



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – Australasian Union of Jewish Students

**Remarks of Ambassador Bleich
at the Australasian Union of Jewish Students, Canberra
“21st Century Statecraft in an ‘I’ World”**

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Thank you for the kind introduction. It is a pleasure to be with you all this morning. It is good to see members of the Australasian Union of Jewish Students again. You really are an exceptional group.

This is a dynamic time in international relations. In fact, in selecting a topic, it was hard to choose among the many issues confronting us because there are so many commanding our attention now. The terrible bloodshed in Syria, the threat of nuclear proliferation in Iran and North Korea, on-going fighting in Afghanistan, the painful financial spasms in the Euro Zone, and yet also promising signs like the movement toward democracy in Burma, the rise of developing nations in Asia and South America, glimmers of a stronger economic recovery in the U.S.

All of these events have been unfolding before our very eyes in real time. Through our mobile phones and ipads we see events sometimes right as they are happening. This is unprecedented – a time when every event in the world is potentially recorded and immediately distributed, and when average citizens are getting reports before the media can even get to the scene.

This phenomenon may be the biggest international relations story of all. The internet, mobile devices, and social media have changed the way news is collected, delivered, and understood. It has changed diplomacy, and – like all new and rapid change – it has the capacity for both great good and great harm.

On the positive side, it can help break through government censorship and inform people in closed societies, in disasters it can help groups rapidly organize and assist hard-hit communities, it can help popular movements form and accelerate their challenge to repressive government, it can disprove false claims, and the mere threat of being recorded may cause government officials to behave better.



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Think of the recent video of a brutally beaten 13-year-old Syrian boy, Hamza Ali al-Khateeb. That mobile recording brought international condemnation. It stirred protesters to keep up their fight. And it gave Former U.S. Ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, added authority when he used U.S. Embassy Damascus' Facebook page to warn Syrian military officers that they could be held accountable for human rights violations.

At the same time, this new technology can be exploited in ways that cause tremendous harm. It can create new risks and vulnerabilities that criminals, terrorists, foreign governments, and even commercial interests can exploit. It can confuse voters because there is no vetting or fact-checking of this kind of "news." It can create enormous political pressures to act quickly rather than act correctly.

So today I'd like to talk about the challenges and opportunities that the I World and communication technology pose for diplomatic leadership.

Changing the Nature of Leadership

First, innovative technology changes the nature of leadership. This is a very smart group of internationally aware students. Who can tell me the name of the person who led the Tunisian revolution? It is a trick question. There was no single leader, or even group of leaders. No one person or organization was in control. They had individuals and affinity groups connected by common political and economic grievances. They were able to communicate these grievances quickly via social media. This was virtually unprecedented in a revolution. And it has had both positive and negative effects in this Arab Spring.

Now, I do not want to suggest that the revolutions occurred because of social media. Although pundits dubbed the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt and other Middle Eastern nations the "Twitter revolutions," this is too simplistic. These revolutions were caused by the things that cause every revolution: Repression; Inequality; Lack of opportunity; a government that had lost touch with the needs of its citizens. Facebook does not cause dissent; conditions and people do. But what social media can do is accelerate how quickly people organize, it can amplify their voices, and it can influence how they respond.

Think of it this way. Organizing a rally or a protest in a repressive society used to be a difficult, secretive, and private matter. One or two individuals would begin to form a movement. They would slowly screen possible recruits and constantly change locations and methods of communicating, until over time they were able to form a small, cohesive,



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nimble, and well-organized band, leading rallies before the government was able to stop them.

Now, with social media and mobile technology, this can all be done instantaneously. There didn't need to be a leader or a carefully orchestrated plan to build a movement. People didn't have to be waiting at home by the phone or their desktop computer. Instead, people could be anywhere doing whatever they were doing and get that same information instantaneously. Events, such as the revolution in Tunisia, that would ordinarily have taken at least 12 to 18 months, took 6 weeks.

This was both a great breakthrough, but also it created real challenges. The Tunisian people were then confronted with something that most nations have never had to encounter, a leaderless revolution. Instead of having that small band of identifiable leaders with an organizational structure and a well-developed alternative program, Tunisia had to create a new Country rapidly. Some countries in the Arab uprisings have done this more successfully than others.

New Technology is a New Battleground

Second, cyber space is now a new battleground. Any new technology can be both a weapon and shield in addressing terror groups. On the positive side, more and more, the ability to detect and prevent terror attacks depends on internet and mobile technology. We saw this with the technology that helped America discover Bin Laden's location. We've also had instances in which individual citizens were able to prevent a tragedy, such as with the attempted bombing in Times Square, because they could alert police and relay suspicious behavior instantaneously.

However, terrorists also use mobile technology in their terror plots. Take, for example, the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, which were coordinated through this same technology. Moreover, the capacity to terrorize, to attack, to exploit, and to steal has increasingly moved on-line. The great terror targets - our power grids, our financial markets, our defense systems - are all on-line.

So we depend on the internet to stop terrorists, and we are exposed to terrorists and made more vulnerable through the internet. This is true both as nations and as individuals. Every person and every nation is now exposed to identity theft, to system crashes, to spying and sabotage.



