Media's Influence on Diplomacy: A Comparison of Past and Present Technologies

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Introduction

The mass media have been playing an active role in cultivating relationship among various nation-states. They have been an actor of tremendous importance and have been influencing all key areas. There exists a close association between diplomatic practices and media. This paper is an endeavour to understand the impact of media on diplomacy in the past and present times. The major functions of diplomacy have been to establish and maintain communication and to negotiate and bargain for tolerable agreements and other arrangements between sovereign centers of decision-making in the international system. With the technological advancements in the media industry, it has become easier for the diplomats to maintain communication in a more effective fashion. After September 11, the world has witnessed diplomatic activity of gigantic magnitude in order to foster and perpetuate an alliance against terrorist networks to avoid a future catastrophe. The media, no doubt, has played a pivotal role, but it is different from the role played by it during World Wars.

In foreign policy circles these days, one often hears that the advent of instantaneous and global technology has given the news media far greater influence in international relations than ever before, robbing diplomacy of its rightful place at the helm in the process. Observers of international affairs call it the CNN curve, and the term is not a compliment. It suggests that when CNN floods the

airwaves with news of a foreign crisis, it evokes an emotional outcry from the public to "do something." Under the spell of the CNN curve, goes this refrain, policymakers have no choice but to redirect their attention to the crisis at hand or risk unpopularity, whether or not such revision is merited by policy considerations.

This paper argues, in contrast, that satellite television, and the coming clashes in cyberspace, are but the latest intrusions of media technology on the body politic. Throughout history, whenever the political world has intersected with a new media technology, the resulting clash has provoked a test of leadership before the lessons learned were absorbed into the mainstream of politics. Eventually, the turmoil caused by a new media technology's impact on diplomacy is absorbed and forgotten, until the next media invention begins the process anew. The marvel of real-time television is that it allows constituencies to watch history being made at the same time as their leaders. Yet the enormous power of images broadcast in real time—students rebelling in Beijing, bombs falling in Baghdad a0nd Afghanistan, Marines landing on the beaches of Mogadishu, a Russian parliament being shelled by troops loyal to President Yeltsin, paratroopers descending on Haiti—is only novel to a generation raised on television. To a generation accustomed to receiving news at the speed of a steam train or sailing ship, the telegraph conferred similar wonder. Similarly, to a generation experiencing the avalanche of information available on the Internet, watching the war in Iraq via satellite television may soon seem a quaint throwback to a more innocent age—before cyberspace allowed the public to experience battle in virtual reality.

A pattern has emerged from the past clashes between new media technology and the political world, one that mitigates the power of the CNN curve. History shows that technology

revolutionizes the way in which nations and peoples interact but without impacting the core of their relations. It is almost as if the media influence diplomacy and war at the margins while keeping intact the principles that guide both. The media, empowered with a new technology, can force the agenda but do not dictate the outcome. From the printing press to the photograph, from radio to cyberspace, media technology has challenged political leaders to rise above the immediate "do something" clamor of public opinion. The changes unleashed by satellite television are no different. With nearly every new invention, diplomats complained that they no longer had time to make rational decisions, while journalists boasted of new-found power to influence public opinion. The closest mirror to the upheaval felt by diplomats amid the CNN curve is that seen more than a century earlier with the invention of the telegraph. There was a revolution.

The Past Experience

The telegraph was the first invention of communication technology in history to travel faster than the fastest form of transportation then available. Carried over electronic wires, the telegraph traveled at the speed of light, 186,000 miles per second, [1] while all the railroad train could muster was half a mile per minute, and pigeon carriers were clocked at around 35 miles per hour. The telegraph's impact was as revolutionary in the Industrial Age as that of satellite television or the computer in the Information Age. Even now, it is hard to comprehend the magnitude of the transition. In a world where communication had depended on the speed of a horse or a sailing ship or a train, messages could suddenly be received and answered almost instantly. This transition, from a leisurely pace of communication to almost instantaneous contact, most closely mirrors the changes in information technology that we are experiencing today. Looking at the telegraph as a

later generation would view the computer, one early witness said, quite simply, "Time and space are now annihilated."[2]

