Russia's Digital Diplomacy: The good, the bad and the satirical

Ilan Manor, Department of Communications, Tel Aviv University

Abstract

Recent years have seen the digitalization of diplomacy. Studies investigating Russia's use of digital technologies have focused on its nefarious or unofficial activities such as spreading fake news stories during the Crimean crisis. This essay examined Russia's official use of digital technologies in the form of Embassy and MFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) Twitter accounts. The essay demonstrates that Russian Embassies use Twitter to resonate with local narratives while the MFA employs historical narratives to justify present day policies.

Introduction

The digitalization of diplomacy has advanced at a remarkable pace. In less than a decade, MFAs have launched virtual Embassies, created social media empires, written their own algorithms and created smartphone applications (Duncombe, 2019; Hocking & Melissen, 2015; Seib, 2012). 90% of UN member states have established some form of digital presence, and while some invest in social media campaigns others opt for big data analysis through which nefarious digital activities may be monitored (Bjola, 2017; Manor, 2019).

The digital diplomacy research corpus segments diplomacy's digitalization into three stage. The first, which lasted from 2008 to 2011, was marked by diverse approaches to digital diplomacy. The Swedish MFA, for instance, created a virtual Embassy on the virtual world of Second Life. This Embassy was meant to serve as a global cultural institution as computer users from all over the world could attend online film festivals or meet Swedish artists (Pamment, 2012). The US launched a virtual Embassy to Iran. This website was meant to overcome the limitations of offline diplomacy and enable US diplomats to converse with Iranians despite the absence of bi-lateral ties (Khatib, Dutton and Thelwall, 2012). The second stage followed the Arab Spring of 2011. These revolutions surprised diplomats who failed to anticipate the fall of local autocrats (Manor, 2015). In its wake, MFAs hoped to converse with foreign populations online, and 'listen' to online conversations. By

monitoring local conversations on social media diplomats hoped to anticipate future shocks to the international system.

The Arab Spring demonstrates the link between online and offline diplomacy. Offline revolutions shaped diplomats' use of digital tools while online tools were used to anticipate offline events. The third stage of diplomacy's digitalization started with Russia's annexation of Crimea. Indeed, Russia's digital activities between 2014 and 2016 dramatically altered the trajectory of diplomacy's digitalization. During the Crisis, Russia used fake news sites to allege that Ukrainian nationals were threatening the lives of Russian ethnic minorities. News sites suggested that Ukrainians were raping Crimean women and crucifying young children (NATO Stratcom, 2015; Sazonov, Müür & Mölder, 2016). This led MFAs to view social media as a competitive arena in which diplomats vie for the attention of online publics hoping to shape their worldviews.

During the Brexit referendum, Russia used a network of thousands of fake social media accounts to spread pro-Brexit messages (Mostrous, Bridge & Gibbons, 2017). While the impact of these activities is debatable, they suggested that digital disinformation could shape individuals' offline behaviors. Potential Brexit voters, exposed to a fake online reality in which hundreds of thousands of British citizens were willing to leave the EU, may have been motivated to storm the voting booths. Subsequently, the British Foreign Office created a big data unit tasked with monitoring and containing social media-based disinformation campaigns. Online networks such as Twitter and Facebook, once associated with the democratic aspirations of the Arab Spring, were now labeled a menace to national security.

Finally, Russia's use of Facebook ads to try and sway the 2016 US elections, led MFAs to adopt a proactive approach when dealing with nefarious social media content. The Israeli MFA has taken to writing its own algorithms which identify and remove anti-Semitic Facebook posts that call for violence against Jews (Manor, 2019). Russia's digital activities thus led MFAs to use specific technologies to contend with specific national threats.

Yet Russia's official use of digital diplomacy also warrants closer inspection. In this article I explore two case studies that illustrate how Russian diplomats use social media to obtain concrete diplomatic goals. The first case study examines the use of Twitter by the Russian Embassy to the UK. The second, examines the Russian MFA's use of historic narratives to shape contemporary worldviews.

The article will conclude by identifying the benefits and limitations of Russia's official use of social media.

Russia in the UK

Since 2014, the Russian Embassy to the UK has adopted a consistent tone on Twitter, one that rests on abrasive language and satire. One notable tweet was published in December of 2016.[1] The tweet included the image of a duck, with the word 'Lame' written across it. The text of the tweet stated that "President Obama expels 35 Russian diplomats in cold war déjà vu. As everybody, including American people, will be glad to see the last of this hapless Adm (administration)".

