Working Paper

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The Impact of the Digital Revolution on Foreign Ministries' Duty of Care

Table of Contents

The Impact of the Digital Revolution on Foreign Ministries' Duty of Care [1]

How are MFAs coping with helping people abroad in an increasingly online world? The "digital shift" in consular assistance reveals how the effectiveness and legitimacy of ministries of foreign affairs' (MFAs) are becoming more dependent on citizen participation. In the years ahead governments are likely to become more explicit in making the argument that a digitally literate or digitally native citizenry will assist government assistance to nationals abroad, and that nationals abroad should assume more responsibility for their own security.

New dynamics between government and people

For now, social media are lowering the threshold for citizens abroad who want their government to provide security through assistance which, to some extent, makes technology a driver for the "duty of care". But MFAs also see how digital tools can be of assistance in responsabilizing individuals. In the meantime, changing conceptions of citizenship may result in people trapped in crisis situations seeing themselves as empowered contributors rather than mere recipients of government assistance.

Trends in government assistance to nationals overseas - single cases and those concerning people trapped in *en masse* crises - point to an evolution in the relationship between subjects and objects of government assistance. Technological change is offering greater exchange potential via new tools and platforms. They are shaping a new environment in which citizens and government swap more information and in which government and citizens-turned-customers renegotiate the quality of their interaction.

Society, rather than government, is setting today's fast-evolving technological standard and digital technologies help recalibrate the balance of consular relations between MFAs and society. Empowering governments and people, digitization creates a new relationship dynamic that is colliding with old routines. The new environment offers opportunities for engaging with citizens in more active roles, and spotting openings for collaboration with civil society actors that compensate for limited resources and capabilities. Governments have an undiminished *moral* duty of care, but the customer profile is changing.

Sea-change in MFA communications

In diplomacy digitization is first of all experienced as a change in the style and practice of communications. Top-down messaging at a pace set by government is unrealistic when the demands for assistance are, as a rule, coming in from the outside. Interestingly, direct dialogue between MFAs and citizens is much more common in the consular field than in public diplomacy. Governments are entering into direct, online conversations with citizens, although the bulk of electronic communication is still fairly traditional and usually relates directly to offline work. Real 'webcare' in the consular field is still rare.

The immediacy of the digital age is making consular diplomacy more political than ever before. Perceptions of inadequate or sluggish government assistance tend to go viral within minutes rather than hours. MFAs across the world have come to the conclusion that they need to engage with people via their privately used communication platforms rather than through government channels. The mere fact that digital media rank equally to official information channels is a sea-change in the history of communication by MFAs with a penchant for controlling information flows. But there is a lingering old-school reluctance to involve end-users in innovation. A good example is that most of the world's governments fail to depart from the outdated assumption that their citizens will voluntary register

before going abroad. Governmental bureaucracies have only partially come to terms with ever-changing norms underpinning their citizens' communicative behaviour.

Data reliability

Governments in different parts of the world have learned lessons from public criticism of their relatively poor use of social media during the 2011 Arab Spring. Whilst social media were widely hailed for their mobilizing power in the Arab street, Western governments had little interaction with users of SMS, Facebook, Twitter or YouTube. The fluid realm of social media forces MFAs to think through the implications of operating in an increasingly online world. For the younger generations, social networking sites are all about connected communities embracing participation, openness and ongoing conversation, although privacy concerns are growing. Adapting language to home audiences in idiom that is appealing and effective constitutes a test for diplomatic and consular communication. Words have of course been crucial to all diplomacy from its inception, but in the open public space diplomatic language is an entirely different ball game, implying different types of risk on a changing diplomatic playing field. Diplomatic communication with different kinds of interlocutors will become more open, but never relaxed. Making mistakes will be considered unavoidable and more easily forgiven. But in the town square the diplomats' words will forever be weighed differently from the people they represent.

Data mining is at the heart of any operation aimed at securing nationals abroad, as well as the organization of data within the MFA in order to better manage work flow and customer use. If there is one thing that all MFAs are struggling with, it is that valid data are potentially obscured by the unreliable. In the 2016 advisory report Future FCO, digital diplomat Tom Fletcher makes a point that applies to MFAs the world over: "The FCO is not yet in a position to 'mine' even its own internal data for insight, which means we miss important patterns and trends." Regarding consular assistance, literature

varying from crisis management to information science advocates a move away from top-down control and dissemination of information to acceptance that the gathering of data and their provision to the public should become more socially distributed. Some of the recommendations may be challenging for those making decisions about securing people in real-life situations, such as the acceptance of a level of uncertainty in the data. Other suggestions that make a lot of sense are using social media and building online relationships before crises or working with partners that have trusted data, varying from companies to friendship groups, and analysing social media in the interests of assisting nationals abroad.