No other phrase appears so frequently in the literature on the history of technology. It is as if conquering time and space is a human instinct as basic as hunger or thought. "Man may instantly converse with his fellow man in any part of the world," proclaimed one of the telegraph's devotees.[3] "Is it not a feat sublime? Intellect hath conquered time," trumpeted the masthead of the Telegrapher, the official publication of the National Telegraphic Union. One Rochester newspaper wrote: "The actual realization of the astonishing fact that instantaneous personal conversation can be held between persons hundreds of miles apart can only be fully attained by witnessing the wonderful fact itself."[4] Even a congressional committee, investigating the telegraph in 1838, concluded that it meant "almost instantaneous communication of intelligence between the most distant points of the country, and simultaneously. Space will be, to all practical purposes of information, completely annihilated."[5] It is fashionable in the early years of the twenty-first century to talk about "The Information Superhighway" and its promise for global interaction. But long before satellites circled the globe, the telegraph was proclaimed, "The Great Highway of Thought,"[6] its wires "slender bridges."[7]

To nineteenth century sensibilities, there could be nothing more instantaneous, nothing more immediate, and nothing with more promise of the global village. "The chilling influences of time and distance are all gone," said Dr. George Loring, former congressman and chairman of the Massachusetts Republican Party, at a reception in inventor Samuel Morse's honor in 1871. "All mystery and doubt with regard to passing events and their influences are ended. The events occur, are received, weighed, set down in a

moment, and in a moment we pass on to the next."[8] Even before Congress approved $30,000 to test the efficacy of the telegraph, Samuel Morse's brother Sidney hailed the invention. "Your invention, measuring it by the power which it will give to man to accomplish his plans, is not only the greatest invention of this age, but the greatest invention of any age," Sidney Morse wrote to his brother in 1838. "The surface of the earth will be networked with wire, and every wire will be a nerve. The earth will become a huge animal with 10 million hands, and in every hand a pen to record whatever the directing soul may dictate! No limit can be assigned to the value of the invention."[9] What is remarkable is that these claims to greatness were heard again in 1994; more than 150 years after Sidney praised his brother's invention. "Time in this age has been collapsed, there is no time any longer," said Marvin Kalb, director of the Joan Shorenstein Barone Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University. "Another concept that has been collapsed is distance. Both are gone."[10] From the beginning, the telegraph worried some intellectuals, who fretted that the faster dissemination of information by cable would somehow dilute the quality of public discourse, to say nothing of their own influence. Henry David Thoreau, in Walden, set the tone. "We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas," he wrote, "but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate." It is, he added, "as if the main object were to talk fast and not to talk sensibly. We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the Old World some weeks nearer to the New; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear will be that the Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough."[11]

Advances in communication technology inspired fears among nineteenth century leaders that they could no longer control public opinion. Even before Morse perfected the

electric telegraph, France banned the visual telegraph, or Chappe system, based on flag signals. "Just imagine what could have happened if the passing success of the Lyons silk workers' insurrection had been known in all corners of the nation at once!" argued a horrified member of King Louis-Philippe's court. It is not surprising, therefore, that in 1837, a French law was enacted imposing jail sentences and stiff fines (up to 10,000 francs) on "anyone transmitting unauthorized signals from one place to another by means of the (Chappe) telegraph machine."[12]

Russian Czar Nicholas I was likewise terrified by the telegraph's potential to spread information. Fearing that the broad use of the telegraph would prove "subversive,"[13] Nicholas turned down a contract with Morse, even though the details had already been worked out.[14] It was a strategic blunder that cost Russia dearly.[15] On the eve of World War I, Russian telegraph lines were still so rudimentary that Russian officers were forced to transmit marching orders by radio. As a result, during one of the first battles of the war, Germany learned from un-coded Russian radio broadcasts the exact location of two key Russian units. The information proved decisive in the German victory at Tannenberg.[16] Nicholas I feared the democratizing potential of information so much that he was willing to risk victory in order to keep the new technology at bay. Years later, his Communist successors would act in a similar manner while trying to outlaw the telephone.

Even as Nicholas I saw in the new technology a recipe for war, others saw the prospect of peace. "Ambassadors can utter each day the voice of the government to which they belong, and communicate the reply from that to which they are sent," Loring said. "The boundaries of states and empires may remain the same, their tongues may differ, their social and civil conditions vary, but united as they are into an international community, intimate with each other's

wants and necessities and interests, how can they long remain antagonistic?" Such optimism about the fruits of technology attests to a naive but endearing view that the knowledge relayed by the telegraph would make nations so conversant with the national interests of their one-time enemies that war would come no more. Sadly, that has been the case neither then nor now.

