

New trends on international communication

The Rotary Club of Newport-Balboa, Corona del Mar, CA, 92625
September, 23, 2009,

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- Last July 24th 2008, the *New York Times* published a story on a new communication strategy started by Hamas, the Islamic fundamentalist group of Palestine. The headlines said: “Hamas shifts from rockets to culture war”. And latter explains: “Hamas has suspended its use of rockets and shifted focus to winning support at home and abroad through cultural initiatives and public relations”. After describing some of the events organized with that purpose (such as a theater play, a movie premiere, a presentation of a book of poems), the *New York Times* highlights a statement of the minister of culture from Gaza (Osama Alisawi): “We are not terrorists but resistance fighters, and we want to explain our reality to the outside world. We want the writers and intellectuals of the world to come and see how people are suffering on a daily basis”.

I do not know yet what the reaction of other countries was, but at least in Spain, only some days later from this story, main newspapers brought out a report on Palestine children trying to get a Guinness Award. The challenge was to fly simultaneously the largest number of kites ever: pictures showed a beach, packed with young Palestinians trying to fly three thousand kites. Although nobody from Guinness World Records was there to register the event, the strategy set by Hamas had achieved it first hit being present in Spanish front pages with a different image.

They have perceived the importance of reaching out international public opinion and get support for their cause: “They are resistant fighters, no terrorist”. In a sense, they understand that their war has a new frontline: not only the Israel frontiers, but also the international public sphere.

It is not new. Many international actors have understood the importance to move from hard politics to soft politics: from the use of force, economic pressures, or threatening language to dialogue, engagement, and influence.

- **What is new then? What is modifying the way governments communicate with foreign publics? What new strategies are other states using to talk to us?**

What is recent is:

- the decisive role that public opinion is playing in international politics,
- the increasing of the power of persuasion as a tool to set alliances and agreements among political actors;
- and, finally, the use of new technologies which spread globally information and, potentially, allow a direct contact with people.

Tonight, I would like to focus in the last point: how new technologies and, specially, new social media (Twitter, FaceBook, YouTube,...) are being used by governments and how effective they are in international political communication.

Some key questions should be answered:

- How many people really use these new technologies? What is their profile?
 - How much effective are new technologies in influencing people perception or changing minds? Is it enough for Hamas' change of image to spread its new message thought Facebook or YouTube?
 - Are new social media a real way to develop a dialogue among different cultures?
 - How much does it matter the content you are disseminating?
 - What role does it play here credibility, the key factor for any political message?
- In order to answer, or, at least, to give some basic hints (clues?) to these questions, I would like
 - Firstly, to give a general view of the context within which international politics take place today;
 - Secondly, to describe briefly some of the new experiments that governments are developing in these days;
 - And finally, to conclude with reflections about the effectiveness of these new tool.
 - Let us go first to describe the **context**.

The world has change and political communication has to change with it.

In the first place, the democratization of access of information has turned citizens into independents observers as well as assertive participants in international politics. From the cell phone images of the repression of the monks in Burma to the last support to the opposition in Iran through Twitter and Facebook, independent citizens have been able to draw international attention at some events and denounce them. Someone has described this era as “the age of people power”.

The second feature is that non-official players (such NOGs, corporations, universities, groups of interests,) have turned out to be extremely agile and capable of mobilizing support for different causes. Even they have modified the content of international issues. As an expert on public diplomacy asserts, “Public diplomacy is no longer merely framed in terms of national interests. Public

diplomacy is also about societal issues, (...) and norm and value-based transnational conversations”¹.

In third place, something that describes well the current situation is the emergence of the so-called soft power. In words of the author, soft power is the “ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or payments”². This new power to influence others by persuasion instead of repression highlights the importance of the power of attraction, and as a consequence, the relevance of the international image in terms of credibility and authority.

Finally, foreign policy is not only a matter of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the State Department: issues on trade, agriculture, and education are sort out/managed directly by specialized departments.

Therefore, we see a growing complexity in the multilateral decision-making. New actors, with new issues, and new strategies: this entire context modifies significantly the traditional way to address international audiences. Power and influence depend as much on reputation and ability to communicate as on military supremacy or economic strength.

