

DIPLOMACY IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

by Nirupama Rao

Mr Engida,

Ambassador Kamboj,

Distinguished Ambassadors,

My dear friends.

Diplomacy, I hear fellow diplomatists say, is a fine art, an heir to centuries of epochal deal making, system building, peace-making, conflict avoidance and resolution, a profession in many ways for the ages. In the minds of men and women at large, however, it is also seen as a profession conducted in rarefied environs, in dizzying ivory towered heights, away from the hurly burly of earthling life. In my own country, I have often faced the perennial question, asked in a condescending tone by colleagues in other branches of the government: “What do you do in the Foreign Service?” as if we diplomats live in a never land of whisky-marinated escapism, a kind of lagoon with flamingos flying over it as never land was once described. Back in 1959, Harold Nicholson said, “There are those who regard the Foreign Service as a kind of bird sanctuary for elegant young men ...arrayed in striped pants and spending most of their time handing sugar cookies to ladies of high society. Conversely there

are those who regard diplomatists as an international gang of intriguers intent upon ensnaring the Great White Soul of the United States.” Thus, diplomacy in the minds of those outside the foreign services and chancelleries of the world, is rarely accorded the definition of a profession, tied to life and existence on our planet, in the way that medicine, civil service , or law or a career in the military may be regarded. For those of us, however, who have practiced diplomacy through our working lives, it is regarded as a transnational profession as evolved, requiring as much training and growing specialization, advocacy and negotiation skills, analytical acuity, keeping up with new technologies and methods of functioning, and the possession of situational and terrain awareness or the steady hand that is, as Lawrence Durrell once said, a prerequisite to doing a job well, as any of the other professions just mentioned. The closed mind, unattuned to change, creativity, to the ability to pursue the new and untested, that is risk-averse (you see we diplomats face hazards, but we normally outlive them) does not belong in the profession of diplomacy. So, at the expense of self-congratulation, we as diplomats like to see ourselves as change makers and pace setters in the corridors of government and in the ecosphere of statecraft. Of course, as the skeptics might say, conditions apply.

At the core of diplomacy lies the art of communication, communication with credibility. We diplomats, as it has been said

before, like to keep things in a negotiable state. It has also been observed that diplomats approach all problems with an open mouth. Fluency in communication, eloquence combined with economy in the use of language, possessing the antennae to pick up surround sound, the reverberations from the ground, that is what makes good diplomacy tick. This is the age of the ‘naked diplomat’ as famously defined by Ambassador Tom Fletcher, lately retired from Her Majesty’s British Foreign Service: the naked diplomat with the smart phone, shorn of all the trappings of yesteryear, in an era of citizen diplomacy, subject to oversight from the population at large that is buoyed by the freedom of the internet and the online, digital world. The demands of openness and transparency in policy deployment and articulation, real time communication, countering fake news and alternative facts in a post-truth world, clarity and conciseness, the need to wipe aside the dreary desert sands of habit that define style and syntax in traditional governmental handouts, are all upon us, and we ignore them at our peril.

Reflecting on the theme of my address today, on diplomacy in the age of social media, I realize how my profession is beginning to leave its ozone chamber, its protected past, to become interactive, better networked, and more people-centered and people-friendly. Many social media platforms boast of followers and subscribers that equal the populations of large-sized

countries. Google could at some conceivable stage make a case for membership of the Security Council (of course the present membership is not accepting new entrants which flies in the face of the need for diplomacy to adapt to the new shape of the world). As the Australian national security expert Rory Medcalf recently said, “the job descriptions for hacks, spooks, diplomats and wonks are becoming less and less distinct, blurring at the edges into a spectrum of geopolitical knowledge makers and manipulators...when a crisis or event breaks across the 24-hour information cycle, pioneers from each profession find themselves turning to fast-paced, flexible social media -twitter, blogs, Facebook, YouTube - to help make and project succinct meaning in a world of noise.”

Public diplomacy is a buzz word that has been around for decades but today it is well ensconced with a significant other, which is social media. Sixteen years ago, when I became the spokesperson for the Indian foreign ministry, the internet was very much with us, as was 24/7 news television (mainly cable) and the text message, but social media as we know it today - Facebook and Twitter, Instagram and Spotify to name a few - were still a twinkle in their inventors’ eyes. But that brings me to what I think is a relevant aside. Remember the telegram? The same telegram that Lord Palmerston would say signaled the end of diplomacy? Perhaps in an atavistic anticipation of what

Twitter would demand of our life skills, long years ago, in school, we were all tested in English Composition, for our ability to draft telegrams that were brief, pithy and punchy, said it all, and saved costs in transmission. My younger colleagues who are millennials and who look at telegrams as being for the antediluvians, little realise how well-equipped we come to Twitterverse with our telegram-writing skills! Writing a 140-character tweet is a cinch, my friends.

