissance and communications needs," he says. It is hard to say what this means. Probably "to meet its needs more effectively, and potentially exponentially more abusively."

Potter’s own essay, “Information Technology and Canada’s Public Diplomacy,” focuses on public diplomacy as a means to enhance Canada’s "soft power." His basic point is well taken, that “among a cacophony of competing voices,” and “in the face of a decade’s worth of declining Foreign Affairs’ budgets, the new and old communications technologies’ potential to advance Canada’s interests to foreign audiences has not been fully exploited.” Potter’s second major point is that "Ottawa, in contrast to its main competitors, has not identified international broadcasting as a key element in its public diplomacy approach."

The merits of an increase to Radio Canada International’s budget aside, and doubtless the case Potter makes is a strong one, this discussion is out of place in a book on cyber-diplomacy. It is doubly disconcerting because it is the Internet that provides the cost-efficiencies a strapped DFAIT needs. Potter’s own essay, “Information Technology and Canada’s Public Diplomacy,” focuses on public diplomacy as a means to enhance Canada’s "soft power." His basic point is well taken, that “among a cacophony of competing voices,” and “in the face of a decade’s worth of declining Foreign Affairs’ budgets, the new and old communications technologies’ potential to advance Canada’s interests to foreign audiences has not been fully exploited.” Potter’s second major point is that "Ottawa, in contrast to its main competitors, has not identified international broadcasting as a key element in its public diplomacy approach."

Books received—Livres reçus


David CHEAL (ss. la dir. de), Vieillissement et évolution démographique au Canada (Les Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 2003).


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