- We have seen how international relations have changed. Which modifications has political communication undergone?

This past summer, the death of Walter Cronkite provoked many reflections around the new media landscape: from to the “trust me” style of Cronkite (you will remember that he always signed off his program with his: “And that’s the way it is”) we have gone to the “show me why” skeptical attitude of the public. In those years, the stress was in the journalist, now it is in the audience. Even more, the audience has become a journalist itself: blogs, twitters, and Facebooks offer as much information as the traditional media, and sometimes even more accurate. There are many sources; there is an immense amount of information out there that overwhelms us everyday, and that overpowers governments as well. As The Washington Post pointed out “the nostalgia for Cronkite is nostalgia not for a lost golden age, but for a brief time when three large media corporations held a monopoly on the air, when trust could be sorted out easily and quickly with the shorthand of race, class, and education”³.

Together with these reflections, we already have facts to show the impact of new media in political communication nowadays.

New media (from cell phones to twitter) have turned out to be a channel to spread out political repressions and to cry out for international support.

¹ Melissen (ask if can be quoted in that way FROM PUBLIC DIPLOMACY TO SOCIAL DIPLOMACY? A CHANGING CONCEPT FOR A CHANGING WORLD. Clingendael Diplomatic Studies Programme Netherlands Institute of International Relations ‘Clingendael’ Background Paper. Club of Venice, Public Diplomacy Workshop, Paris, 27th May 2009.

² Nye, Soft Power) smart power (also Nye)

³ KENNICOT, Philip, “Who can we trust now?”, The Washington Post, July 21, 2009, Style, p. C2.

We all have in mind last June Iran Presidential elections. While the authorities drove out mainstream networks and newspapers, regular people provided critical messages and images on the post-electoral upheaval. They sent cell phone video images and photographs through Twitter and other forms of social networking. They have not changed the situation, but they were able to globalize the protest and to draw an indifferent Iranian diaspora into the struggle, as well as provided an effective organizing tool in the absence of strong leadership⁴.

But it won't be an isolated reaction: it could have second and durable effects.

After Burma violent reaction against the monks, disseminated through cell phones videos posted in YouTube, members of the social networking site Facebook started a group to support the Buddhist monks protesting Burma's military government. On September 2007 the group had 3.500 Facebook members; one month later, the group had grown to 426.00 members. At the end of September, the group was growing at a rate of one new member a second⁵. The group's Facebook said how people registered could show their disapproval of the military regime in 16 different countries and give information about upcoming protesting marches. Moreover, this site was used as a channel to share experiences in how to confront totalitarian regimes and to send messages of support to those politicians who spoke out against the Burma government.

The important lesson of these events is that private citizens now have means, motives, and opportunities to take political communication into their own hands and influence global public attitudes.

- So how international actors, states and non-states has adapted to this new environment? How are they trying now to tell us about their policies, objectives, and goals?

What we first can observe is that they have changed their strategy. From top-down information flow, they have moved to two ways information flow. Some authors describe this process as going from monologue to **dialogue**. Dialogue is a process of mutual influence, where political actors exchange ideas with other actors, and try to understand others' situation, perspectives, and problems.

And, as a result of that dialogue, they end by working together. There is a process of **engagement** and collaboration to achieve similar interests and goals. For instance, it is well known the case of how officials from the EU together with the NGO, Global Witness, national diplomats, journalists and the global diamond firm De Beers, have contributed to the establishment of a regime to control the sale of 'conflict' diamonds: concrete.

To sum up it is to see other publics less as targets than as possible partners, to engage people not to sell messages, to work with publics not just to inform them.

⁴ COHEN, Roger, "New Tweets, Old Needs", The New York Times, September 10th, 2009.

⁵ KOTOC, Alan, "Private Connected Citizens, Public Connected Diplomacy", <http://www.publicdiplomacy.org/86.htm>, October 21, 2007.

- In order to obtain that, the governments have started different initiatives on the new social media, striving for seizing publics abroad. Social networking sites, such as Facebook or Twitter have become a central global communications tools.

