



## DIPLOMATIC REPORTING

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It will be argued that the once held sacred maxim that - 'The voice of the people is the voice of God', may no longer be applicable in a world where surreptitious political practices, and political jockeying is ubiquitous.

As such diplomatic reporting may not only be a victim of its own duplicity but is now further challenged by host of other factors, be they the emergence of NGOs, bloggers, citizen journalists, professional journalists, et al.

Of course these new players in this rough and tumble political world are too not without their deficiencies. And these will be addressed accordingly.

It will be finally postulated that if 'Diplomat is Reporting' must survive as an art, it must make poignant changes by adopting the strategies, tools, and philosophy of its competitors.

Today, Diplomatic Reporting is a non-partisan and impartial way of disseminating information about a country via diplomatic channels, has seen its importance dwindle.

Acknowledging the decline in the traditional role of Diplomatic Reporting, former foreign minister of Australia stated, " My own government has been chopping resources with more and more emphasis on trade and commercial aspect". (International Herald Tribune, Tuesday, January 11, 2000; p.23).

This decline may be attributed to the new face of the media, and the rapid rise of bloggers, citizen journalists and to the accessibility to the all encompassing 'information highway'.

With the rise of geo-political maneuvering, ethnic tensions, invasions and threats thereof, the media, whether print or broadcast, has assumed the responsibility to as the principal mechanism of informational dissemination. The Internet, as aforementioned has made access to news of diverse persuasions very readable.

The role of the professional journalist has also expanded. Through 'live feeds' to media houses, and new forms of media technology, the goings on in any one country is never divorced from the rest of the world. And despite the autocratism and suppression of information displayed by the authorities in Myanmar (Burma), the world witnessed its brutality through the videos and text messaging relayed by the computer savvy Burmese people.

Thus, it can be argued that governments are relying less on diplomats for information of any one country, and more on journalists using a assemblage of media technology. NGOs can also

provide a useful information about facts on the ground, venturing into remote areas, and understanding the ethos. This may suggests overt 'politicking' by the NGO. And the allegations have been rampant. NGOs have been accused on meddling in governmental activities even partisan in electoral issues.

According to Suleiman Shakombo, National Heritage minister of Kenya many NGOs have the habit (sic) of indulging in active politics and even in the sponsoring of political parties, urging them to be consistent with their commitment to be advocates of civic education and being neutral in political pronouncement. (The Standard; Friday October 19, 2007).

In July, 2006, the Zimbabwean government of Robert Mugabe accused a German NGO of politically funding the anti-Senate opposition. (Peoples Daily Online; July 24, 2006)

In an article entitled 'Blowing Against The Wind', the involvement of Palestinian NGOs as more than an advocate group for Palestinian causes was chronicled. It states, 'After the first Intifada, local and grass roots organization in conjunction with local political cadres, maintained its broad participatory base. It has bureaucratized rivaling the PNA in the provision of some basic services, health care...(Human Rights Features, 25 September, 2002).

Undoubtedly the injection of news to every societal fiber has undermined the once august role of the diplomatic reporter. In contemporary society, the role of journalists be they employed by veritable news agencies or nondescript ones, or even operating as independent freelancers do provide both citizenry and body politic with adequate policy and decision making information.

Citizen journalists, sometimes referred to as bloggers have also gained a measure of legal protection afforded to mainstream journalists. In May 2007, provisions were made to protect bloggers from prosecution if they refuse to divulge their sources in certain situations. This has legitimized bloggers and has, inter alia opened another source for potentially viable reportage.

Nevertheless, journalists too are hampered by indiscriminate military imbroglios that disregard the protective status they once enjoyed. Arguably, this may influence the veracity and complexity of news gathering. William A. Orme addresses this concern in an article entitled, 'The Protection of Journalists' (See [crimesofwar.org/the-book/journalist-protection/](http://crimesofwar.org/the-book/journalist-protection/))

In 2006, 55 journalist were murdered while working. Another 27 deaths are still being investigated. (Source: Committee to Protect Journalists Special Report, 2007)  
Of course this reflects the perilous situations in which journalists are required to work.

And so too will the fluidity with which information reaches the public.

Another disconcerting issue is the attempt by governments to color the context and flow of information.

Anthony Arnove, author of *Iraq: The Logic of Withdrawal*., angrily protested the US government attempt to prosecute journalists. Of this stated, " Dissenting voices are always silenced during wartime. It is trying to use the press as a tool in its prosecution of journalists who is exercising his right to speak out against and refuse in an unjust and illegal occupation". Mr. Arnove was referring to the case of Sarah Olsen.

Arguably, the problem with the traditional mode of diplomatic reporting revolves around its highly structured, and political controlled manner of delivery; whereby the contextualization of its information is politicized and may be void of reality. Its original purpose of gathering, collating, analyzing, and delivering the social, economic and political trends present in a country is almost non-existent.

The unreliability of information delivered through official government channels is notorious. How can one gauge the context of any information. How does one differentiate between literalism and conceptualization? These are areas that test the cognitive and analytic prowess of the reader or viewer.

In an article appearing in the New York Times, October 23, 2007 edition, a senior American diplomat denied that the State Department had any dealings with the PJAK (Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan), a guerrilla group fighting the Iranians. But according to a journalist given access to one of the group's leaders, the PJAK had had "direct or indirect contact with American officials". Members of the group are also believed to have visited Washington.

Again, as former diplomat Barry James commented, "If diplomats are often sent abroad these days to promote their countries' exports and say the nastiest things in the nicest way, what is happening to their traditional task of political reporting and analysis". (Source: International Herald Tribune, Tuesday, January 11, 2000).

Diplomatic Reporting is entering a new phase of its existence. The distortion, if not the suppression of information is a thing of the past. While it cannot be viewed as an arm of a government aimed at bending others to its will, human, material and technological resources must be allocated accordingly to foreign governmental agencies so that they can regain a competitive edge.

Cognizant of this daunting reality, The International Crisis Group was formed. Employing an assemblage of political scientists, journalists, and diplomats, it is funded by the European Union, governments and private foundations. Thriving on empirical data collection and analysis it has emerged as an invaluable resource for governments and private entities that rely on socio-political and economic trends that determine how policy is implemented.

It is with much irony that its chief executive some seven years ago stated that Burma was one of the countries that his organization can do significant work in the field of political analysis.(International Herald News; January 11, 2000).

Governmental agencies must use the inherent credibility that they enjoy, a factor that the 'bloggers', or citizen journalists may not enjoy. Diplomatic Reporting must employ diverse methods -human intelligence, journalists, social scientists, blogs, podcasts, and websites. They must also use other aspects of diplomacy, especially those of a cultural nature in order to diffuse skepticism and foster understanding and cooperation.

According to the US Department of State Federal funding for cultural exchange programs has tripled since 2001. Like measures must be adopted by other nations for it facilitates the work of the diplomatic reporter. Until such time, the Diplomatic Reporting as we know it today remains an endangered art.

## **Readings:**

Freeman, W. Chase: The Diplomat's Dictionary, USIP Press Book, 1977

[www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)

[www.concernedjournalists.org](http://www.concernedjournalists.org)

[www.crisisweb.org](http://www.crisisweb.org)

[www.genevaconventions.org](http://www.genevaconventions.org)

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