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Overload, distortion, and confusion

Finally, while technology does not change the content of diplomatic ideas or the solutions to global problems, it can change how people respond. It dramatically changes the pace, the permanence, and the proof of communications, which can have significant effects on decisions.

With news spreading everywhere instantaneously, the time for thoughtful deliberation has decreased considerably. Journalists increasingly operate under a pressure to be first, even if they are wrong. The phrase they use is “not wrong for long.” Remember Geraldo Rivera being completely wrong that the President was going to announce the capture of Ghadaffi when in fact the announcement was about the Bin Laden operation? There were no repercussions – no loss of confidence in the news source. And this only encourages news media to press ahead with incomplete and unsubstantiated stories.

Policymakers and diplomats follow suit. We have to move at the speed of the news as well. Often people are required to speak publicly about events long before the facts have come in. I appeared on Q&A with Kevin Rudd in April, 2011. I remember that we were both sitting off-stage, glued to our blackberries monitoring Twitter right up until the moment we walked on stage. We knew that we could be asked any question about any subject including subjects that had started trending after we went on air. We had no way of knowing whether any report we saw was correct.

This is compounded because everything a diplomat says publicly will be on the record to all sorts of audiences. I may give an informal talk here in Australia, but if one of you is recording it and uploads it this afternoon, it will be heard in other parts of the world as a speech to them. Any misspeak or mistake will be recorded permanently and repeated on the 24 hour news cycle. It is thus much more difficult to counter bad or incorrect initial readouts of fluid events as public opinion takes shape very quickly. And by the time you try and counter misperceptions, a scandal is already yesterday's news, its proof established simply by being run on television.

The issue of information overload arises as well. With so much information available and constant bombardment via email, Twitter, 24 hour news channels, and the internet, it is easy to become overwhelmed. Whereas in the 20th century the key was developing the information we need, one of the great skills of the 21st century will be not getting lost in the information that we don't need, and rapidly differentiating between reliable and unreliable accounts.



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While any citizen with a mobile phone, camera, or Twitter account is arguably an “I Journalist,” this is a very different kind of journalism. They haven’t been trained in how to develop a story properly, they are not checked for biases or dishonesty, they have no editors to review their work or challenge their content, and they have no cost – no job loss – if they do a poor job.

Not surprisingly, the rise of new media means that information is subject to more manipulation and false rumor. Consider how many people in the United States today still believe President Obama was not born in the U.S., even though all credible media have rejected it. Anyone, anywhere, can say anything without running it past a sober editor, who has built his or her news organization based upon some level of responsible behavior. Without an editor who has lawyers, subscribers, and advertisers, and a reputation for accuracy to maintain, publishing standards degrade.

And of course the risk and scale of data breaches also rises exponentially. This can have huge and very negative impacts on individuals, on businesses, and on national security, with open societies substantially more vulnerable than closed ones. It used to be that someone stealing information had to be selective, they had to have a willing source for the information, and they could only steal what they could fit in their clothes or a briefcase. Today, an individual with a thumbdrive can steal vast quantities of information and make it available to everyone virtually for free. This will ultimately be very bad for how people do diplomacy. If you are worried about the privacy and security of data and communications, it could make decisionmakers guard information too zealously, share it too narrowly, and fail to write it down. This in turn reduces the quality, speed, and accuracy of the information we all need to make good decisions. And so it could degrade the quality of decision making.

So with all this in mind, let me offer three conclusions about this brave new I World and its social media as they affect the challenges of 21st Century Diplomacy. My view is that this technology is here to stay, and so we are going to have to adapt to it. I also think that our history as a species is that we are ultimately able to bring out the best in new technologies and find ways to minimize the worst. But here are three things to consider.

First, this new communication technology is not a magic wand—it doesn’t produce results if the content and the connections aren’t there. At the Embassy, we have incorporated all of these new platforms into our website: Facebook friends, Twitter tweets, YouTube videos, Flickr photos; we have a ton of those.... None of this will connect with the public if we don’t have the right policies, and they don’t feel they are



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participating in a real conversation. Our communications have sped up and flattened, but they still have to be good. One trap we all need to avoid is believing that the technology can generate trust. It can't. Content that would fail in other media will not magically succeed in social media. A government that has lost touch with the needs of its citizens won't succeed with the same message in a different medium. And so we need to find ways to build trust, just as newspapers and old broadcast news programs figured out ways to build trust.

Second, we are losing the ability to tailor our messages to the customs and sensitivities of each nation and audience. If all of our communications can be circulated world-wide instantaneously, it makes it very difficult to try to communicate with one audience without possibly saying things in a way that will disturb another audience. Something that makes sense in one setting will be interpreted all wrong in another. [Bromance story] Likewise, if people can steal information and dramatically increase the damage from its disclosure, we need to figure out how to prevent serious harm to diplomacy.

Third, the solutions will have to come from a combination of new technologies and new rules of behavior by people. It is not a question of should we or shouldn't we embrace this technology. This is the technology. This is our media. We use it best if we understand that it can be used as a new means for human beings to communicate the way they have always communicated. An online community, like a regular community, is built not on technology but on trust and sincerity. The trust and sincerity usually established by in-person meetings can be built with new social media. But it depends on how the tools are used, developed, and understood, and the extent that we all work together to prevent their abuse. That will be the ultimate challenge – and in the future, your success will depend upon it.

Thank you.