And we have many and different cases here.

In the US, although Bush Administration had already set up several initiatives, with the election of President Obama came new expectations for online social accountability as the Obama administration committed itself to “creating an unprecedented level of openness in Government”.

And really, President Obama seems to be one of the major exponents of this new trend. You can find the US Government present in Twitter, Facebook, Flickr and YouTube.

The State Department’s official blog that began in September 2007 has reached right now 46.000 of regular visitors. It is called DipNote. There, we can find a variety of high-level and front-line officials offering first assessments of current issues or just telling their experiences in Sudan, Chad or Ethiopia. It is also possible to post a comment or a question. Most of them address the Secretary of the State, Hilary Clinton, and her team takes no more than three days in give you an answer back. There is also a question of the week: “What does religious freedom mean to you?” or “How can the international community strengthen the nuclear non-proliferation regime?”. And you can follow the Secretary’s travels thorough and interactive map. So far, there is an average of 46 people per day.

Apparently, Obama’s recent trip to Ghana made that 250.000 people sent a cellphone message. The President through his blackberry directly answered some of them; most of them were answered through the web page of the State Department.

The nomination of Judith McHale, former president and CEO of Discovery Communications and current Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy, is itself significant. She has brought to the State Department much of her knowledge. As she asserts, “social networks allow the US government to reach “deep into societies” as never before, and to go beyond sort of traditional, elite audiences that would have reached previously”. It is expected that the US Government will launch new initiatives in the new social media.

The government of Sweden has opened a virtual embassy in Second Life, called Second House of Sweden. (You probably know that Second Life is a kind of a digital game where you can create a character that moves around, lives, takes decisions, meet other people in a virtual world). The Second Life Swedish embassy organizes events related to the Swiss culture, such us the Midsummer’s Eve, Valentine’s Day, or Santa Lucia’s feast right before Christmas. Any character of Second Life could go to the Embassy and participate in those events, knowing more about Swedish culture and way of life. The building of this Embassy has been designed by a Swedish architect and everything there tries

to show “Swedishness”⁶. Right now there are several embassies in Second Life, among others, The Maldives, the tiny island nation. Actually it was the first one in doing it.

Israel launched the first government blog in 2006 and held the first news-conference- by-Twitter last December. To counteract the bad image that Israel’s military strikes against Palestine were provoking, the government organized a “citizens-press-conference” on twitter to ask any questions regular people might have. As David Saranga, Consul for Media and Public Affairs has recently mentioned, it was the way to go directly to the public opinion, avoiding filters of the traditional media. Those traditional media, in his opinion, always portray a biased and negative image of the country, avoiding to cover regular life and other interesting events that are taking place in the country. And not only that, going trough internet allows regular citizens “to spread our messages all around the world and to give the Israeli narrative worldwide attention”⁷.

We see here different quite sophisticated attempts to reach out regular people, young people, and to engagement in a closer relationship with the government of Israel, with the government of Sweden of with the government of Israel.

- But how effective are being those new tools?

If look at the Obama’s administration and make an evaluation of the last outcomes, they do not seem, at least so far, very successful. Let’s have a look to two of the main challenges the US has:

- North Korea responded by testing nuclear weapon, firing missiles toward US allies and threatening the US with a “fire shower of nuclear retaliation”.
- The Iran’s regime reaction has been to keep on going with nuclear enrichment facilities, to conduct a fraudulent election and imprison a variety of political opponents

As Michael Gerson pointed out some months ago in The Washington Post, “The problem is not engagement itself – which was, after all, attempted in various forms by the previous administration. The difficulty is that the Obama foreign policy team has often argued that the reason for tension and conflict with nations such as North Korea and Iran is a lack of adequate American engagement. But attempting to engage North Korea and Iran so visibly, Obama is dramatically exposing the limits of engagement – and building the case for confrontation”⁸.

Last week I read in an expert’s blog (the name is Tori Horton) that since last February 20th there have been only 31 discussions posts in the State Department Facebook page. In all, there were only three meaningful discussions, and only

⁶ See <http://secondhouseofsweden.com>

⁷ SARANGA, David, “The use of New Media in Public Diplomacy” <http://www.onejerusalem.org>, June, 3rd, 2009.