From Nepal to Paris

Reaching people is of critical importance during crises and a number of MFAs have begun exploring the potential of technologies enabling the targeting and messaging of people within given geographical areas. Public pressure paved the way for effective use of social media as a resource for crisis management. This implies a different way of government looking at society, and the ways in which it can help co-create solutions that were conventionally seen as a government responsibility. For many countries with citizens in Nepal, the 2015 earthquake "changed everything". As a perfect storm, it provided an opportunity for governments to improve on past performance and demonstrate the potential of social media in crisis response. The fruits of the lessons of Nepal, such as the need for continued staff training in social media usage and developing a robust data analysis capacity were employed at the time of the 2015 Paris attacks, both in terms of broadcasting advice via social media as well as encouraging the public to provide data themselves. The two contrasting consular emergencies in Asia and Europe experienced the challenge of balancing 'online' and 'offline'. The Paris crisis exhibited a much larger base of social media users tweeting and posting about the attack in a concentrated metropolitan area, however this produced an "information cascade",

whereby platforms like Twitter and Facebook were inundated with posts of dubious reality, complicating action on the ground.

Geospatial mapping

Social media use enables the merging of users' digital footprints with geographical data, so as to create a profile of people's movements. Geospatial mapping is still an ambitious undertaking for most MFAs and for some of them a distant prospect. During crises, most if not all of consular services can only detail where people are on a pie chart, but not yet on a dynamic map. The crowd-sourcing of information for these ends gives NGOs and aid responders large data sets with minimal devotion of their own resources. This appeals to MFAs facing budgetary restrictions and those that are confronted with an ever-growing demand for assistance. Volunteered geographic information offers much better results than proprietary data, although there are also partnerships with business. With citizen expectations as the main driver, plus the expected policy benefits from seeing people and their movements during emergencies where the security of nationals is at stake, the geospatial map should be added to the consular toolkit in the years to come.

Staying abreast of digital trends

Most digital innovations have been introduced as a result of public pressure, but in the professional culture of MFAs, citizen-driven modes of operation can feel like a novelty. Another recent development breaking with tradition is that open source data are now accepted as "good enough", or even the best available information, in times of international emergencies. In the history of diplomatic communication, social media being used by people that are now being given equal status to official communication channels during crises is little short of revolutionary. As has become clear in the course of our argument, diplomats find themselves in an unstated race with a more digitally agile and savvy civil society, and MFA effec-

tiveness in the consular field is now dependent on the ability to stay abreast of digital trends. Another notable change impacting on digital work practices in large-scale international crises is that successful collaboration with non-governmental actors has become a condition of success. This adaptation and change of work processes is often experienced as profound by the diplomats themselves, and bound to seep through and reinforce similar trends in non-service oriented diplomatic work.

Understanding behavioural change

Digitization offers an intriguing opportunity for breaking with the past, building on the recent trend among consular services across the world placing more emphasis on individuals taking more responsibility for their own actions when travelling abroad. This has to do with more participatory behaviour in international crises, with people casting themselves as empowered contributors rather than victims or spectators. In the realm of the duty of care there is room for a more nuanced picture than that of MFAs as service providers and citizens as passive recipients of assistance. Other recent research points to shifting perceptions of citizenship and changing civic information styles based on diversifying and sharing content, self-expression, participation and problem-solving[2].

Renegotiating government-citizen relations

MFAs and the public are entering an age in which digital citizens' behavioural codes are in flux and thus contribute to the reconfiguration of the relationship between MFAs and the public. This exploration of the effect of digitization on crisis assistance to nationals abroad throws a light on key changes in how an empowered domestic public and empowered government see one another. Consular assistance in the digital age constitutes

[2] Wells, »Two eras of civic information and the evolving relationship between civil society organizations and young citizens«

therefore not just a technological challenge. For government the understanding of change in people's behaviour comes first and the business of helping people abroad also influences how MFAs see themselves and go about their work. The duty of care in the digital age offers a window on the renegotiation of government-citizen relations and, in the context of this narrative, with greater potential for governments to mobilize citizens for their purposes.

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