History provides other examples of new communications technologies influencing public opinion. Seventy years after the invention of the printing press, Martin Luther, the founder of the German Protestant tradition and the herald of the Reformation, challenged the papal authorities with a flood of pamphlets that exploited both a new technology and a growing role for public opinion. Luther, who described printing as "God's highest and extremist act of grace, whereby the business of the Gospel is driven forward," published 30 pamphlets between 1517 and 1520 that sold over 300,000 copies.[17]

Photography made a similar entry into the political scene. Mathew Brady's photographs of the bloodshed at Antietam appeared at his gallery in October 1862, only weeks after the smoke had cleared from the bloodiest battlefield in American military history. The exhibit was a sensation. "Mr. Brady has done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war," wrote a New York Times correspondent on October 20, 1862. "If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our dooryards and along the streets, he has done something very like it."[18] Vicki Goldberg, author of The Power of Photography: How Photographs Change Our Lives summed up the photograph's impact this way. "The first living-room war was not Vietnam but the American Civil War. It came into the front parlor in word and picture, even in photographs, as no war had before."[19] To those who had only imagined the horrors of war, the photographs of corpses lining the

battlefield at Antietam were a shock. Every new medium has this intoxicating effect. To those listening to Edward R. Murrow describe German bombing attacks on London; the radio was as instantaneous as any CNN broadcast. None of these innovations, however, changed the essentials of politics; power remained with political leaders who demonstrated both popular appeal and strong convictions.

Role of the Political Leadership

Policymakers feel rushed to comment by the immediacy of a crisis and the mess of microphones and cameras stuck in their faces by reporters who now tread on a 24-hour-a-day news cycle. Although aided by the improved speed of communications, diplomats despair over the shift away from substance that satellite television has produced. Henry Kissinger remarked recently that diplomats seeking his advice used to ask him what they should do. "Now," he droned, "they ask me what they should say."[20] As former CIA Director Robert Gates puts it, "The aggressiveness of moment-by-moment commentary gets policy-makers in the frame of mind to answer an ambushing reporter, more than figuring out what to do."[21] Any diplomat who resists the temptation, who declines the honor of rushing to judgment by issuing a "No comment," or a "We're studying the problem," risks an avalanche to mean-spirited editorial opinion that the government in question is inept.

The truth is that diplomacy—the formal conversation between sovereign nations—has not so much been eliminated as driven underground. The meetings between the Israelis and the Palestine Liberation Organization in Norway, the visits of British government officials to Northern Ireland, the Mexican government's negotiations with Zapatista rebels from Chiapas, were all forced into seclusion by the glare of international media attention. Even the diplomatic missions of Robert Oakley to Somalia

and Jimmy Carter to North Korea and Haiti, though widely covered, were largely conducted in private. When it is important, when it is necessary, trained diplomats and even political figures can still keep secrets. In fact, the posturing required in front of the cameras after private talks can actually benefit the negotiations inside by forcing diplomats to think about public implications as they negotiate. This has long been the role of the media: to convert private musings into public policy debates.

It is simply untrue that foreign relations have been replaced by public relations. Contrary to Marshall McLuhan's edict that the medium is the message, the message always mattered more than the medium: The Ayatollah Khomeini, living in exile in Paris, used audio cassettes to spread the message of his sermons back home to Iran. East Europeans, eager for the riches and freedom of capitalism, used radio to communicate their revolution. Corazon Aquino offered videotaped messages to anyone who contributed a blank cassette to her 1986 campaign. Students in China used the fax machine to relay information about their pro-democracy movement. With Red Army tanks poised to topple a nascent democracy, St. Petersburg Mayor Anatoly Sobchak called out the faithful by computer to surround Boris Yeltsin's White House in a sea of human guards. Subdominant Marcos, leader of the Zapatistas guerrilla group challenging Mexican rule in the Chiapas region, is said to write his communiqués on a laptop computer plugged into the lighter socket of an old pickup truck.[22] Political leaders are responsible to both the professional diplomats and the public at large. History teaches that there are risks to ignoring either audience, or that these risks are exacerbated by the glare of media attention. In the face of new technology that speeds information and a sensationalist press that tries to sell it, leaders would be best served by ignoring their own press clippings. No one understood this better than Abraham

Lincoln, who did not have to contend with television cameras, radio broadcasts, cellular telephones, or even home movies. Lincoln's only burdens were the telegraph and the photograph, and a mischievous, partisan press.

Upon being elected president in 1860 with 40 percent of the vote, most of it from the North and West, Lincoln was assailed with death threats from the South. Detective Allan Pinkerton insisted that on his way to Washington from Springfield, Illinois, Lincoln should avoid Baltimore, where an assassination plot was thought to be brewing. So Lincoln, against his instincts and initial wishes, was huddled onto a less prominent train and sneaked into Washington in the middle of the night. This concession to security was mocked mightily by the Northern papers, which published scathing articles and cartoons about "the flight of Abraham." Lincoln told friends that he was embarrassed by the manner of his arrival, that he regretted not making an entrance into the divided Capitol with head held tall, in broad daylight. But neither did he wallow in pity over the incident. The cloistered arrival in Washington "was the beginning of a relentless smear campaign against 'this backward president' and his 'boorish' wife, particularly on the part of Democratic papers," writes historian Stephen Oates. "Their taunts about his crudities and illiterate manner wounded Lincoln to the core, but he never replied to such journalistic abuse, rather he tried to accept it as one of the hazards of his job."[23] That is the forbearance required of political leaders amid a media onslaught.