At first glance this tweet may seem undiplomatic in nature. If diplomacy's role is to maintain the tranquility of international affairs, then Russia's crude attack on President Obama negates diplomacy's principal function and spirit. And yet this tweet was actually a sophisticated rhetorical device which included several messages. The first is that President Obama is lame. This message would be clear to all Twitter users regardless of their education and familiarity with American politics. The second message suggests that Obama is a 'lame duck', or a powerless President bereft of power and influence. There may also be an assertion here that while Obama belongs to the irrelevant past, Russia belongs to the relevant future. In other words, Russia is an important global actor that has outlived the Obama presidency

Finally, the tweet suggests that Russian diplomacy is clear and understandable to the common man or woman. Unlike other nations that hide behind long diplomatic messages ripe with double entendres and measured words, Russia speaks its mind directly and frankly.

A second noteworthy tweet was published at the height of UK-Russian tensions as the UK government alleged that Russia had used a nerve agent to attack former double spy Sergei Skripal in the English city of Salisbury. The tweet featured the image of television's detective Hercule Poirot as portrayed by the British actor David Suchet.[2] The text read "In absence of evidence, we definitely need Poirot in Salisbury!". Here, the Embassy relied on satire to deliver a clear message, one attesting to the incompetence of the UK's investigation of the Salisbury attacks. By invoking the literary icon, the Russian Embassy also suggested that the British government's findings were as ficticious as Poirot himself. Finally, by relying on Poirot the Embassy may have sought to deflect

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[1] https://twitter.com/RussianEmbassy/status/814564127230271489
[2] https://twitter.com/russianembassy/status/975309334191230977?lang=en

allegations against Russia, as in Poirot novels the criminal is often the least likely culprit. Indeed, unofficial Russian digital channels maintained that Ukraine was behind the attack hoping to harm UK-Russian relations (BBC news, 2018). Yet above all, this tweet was tailored to British digital publics as it invoked two British icons- the author Agatha Christie and the beloved Poirot TV show.

Over the past 7 years the Russian Embassy has published more than 60 satirical tweets, all similar in tone to the aforementioned tweets as they combine crude language with humor. The question that follows is whether these tweets have enabled the Embassy to obtain any concrete diplomatic goals? On the one hand, such satirical tweets have 'gone viral' and were shared by hundreds of thousands of Twitter users. This has enabled the Embassy to reach new online audiences. Moreover, these satirical tweets have attracted the attention of the offline media. Several newspapers have reprinted Russia's tweets while arguing that they are an affront to diplomacy (Buckley, 2017). Yet thorough these articles Russia was also able to reach offline publics. Moreover, such tweets enabled the Embassy to directly refute British allegations of Russian misconduct. On the other hand, the tweets failed to narrow the rift between the two governments and have not altered the perceptions of British twitter users who still regard Russia as a national security threat.

Russian Historical Narratives

At the level of the foreign ministry, Russian tweets often deal with historical events. That the past is present in digital diplomacy is not surprising. Many nations who have historical moral blemishes use social media to re-craft their nation's image. One example is the Lithuanian MFA which has invested resources in rebuffing allegations that Lithuanians were ardent supporters of the Nazi regime and took part in Nazi atrocities against Jews (Manor, 2019). Morality plays an important role in online diplomacy given that norms and values play an important role in offline diplomacy (Van Ham, 2013). Nations associated with negative values such as racism and human rights' violations find it harder to form coalitions in multi-lateral sessions, to get elected to elite UN forums such as the Human Rights Council or attract FDIs (Foreign Direct Investment).

Many Russian tweets center on WW2 and Russia's historic role in defeating Nazism. One Tweet, published on February of 2021 read "In February 1943, Ukrainian nationalists headed by Stepan Bandera launched a campaign to annihilate the #Polish population in Western #Ukraine. During the

1943-1944 'Volhynia massacres' more than 100K people, including women, children & the elderly, were brutally killed".[3]

A few months earlier, in October of 2020, the MFA published a tweet memorializing the 1943 Kiev offensive writing "76 years ago the #RedArmy - millions of Russians, Ukrainians, Belarussians, Kazakhs & other peoples of the #USSR - completely liberated Soviet #Ukraine from the Nazi aggressors & occupants as well as from regular forces of the collaborators #WeRemember"[4]. In both cases, the MFA employed several black and white photographs depicting Red Army troops or Polish victims of Ukrainian aggression.

These tweets are important as they illustrate Russia's use of historical narratives to narrate contemporary events. During the Crimean Crisis of 2014, the Russian government argued that Ukrainian nationalists have staged a coup ousting a legally elected President. Russia even went as far as suggesting that these Ukrainians were led by neo-Nazis (Harding, 2014). Both of the aforementioned tweets contribute to this argument as both argue that Ukrainians nationalists have historically relied on horrid violence to obtain their goals, while Russia has historically opposed such nationalists as part of its commitment to combating Fascism. Such was the case in Crimea, when, according to the Russian MFA, Ukrainian nationalists were threatening the lives of Russian ethnic minorities. In this light, Russia's annexation of Crimea was a humanitarian mission. Moreover, Russia's policy in Crimea was in line with the nation's historic opposition to Fascism. As was the case during the Kiev offensive, the 'Red Army' has liberated Crimea, not occupied it.