But let me dwell a little on that period sixteen years ago when I became spokesperson for the foreign office in Delhi. A few weeks into my tenure, the leaders of India and Pakistan met for talks. They repaired to what was billed as a retreat in Agra: a retreat that instead of being just a quiet retreat turned into a mardi gras with the media. Each of our two countries jostled for high ground vis-a-vis the national, regional and international media who had converted this retreat into a giant gladiatorial spectacle in an amphitheatre. Even the Taj Mahal was attention-starved at that surreal moment.

Remembering that sweltering mid-July of 2001 I often think how we might have dealt with the situation in an age of social media. There would have been no luxury of withholding information from the media on the grounds that a press briefing

would be provided in due course. Tweets and Facebook posts by the media would have demanded responses, or correction, and taking the temperature on the public mood so that media outreach could be more effective, would have been enabled more accurately. Fake news or misinterpretation of facts could have been refuted. Most importantly, the walls that we in the establishment have traditionally taken refuge within, so as to withhold information or be less open or communicative, would have lost their impermeability. Crisis management, as the summit floundered, would have been much more immediate and effective.

But for all these reasons, I also realise that the world we lived in sixteen years ago was less complex, almost unbelievably so, when we compare it with the post-truth world we live in. Diplomacy wears its shirtsleeves rolled and treads a *terra infirma* today. It is surrounded by a habitat of migrants, broken boundaries and destroyed sovereignties, rising nativism and irredentist nationalism, intermittent natural and man-made disasters, and galloping religious extremism coupled with the unadulterated evil that is terrorism. This is the world inhabited by the babel of voices that define social media, many schools of thought colliding, a sort of cacophony of the spheres. Freedom of expression, despite the freedom with which all kinds of views are expressed on social media platforms, is endangered because the

wells of intolerance of overflow. This is the age of anger, of political extremity, with audiences or media users who inhabit their own echo chambers and subscribe only to the views of the like-minded. Social media algorithms tailor content to meet the preferences of their users. And to quote a recent study, these echo chambers are “a threat to political dialogue, political compromise, political tolerance and respect for democratic processes. They are, in effect, an erosion of the public sphere or town square.” How does diplomacy deal with narrow, prismatic, pre-conceived views on a particular policy issue? How does it deal with the abusive responses to any outreach that contradicts or seeks to moderate extreme views? Hate speech, vitriol, ethnic, racial or sexual abuse can inundate embassy social media profiles. Is the world losing middle-ground?

But reverting to the high ground of public diplomacy, let me say that for an Indian diplomat the abundant natural resource or veritable Indian Ocean of India’s soft power and its transnational appeal should make the leveraging and projection of such power a showstopper. The potential is immense and we are beginning to tap it in a strategised fashion as recent efforts, especially the global impact of yoga diplomacy would show. The role of the Indian diaspora especially in the developed world in showcasing Indian democracy, pluralism and diversity, business potential, millennial culture, and the vision of Digital India, is becoming

increasingly salient and impactful in this new outreach. The audience provided by the near 30 million strong Indian diaspora across the world is also very significant in terms of this effort. Each of them becomes a citizen ambassador for India in their countries of residence and building bridges of communication with them is very much a part of soft power projection.

Indian Embassies and diplomatic missions across the world are active on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter these days and what was considered as a no go for Indian officialdom until a few years ago is now *de rigeur*. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has one of the largest followings for a global leader on Twitter and Facebook. The 2016 Twiplomacy study placed him as the global leader with the largest following on Twitter after President Barack Obama and Pope Francis. India's Foreign Minister, Sushma Swaraj's Twitter timeline is a hub of activity. Mrs. Swaraj is the most followed female world leader on Twitter with 7.3 million followers as of end-February 2017. Her presence online is a powerful example how digital diplomacy connects government with citizens, particularly those in need of consular assistance, often reuniting families and helping individuals in distress. According to Twiplomacy, the most-followed world leaders on Twitter have one thing in common: they have discovered Twitter as a powerful one-way broadcasting tool. Former U.S. President Obama is often cited as the most influential

global leader on Twitter particularly because of the friendly tone he adopts. For instance, his tweet “¿Qué bolá, Cuba?” meaning “What’s up, Cuba?” posted as he touched down in Havana on the first visit by a U.S. President to the island after 1928 became a defining moment. Prime Minister @NarendraModi election victory tweet of 2014 “India has won!” was retweeted many thousand times.

I must confess to being a long-time user of Twitter, having tweeted over 11,000 times since I first joined the platform in February 2011. Public diplomacy has always held a great deal of fascination for me right from my days as foreign office spokesperson. When the Libya crisis became full blown in early 2011, we were faced with the problem of evacuating the 20,000 Indian professionals and their families who were located all across the country in areas far removed from the big cities. Communication was a huge problem. Twitter worked as a means to reach out to the Libya Indians. Just joining the platform and reaching out to these persons in order to reassure them that the government of India was mindful of their welfare and was making arrangements for their evacuation helped a great deal. The communication vacuum was breached. My joining social media as the head of the Foreign Service was seen as an unorthodox, almost iconoclastic move. But I did not encounter opposition from the political leadership of the government.