If history brings a conviction about the primacy of leadership, so too does it leave a certainty that technology is often feared or praised beyond its deserved legacy. To this end, mastering a new technology is a fundamental prerequisite of strong leadership. For all the thresholds crossed by new technologies, individual skills of leadership in the selling of public policy matter most.

New Trends in the Age of Satellite Television

In spite of these historic echoes, or perhaps because of them, some maintain that the current explosion of media technology is exponentially more of a burden than past inventions. The war in Afghanistan and the relief effort in post-war Iraq are widely claimed as proof that media technology is driving world events. In assessing the impact of real-time television, it is important to separate impressions from realities.

For three years, a media drumbeat from Bosnia to "do something"—to stop the bloodshed and butchery—did not compel NATO to intervene. Horrific images of bread line massacres and concentration camp victims produced a response more like a palliative than retaliation. The Serbs massacred, the West sent food to the Muslims. This pattern persisted for three years, despite the tug of heart-wrenching pictures. No better example exists of the inability of pictures to sway policy than the city of Gorazde. This Muslim town came under siege after a Serbian attack in April of 1994, and faced another devastating attack in September of 1994. In between, NATO threatened, the United Nations patrolled, the United States air-lifted food, peacekeepers abandoned their posts. If the media had dictated the outcome, Gorazde would have endured one massacre, not two. In 1995, a Serb assault on the marketplace in Sarajevo that killed 37 people, finally prompted NATO to pound Serb targets with air strikes. It is problematic to argue that television pictures produced this result, as they had not had that effect in all the bloodshed that came before. What is more likely is that it took years to build the political will to use muscle in the Balkans, despite the emotional pull of the pictures. Here again is confirmation that leadership is more telling than television.

In Somalia, too, the oft-heard chorus is that "pictures got us in, and pictures got us out." Those who hold this view argue that the vivid and wrenching images of starving Somali children forced President Bush to act, and that the equally horrible pictures of an American soldier's corpse being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu compelled President Clinton to announce a departure date for U.S. troops. The truth is more textured. If TV pictures alone compelled Bush to intervene in Somalia, then they should have had a similar impact in the Sudan, where the starvation was equally devastating, the pictures equally horrific, and, at first, equally in evidence on CNN.[24] If Clinton had wanted to use political capital to explain to the American public why the United States was in Somalia, if he had used the bully pulpit of high office to make a case that the United States had an obligation to stay, he could have countered the weight of those pictures from Mogadishu. By choosing not to expend his political capital for a cause leftover from an earlier administration, Clinton allowed the pictures to dominate. It is not inevitable, or even desirable, that leaders cede this power to television. It is also not the fault of television.

George Kennan, the esteemed diplomat who was one of the key proponents of the containment policy of the Cold War, criticized U.S. intervention in Somalia because he believed emotions evoked by television pictures were driving American diplomacy. "If American policy from here on out, particularly policy involving the uses of our armed forces abroad, is to be controlled by popular emotional impulses, and particularly ones provoked by the commercial television industry, then there is no place—not only for myself, but for what have traditionally been regarded as the responsible deliberative" voices in government, he wrote in an article written just before U.S. Marines landed on the beaches of Mogadishu. It is a fitting coda to Kennan's laments that when the Marines landed,

they encountered only one hostile group—a pack of journalists whose bright camera lights mitigated the strategic effect of the soldiers' night-vision goggles.[25] To Kennan, these cameras looked like the enemy.

The old warrior of diplomacy, who had been so prescient in predicting Moscow's aggressions during the period of superpower rivalry, was trying to warn a new generation of the dangers of television and its impact on diplomacy. But Kennan's real quarrel is not with television pictures that hit viewers in the gut but with leaders who too easily yielded to their pull. Scolding the emotionalism of the 1990s, this grand man of foreign policy may have forgotten that he was equally incensed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt's decision in the 1930s to grant concessions to the Soviet Union during negotiations over diplomatic recognition. Chiding FDR in his Memoirs for "showmanship and prestidigitation," Kennan attributes the move to "neurotic self-consciousness and introversion, the tendency to make statements and take actions with regard not to their effect on the international scene...but rather to their effect on...American opinion."[26] Then and now, politicians tend to make decisions for political reasons, with public opinion and emotion much on their radar.

