Towards Formulating a Digital Diplomacy Maturity Framework: A Theoretical Prospective

Full Paper

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Abstract

Diplomacy is the key driver of international relations and platform of the interaction of countries in areas such as art, negotiation, promotion, representation, social engagement and mutual benefits. Traditionally, nations use conservative communication approaches due to issues of bureaucracy, secrecy, sovereignty, and various other obstacles. This research presents a novel conceptual framework for evaluating the maturity of e-diplomacy in foreign missions. The e-diplomacy maturity framework is derived from the literature review of e-government maturity models as well as theories and practice of diplomacy. It involves two variables, level of complexity and level of interaction. The interaction of these two variables produces different stages of e-diplomacy maturity framework. Stages include intra-organization capabilities, mobile access, citizens' interaction and open diplomacy. However, the maturity framework faces challenges of organization structure, secrecy and sensitivity of diplomatic functions, communication nature of diplomats, socio-cultural norms, and political-economic aspects.

Key word

E-diplomacy, Digital Diplomacy, ICT maturity level, e-Government

1. Introduction

Jacoby (2013) notes that through diplomacy, nations are able to get along with each other well through the art and practice of undertaking negotiations and deliberations that benefit the respective growth of their nations. Even though diplomacy underlines the basis by which countries negotiate for their benefits and growth, a different viewpoint holds that there should be more to ordinary diplomacy than just a simple negotiation for aids (Huntington, 2006). As the need for achieving diplomatic excellence becomes a priority for all countries, it is important that research is performed in this area of study to come out with best practices and modalities by which this can be done. Arguably, this is the fundamental motivation under which this literature review is performed. Thus, it is as a means of reviewing literature that makes it possible to develop a framework based on which diplomatic maturity levels can be measured. More specifically, the framework focuses on e-diplomacy, that is the use of information and communication technology for purposes of attaining foreign policy goals, as a modern tool to diplomacy, guaranteed with the outcome of diplomatic excellence (Loewe & Shaughnessy, 2009).

A review of relevant literature revealed a significant lack of adequate previous studies that have examined e-diplomacy. Also, e-diplomacy is an area that has been thus far neglected in the broader e-government debate. Therefore, the paper is attempting to fill an important research gap in this field.

In effect, the literature review does not necessarily construct the framework but gives the literary background that justifies the formation of the framework to be discussed in later parts of the research. The subsequent section provides background information about the modern functions carried by diplomats. After which, the concept of e-diplomacy maturity framework will be presented. The stages of the maturity, the variables of the maturity's levels, and the potential factors influencing the implementation and diffusion

of the framework is discussed in section 3. Finally, the last section of the paper provides the key points and the conclusions.

2. Literature of diplomacy

Sun (2008) points that with the growing need for many countries to be competitive not only economically but also in political supremacy, cultural penetration, and commerce, countries are constantly seeking ways in which they can maximize the outcome of their diplomatic relations. Armitage and Nye (2007) observed that diplomatic excellence strives on several variables, one of which is the use of e-diplomacy. Also known as digital diplomacy, e-diplomacy has been explained to be the practice of using the internet and other new information communication technologies (ICTs) to foster the achievement of diplomatic objectives (Bollier, 2003). The place of e-diplomacy in attaining diplomatic excellence has been extensively discussed in the literature as there is the general conception that e-diplomacy is crucial in achieving efficiency in diplomacy (Wriston, 1997). The next subsection will discuss and detail some of the diplomatic functions reported in the extant literature.

2.1. Bilateral and Multilateral Relation

Thompson (n.d) explicitly states that bilateralism includes political, economic, and cultural relations between two independent states and it contrasts with unilateralism as well as multilateralism in terms of how the relations are conducted and the number of parties involved. As states understand one another as independent parties agreeing to establish diplomatic relations, while they exchange agents that include ambassadors to manage dialogues as well as cooperative links with each other. Furthermore, free trade agreements are the most common forms of bilateral relations, with specific qualities of countries involved indicating preferential treatment for each other, which is not a general principle but is situational (Thompson, n.d). With bilateralism, a state can have tailored agreements and responsibilities that apply to each other.

2.2. Promotion and Image Building

Another facet of diplomatic excellence considered highly necessary is the promotion of home country and image building internationally. Freeman (2007) explained that certain tags that are placed on some countries such as terrorists, violent, politically unstable, highly indebted, and human rights abusers create a negative international image that makes it difficult for such countries to develop healthy relations with others. Freeman's (2007) assertion is indeed true and is observable in states that often abusive human rights and they usually do not grow. From an internal ministerial perspective, there are a number of roles that can be played to ensure that countries develop the kind of international image that can be accepted by all. A typical example of this is through the use of prudent economic management policies that eradicate poverty and economic hardship (Malone, 2005). The necessity to ensure the rule of law, which promotes fair play and promotion of human rights among citizens has also been recommended (Yucheng, 2012).