⁸ GERSON, Michael, “Death of a doctrine”, The Washington Post, July 29th, 2009.

one received a response from the State Department acknowledging a student visas issue and providing an alternative solution⁹.

A Swedish researcher has recently told me that he has evidence of that a half of the people who visit the Swedish Embassy in Second Life are Swedish people, and not foreign visitors, who want just to know how it works. He also highlighted that the main impact of the Virtual Embassy was on traditional media, which covered the initiative out of curiosity¹⁰. The conclusion is that the Second Life Embassy was useful to portray the high tech achievements of Sweden, but not to provide regular services of an Embassy.

Apparently, these initiatives have allowed governments to address directly people; to overpass media with their filters and critical vision; to spread their message through other regular citizens who help in disseminating it.

However, as we have seen, their still with a very little impact.

- What conclusions can be drawn from all these consequences?
- 1. The first conclusion is that new social media are being used to change the appearance but not to really modify politics. What government attempt is to rebrand the country (as a high tech expert or as “someone” who belongs to the new tribe of (internautas) but not to really dialogue with people or to engage them in new projects or political goals.

Many observers note that the way in which most of these approaches are applied, is in essence still state centric and based on a notion of a public diplomacy that is coordinated from the centre.¹¹ Governments do recognize the role that civil society needs to play - and in many cases is already playing -, but find it hard and dangerous to leave a state-centred approach, and pursue a network-oriented model of political communication.

- 2. The second conclusion will be that much of the attention has been focused on the excitement of using new tools, regardless the content they disseminate.

This tendency breaks a basic law that rules the so-called soft power. As Joseph Nye indicates “countries that are likely to be more attractive in postmodern international relations are those that help to frame issues, whose culture and ideas are closer to prevailing international norms, and whose credibility abroad is reinforced by their values and policies”¹².

- 3. But there is not only a lack of content, we also find an absence of purpose. It is, how do you decide on the message you want to send to these connections that

⁹ HORTON, Tory, “The US Department of State Social Networking Progress Report, Tori Horton’s blog, August 13 th, 2009

¹⁰ An extended analysis of the Swedish Embassy in Second Life, can be found in PAMMENT, James (forthcoming 2010) Public diplomacy & the spatio-temporal turn. Stockhol: JMK.

¹¹ Rhiannon Vickers, cited in Kathy R. Fitzpatrick, ‘Advancing the New Public Diplomacy: A Public Relations Perspective’, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, vol. 2, no. 3 (2007), pp. 187-211, at p. 202.

¹² NYE, Joseph (2004) Soft Power, pp.31-32

you've built? You have to have a plan"¹³. Is it engagement or dialogue a purpose by itself? No. It is only an attitude, a new appearance, a specific way to do things. But it is not a goal by itself.

4. New social media have their own requirements and have to be used following specific conditions. If governments have to find new ways to communicate to the people, they have to adapt their communication to the new rules implied by new social media. They have to delimit with accuracy different publics, have to offer practical services, answer specific questions, tailor information to each receiver, give products for free...General statements, press releases, speeches do not fit twitter, face book or YouTube.
5. Despite all new trends, the most important condition still prevails. That is credibility. It does not matter how sophisticated is your strategy or innovative your technology. As it always has been, you still need a coherent message and a solid/genuine/authentic credibility to succeed, eventually, in international communication.

Hamas can try any tactics, can contract the best public relations firm: if they fail to show with facts a real will to solve peacefully the lasting conflict with Israel, they will always be a terrorist group not a resistance fighters, as they pretend.

The actual dialogue occurring in these spaces is still lacking in both content and engagement. Be proactive and prepared to take risks/do things differently: "think web"¹⁴.

¹³ TALEV, Margaret & STROBEL, Warren 'Obama "friends" the World with Facebook, Twitter diplomacy. The Miami Herald, July, 31, 2009

¹⁴ MORGAN, Richard. Club of Venice-Public Diplomacy workshop, Paris 27 May 2009. Background paper).