Each generation is mesmerized by the innovations of its times, sure that no other generation has experienced the emotional upheaval that comes of technological change. We are in the throes of such self-indulgence now. In the most extreme example, a diplomat at the United Nations recently quipped that CNN had become "the sixth vote on the Security Council."[27] Similarly, there are already predictions that the World Wide Web will erase national borders, making governments impotent and sovereignty just a memory. What history shows, instead, is that despite the vanity of each age, journalists have always had the power to sway public opinion, and politicians have always

blamed the news media for souring public opinion when they failed to win favor. What changes as one invention gives way to the next is the way in which the message hits home.

Conclusion

As traumatic as satellite television has been for world events, cyberspace could be even more tumultuous. Those who fear the impact on international affairs of Ted Turner's CNN might have more to worry about from Bill Gates' Microsoft. H.L. Mencken once said that the power of the press belongs to the person who owns one. In the coming era of cyberspace, everyone is a publisher, everyone is a journalist, a possibility that blurs the line of professional status.[28] If information is the currency of the Internet, then newspapers will have to compete with government offices, business interests, humanitarian groups, and outraged citizens for the public's attention. Readers who prefer to get their information from specialists will have little need for general news, or much appetite for reporters who pretend to be objective while pushing a deliberate if subtle ideological line. Eventually, the audience may be able to ignore the "professional" journalists completely. Online chat rooms already form at the drop of a crisis, as readers reach out to one another for information instead of the traditional sources of news.

For diplomacy and international relations, the medium of cyberspace, like journalism, is a mixed blessing. With this new technology, the potential is enormous for global interaction, and with it common understanding—or at least more information. Already, sophisticated governments and savvy political figures are making use of the Internet's global component, the World Wide Web, to reach former adversaries and attract new investors. Quick to seize the

new medium's advantages, the Israeli Foreign Ministry is one of the many political agencies around the world to have set up an Internet address. Computer users can call up a news service that includes selected newspaper articles translated from Hebrew to English, speeches by Israeli politicians, and reports on the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange. "It's a very large discussion group in the global village," said Martin Peled-Flax, a ministry official, who estimated that 700 people browse through the service daily. "In the new realities of this world, information travels at the speed of light. And it doesn't need a passport."[29]

Soon governments will no longer have the stage to them but will be competing against interest groups and non-governmental organizations, against newspapers, local cultural groups and corporate advertisers. One potential pitfall for leaders dealing with cyberspace, a place that does not exist except for the lines of communication between people, is that this type of communication makes unified national experiences rare occurrences. An assassination, a famine, an earthquake, or a terrorist attack may bring people to their screens to peruse the latest news, but marshaling public opinion for national purposes like war or economic sacrifice will likely be even more difficult than it is now. Already television networks are ignoring requests for air time and newspapers relegate the comments of top leaders to their back pages. These are tacit acknowledgments that information is decentralizing, that national governments are less relevant, that we are, as Walt Wriston, the former chairman of Citicorp, puts it, in "the twilight of sovereignty."

Perhaps that is why the O.J. Simpson trial riveted national and even international attention, becoming one of the few unifying experiences of 1995. Or perhaps the murder trial of an ex-football star accused of slaying his ex-wife and her friend was the ultimate paean to cultural icons made in

America. The Americanization of international culture began long before the O.J. Simpson trial: blue jeans and rock music were in some sense at the heart of Eastern Europe's revolution in 1989, a flight from the rigid bore of communism to the liberation of travel and dance. Madonna and Big Mac are to this day the best-known exports of American culture. O.J. Simpson was only the latest. The problem with real-time television is not that it Americanizes the international agenda or makes celebrities of questionable characters, but that it encourages no feeling for context or for background; in a word, for history.

It is this legacy of a historicism, this depicting of a double-murder case in a rich neighborhood in California as "the trial of the century"—as if Nuremberg were just a city in southeast Germany rather than the site of court proceedings against Nazi war criminals—that poses the greatest danger for policymakers, in the field of international as well as domestic affairs. Whether broadcast on real-time television or discussed in virtually real chat rooms, events without history are merely "photo shops." The antidote to mindless or sensational journalism is not to blame the messenger but to influence the message. Whether the subject is ethnic rivalry in Bosnia or murder trials in Los Angeles, satellite television requires a voice of authority to set the record straight. Communication has long been at the heart of leadership. Nothing in technology's charter changes that equation.

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