The use of historic images by the Russian MFA warrants elaboration. Susan Sontag (2001) has argued that pictures play an evidentiary role in society. For instance, they are used in courts of law to prove that a certain event did in-fact take place. Through historical images, the Russian MFA may have sought to validate its historic assertion and, by extension, justify its present day policies in Crimea. It is thus through the past that Russia narrates its present. Moreover, by associating Russia's policies in Crimea with WW2, the MFA offered its followers a simple template through which world affairs may be understood. Diplomats often rely on historical templates to help make sense of the present (Miskimmon, O'loughlin & Roselle, 2014). For this reason, Western diplomats describe tensions between China and the US as a new Cold War, while Israeli diplomats assert that the

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[3] https://twitter.com/nahidroxan/status/1359247000227749889
[4] https://twitter.com/EmbassyofRussia/status/1321451074570563585?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw

Western powers use a policy of appeasement when dealing with Iran's nuclear program, appeasement historically linked with England and France's failure to oppose Adolf Hitler and avert WW2.

The benefits of the Russian MFA's approach to digital diplomacy lies in the fact that contemporary international crises are complex ones. The Syrian Civil War, the War in Yemen and the Crimean Crisis are all but a tangled web of national interests. Indeed, one cannot resolve the Syrian Civil War without taking into account the interests of Iran, Russia, Israel, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the US and Syria. Historical analogies simplify complex crisis through the use of familiar templates and a clear distinction between good and bad, nationalists and Russian liberators. As such, the Russian MFA may be able to shape the worldviews of digital publics hoping to better understand a world that seems to be in a state of perpetual crisis.

Conclusions

Official Russian digital diplomacy may be characterized by three elements. The first is consistency. Over the past 7 years, the Russian Embassy in London has consistently employed humor online while the MFA has relied on historical narratives. Consistency is crucial in digital diplomacy. The more consistent a state's narration of events, the more it may impact the worldviews of offline publics. This is the primary goal of digital diplomacy. Indeed, since its inception, digital diplomacy sought to shape the opinions of foreign publics as a means of influencing foreign governments Pamment, 2012.

Second, both case studies explored in this article illustrate how digital diplomacy content may impact a nation's image, the reason being that an Embassy's online activities and tone project onto the offline state. For instance, the Russian Embassy's use of abrasive tone suggests that Russia does not mince words. It speaks its mind clearly while rejecting diplomatic jargon. Russia speaks to the common man or woman and it speaks truth to power. This all suggests that Russia is a confident world power, one that does not fear confrontation. It is no longer the weak state that it was during the 1990's.

Third, both case studies demonstrate that Russian diplomats tailor their online messages to specific audiences. The Russian Embassy in London tailored its online communications by making frequent references to British culture, as was the case with the Poirot tweets. Moreover, Russia's tone may have resonated with specific segments of the British population- those who ascribe to populist

worldviews. The Brexit debate saw pro-Brexit movements rely on common populist arguments such as a rebuke of political correctness which is but a means through which the elite suppresses the silent majority. Brexit and populist narratives also accuse states of lying to the public, withholding information and maintaining 'deep states' through which elites secretly manipulate the masses. The 'Lame Duck' tweet resonated with the rebuke of political correctness, the Poirot tweet fueled suspicion of the British government which was manufacturing evidence against Russia (Betz and Johnson 2004; Castanho, Vegetti & Littvay, 2017; Gerbaudo 2018; Greven, 2006). Finally, the MFA's historical tweets resonated with populist movements among Russia's neighbors such as Poland and Hungary where governments promise to summon a nation's glorious past to its present. By resonating with these narratives, both the Embassy and the MFA may have increased the impact of their online communications as they subscribed to the same point of view adopted by certain digital publics.

While the limited analysis presented in this article precludes the author from characterizing Russian digital diplomacy as a whole, it does offer initial insight into how Russian diplomats use social media sites to obtain concrete diplomatic goals. In the case of the UK, it is winning over populist users and attracting new social media followers through online virality. In the case of the MFA, justifying present day policies through historical analogies. And in both cases, diplomats' messages project onto the offline Russian state. From these tweets Russia emerges as a world power that is not afraid of confronting the 'West' while at the same time staying true to its policies of protecting all Russians from the specter of nationalism and fascism.

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