

## ENGAGING FILIPINOS AND THE WORLD THROUGH DIGITAL DIPLOMACY

by *Virgemarie A. Salazar*

Half of the world's population is now connected to the internet, 3.77 billion to be exact, whereas social media users numbered to about 2.80 billion or 37 percent of the global population, according to the [Digital in 2017 Report](#). With the upsurge of internet and social media users, governments and businesses have come to realize the advantages of using social media platforms in communicating with the public. Most foreign ministries and embassies now have social media accounts on Twitter and Facebook to connect with their audiences in real time. As people gain more access to information through social media, those in the foreign service have to adapt to the different ways technology is changing diplomatic functions. Only then can they harness the benefits and manage the risks brought about by these innovations.

### *Digital diplomacy*

Digital diplomacy is a broad term which refers to the overall impact of information and communication technology (ICT) on the practice of diplomacy. This definition is similar to that of [e-diplomacy](#), which is the use of the web and ICT to help carry out diplomatic objectives. [Digital diplomacy](#) has three components: (1) public diplomacy and nation branding, (2) organizing information for diplomats and constituents, and (3) information gathering.

Foreign ministries have incorporated social media and other digital technologies in their public diplomacy efforts. Disseminating information through social media enables foreign ministries to send official messages directly to audiences in a quick manner and at low cost without convening a press conference or sending a press release to news agencies. Social media is also a tool for [nation branding](#) strategy of states aiming to cultivate a positive image and reputation in the international arena. Moreover, digital media make networking and knowledge management easier especially when soliciting ideas and solutions from multiple sources, also known as crowdsourcing.

[Engaging and listening](#) are important factors in digital diplomacy. Compared to the one-way flow of information in traditional diplomacy, social media foster dialogue or a symmetrical communication flow. Through feedback, foreign ministries and international organizations can gauge public opinion, which is important in shaping foreign policy. Digital technologies have truly revolutionized the conduct of diplomacy. Thus, people in the foreign service have to keep up with the times to remain relevant and efficient.

Twitter seems to be the social media channel of choice for many world leaders and diplomats in reaching out to the general public and international actors to influence their perception and behavior toward certain issues. [Twiplomacy Study 2017](#) identified 856 Twitter accounts of heads of states and foreign ministers in 178 countries, representing 92 percent of all United Nations (UN) Member States, with a combined audience of 356 million followers. The UN, for instance, has 13 million followers across its various Twitter accounts. Its official UN Twitter account (@UN) alone has 9.37 million followers as of September 2017. The UN capitalizes on its presence online by focusing on its activities and programs, addressing misinformation, and opening spaces for the public to provide feedback. It delivers news and information in six different languages to effectively connect with its audiences.

### *Best practices*

The Office of eDiplomacy of the US Department of State is ahead of the curve on digital diplomacy for it provides innovative solutions to strengthen the convergence between technology and diplomacy. It operates several [knowledge management platforms](#) to offer means of communication and collaboration among personnel in the department. One example is Corridor, a networking platform that enables diplomats and staff to tap into the expertise of colleagues worldwide. The State Department also has its online wiki encyclopedia called Diplopedia, which functions as a reference tool for knowledge-sharing. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton saw the importance of social media tools in promoting foreign policy and national security interests; thus, she made e-diplomacy a significant component of the [21<sup>st</sup> Century Statecraft initiative](#).

In Asia, India is leading the way in the digital realm as it continues to invest in building its online reach. India's Ministry of External Affairs has explored the impact of digital media on diaspora engagement by developing a mobile application that acts as a single window source of all information related to the Ministry's citizen-centric services and outreach activities. The app was designed in cooperation with Facebook to connect people with the different Indian missions abroad. Currently, over 165 Indian foreign missions have accounts on Twitter, 172 are on Facebook and 124 have their own websites. The app serves as a one-stop shop of available social media platforms of foreign posts making it easier for Indian nationals to connect with embassies and consulates without going through the individual websites.

Similarly, the Philippine Embassy in Washington, DC created a mobile application to connect Filipinos to their homeland. The Radyo Tambuli mobile app, which was launched formally in January 2015, allows users to listen to daily newscast from partner radio stations in the Philippines, children's stories in Filipino, original Filipino music, interviews, Filipino language lessons, and forums organized by the embassy. It includes a two-way emergency notification for Filipinos abroad requesting for assistance. The app is also linked to the embassy's Twitter and Facebook pages, and e-mail address. The DFA can further improve on the contents and features of the app to make it more responsive to the needs of overseas Filipinos.

#### *Toward developing a strategy*

In the Philippines, 58 percent of the population has access to the internet and social media. In the Digital in 2017 Report, the Philippines ranked 23<sup>rd</sup> among countries with the highest internet penetration. Likewise, mobile is a fast-growing platform accounting for 38 percent of all web traffic in the country, up by almost a third from 2016. Internet use in the country is 8 percent higher than the global average; while social media penetration rate is higher than the average of 47 percent in Southeast Asia. Although issues of connectivity and digital divide persist, especially in rural areas, usage of digital media in the country is steadily increasing.

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A digital diplomacy strategy should be a fundamental part of the DFA's communication plans to leverage the benefits of digital tools in achieving the department's overall objectives. For one, identifying main audiences, both in the local and international spheres, is key in developing a strategy since having a diverse audience is expected. The DFA interacts with the domestic public, including those in government, private sector, academe, and civil society groups as well as the diplomatic community. Internationally, foreign posts are tasked to reach out to overseas Filipinos and strengthen linkages with host governments, business groups, international organizations, and interest groups, among others. A keen understanding of main audiences will allow the DFA to communicate appropriate messages to its target audience. With digital tools, a higher standard of transparency and accountability must be upheld. Therefore, those in the foreign service have to be trained not only on the technical aspects but also on protocols regarding the responsible use of social media to protect the organization's reputation and avoid security risks.

Moreover, a successful digital strategy entails a needs assessment to determine the necessary resources and structures. Having a mainstreaming strategy is also important to guide units within the organization in their implementation of the action plans.

Under the Strategic Plan 2017-2022, the DFA recognized the need to strengthen its public diplomacy efforts through increased online and social media presence. While this is a step in the right direction, the DFA has to consider other applications of ICTs beyond public diplomacy and nation branding into areas such as knowledge management, diaspora engagement, networking, and crisis management. 🌸

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