Obviously, the move I had made was not seen as counterproductive as it yielded benefits in terms of meeting the central need for establishing contact with the stranded Indian population in Libya.

Having joined Twitter, I never left it. I embraced the medium and the messaging opportunities it provided. After all, the diplomat is an envoy, a carrier of messages. It is only the medium that changes with the times. The messenger and the message endure regardless of the situational shifts. My account has over one million followers with most of these numbers acquired after I left active diplomatic service at the end of my tenure as Ambassador of India in the United States in end-2013. My followers come mainly from India but also include Twitter users from the rest of South Asia, and some from the United States, and the Gulf region. I use Twitter firstly to communicate on topics of interest to me including India's foreign relations, Indian art, history and culture, education, health and sanitation, women's empowerment and some literary topics. I also use it as a platform to express my views on certain situations facing the nation, as also to disseminate and repurpose my regular op-eds and commentaries on foreign policy matters. Thirdly, I retweet and repost tweets and writings on Twitter that I find are of interest and topical relevance and which I am generally in agreement with, most times with my own comments and reactions. That I

live in the age of anger and extremity is painfully demonstrated to me when I am attacked for my views and the positions I take on issues of national concern. Often online trolling calls into question my professional abilities because I have voiced opinions in favour of peace and dialogue with Pakistan (even though I have outrightly condemned the use of terrorism as a tool of proxy war by Pakistan against India). I recall the particularly vitriolic reactions a recent newspaper piece, authored by me on a feminist foreign policy for South Asia, and then circulated on Twitter. Those who attacked me called into question everything from my intelligence to my sanity and my credentials as a former Foreign Secretary. All this is part of the ecosystem of social media. For all the criticism that comes my way, I am also encouraged to and hold my convictions by all those who endorse my views and all those who join my list of followers every day. Occasionally, my twitter “spats” with trolls make it to the Indian newspapers which I suppose comes with all the glare that social media receives nowadays.

But Quo Vadis? Where do we go from here? What lies in store for diplomacy in an undefined future marked by the proliferation of news providers and generators, where fact-checking is at a low premium, where lies become truths, and disruptiveness and public intrusiveness the norm? The inner work of diplomacy must go on, there will be peace to make, wars to end, refugees to

help, international laws to uphold and rights to protect, trade barriers to remove, terrorism to be prevented, and so much more. But the need to inform, to communicate, to ensure openness and accessibility to national and international audiences will not recede. It will in fact be all pervasive and can be a two-way process, by which diplomats communicate but through which also they increasingly harvest creative ideas that can be applied to their own professional areas of work from politics, science and technology, cutting-edge research and industry, the arts and literature through an inter-disciplinary osmosis. Nostalgia for the old days of privacy and distance from public spaces may result but is no antidote to what awaits. The era of Open Situation Rooms (tried with some success in Germany) involving consultation between senior officials and a wider public of entrepreneurs, physicians, social activists, and a wider circle of digitally networked experts and scholars is more than possible. New scenarios and recommendations to deal with old problems can often result. Institutions like foreign offices can benefit from innovative thinking and creative solutions.

The digital world has no notion of the limits that defined the world of the seventies and eighties of the last century. The underpinnings of how diplomacy was conducted through the centuries are being questioned. New core competencies in dealing with cyber threats and vulnerabilities, the knowledge

revolution, the assembling of big data and how to use it, the coming of artificial intelligence, will need to be developed. Nation branding, place branding, will all be a part of the exercise. This will involve promoting coalitions between governmental departments and outstanding minds in business and industry, scientists and design specialists. And all this combined with authenticity, credibility, trust. There can be no holding back.

Finally, there is also need in this digital universe to size up the competition and opposition that we face. I am not referring to trolls in twitter-verse but to the country's adversaries in the real world, the proxy warriors, the enemies of our people. What are the ruses, the disguises, the astro turfing they adopt on social media platforms? Countering propaganda emanating from such groups, or stemming the tide of their ideological narrowness and calls to violence will require a carefully formulated strategy that is constantly being tested for quality and relevance. A tweet I read earlier today from an Indian journalist proclaimed that the next world war would be fought on Twitter. He did not seem to be joking. I hope, as they say in Star Trek, our enemies eat static.

21st century diplomacy thus requires an amplification of purpose. All the traditional tasks of diplomacy continue, but we ignore the adoption of all the new information technologies for

communication, the social media platforms at our peril. The door has opened, and the future has already come in. My own experience has taught me that we need not have any irrational fears of social media. We live in a networked world and every life touches us today. Or, as Star Trek's Captain Kirk said, "there's no such thing as the unknown - only things temporarily hidden, temporarily not understood." Going forward boldly, that is the answer. We need tweeting Talleyrands, not control freaks. Guerrilla diplomacy is upon us.

Thank you.