2.3. Public Diplomacy and Social Engagement

Another aspect of the internal performance measuring process that is very critical to the achievement of diplomatic excellence is public diplomacy viewed as a new era of diplomacy (Nossel, 2004). Public diplomacy is differentiated from traditional diplomacy due to the fact that it covers interactions with not only governments, but also with non-governmental organizations (Leonard, 2002). Even though public diplomacy is being made to perform measurement within the embassies, it is critical that the perception and view that diplomats and other employees within the ministry of foreign affairs in the eyes of the public should be brought under critical scrutiny. As observed by Mathews (2007), diplomats are important representatives of the countries and that their day-to-day way of life and actions in the eyes of the public speak volumes about their countries.

2.4. Consular Services

Additionally, Burt and Robison (2008) while writing on the internal performance measure of diplomacy, stressed the need for there to be excellent consular services, which are measured as a component of

excellence in diplomatic relations. Nicolson (2011) explained consular service as the form of assistance and advice given by diplomats and other agents within the diplomatic corps of one country to its citizens in another country. In addition, consular affairs are involved in the issuance of visas and passports, as well as the extension of visas for non-immigrants. The need for embassies and the Ministry at large to have professionals who can offer dedicated guidance, counseling, and advice to citizens have also been admonished (Rana & Kurbalija, 2007). As all these processes and duties take place internally within the embassies, it is expected that there will be a way by which the levels of effectiveness and efficiency associated with consular services will be measured.

2.5.Internal Administrative Functions and the use of ICT

E-diplomacy can be seen as an aspect of the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in diplomatic excellence (Shultz, 1997). In modern governance and politics, ICT is seen as an influential phenomenon that cannot be excluded from the work and engagements of officials (Dizard, 2001). Plainly, this is because even apart from the use of the internet for e-diplomacy, ICT remains very crucial in building communication systems that are used for the day-to-day running of the embassies and other offices within the ministry of foreign affairs. It is not surprising that Yi (2005) opined that the true measure of efficiency within the ministry of foreign affairs can be taken from the perspective of how detailed the information and communication systems of the ministry are. As part of the measurement of performance, therefore, it is very important that ministries will focus on the extent to which they incorporate ICT in their daily engagements and activities. ICT are now deployed in most departments of any embassy such as HR, finance, consular, political and information departments.

3.The Concept of E-Diplomacy Maturity Framework

As already mentioned in earlier parts of the paper, the ultimate goal of the literature review is to pave the way for the construction of a framework. This framework will be linked to the theme of diplomatic excellence measurement. While doing this, the incorporation of ICT through e-diplomacy shall also be considered. For this reason, the current theme of e-diplomatic maturity level is reviewed to have a general overview of what the model is likely to contain.

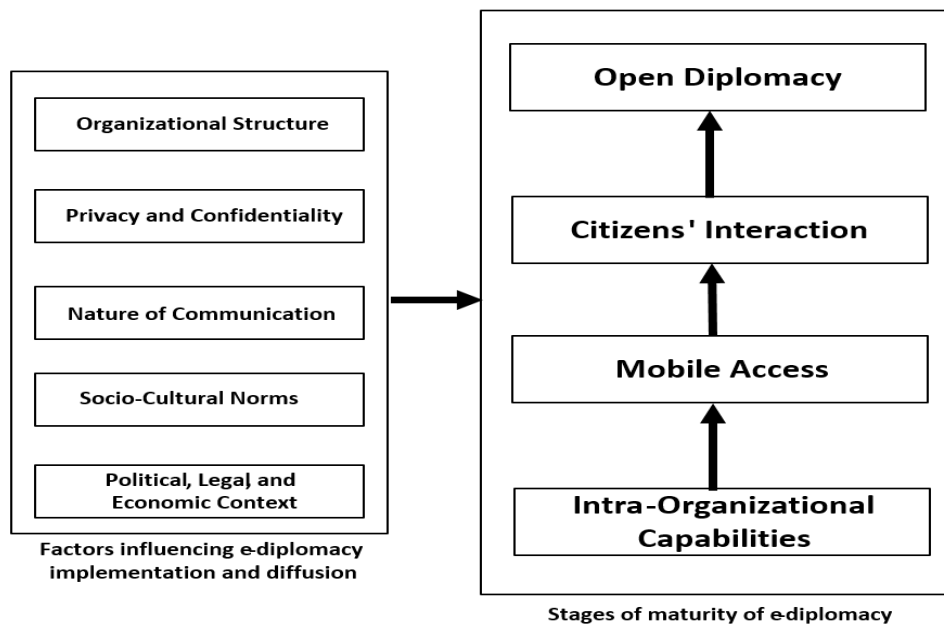The following figure 1 shows the conceptual e-diplomacy maturity framework proposed by the researcher: -

Figure 1, conceptual framework for e-diplomacy maturity

The following three subsections illustrate the above shown framework.

3.1.Variables of the Maturity Framework

Briefly, one aspect of the framework to be created is an emphasis on maturity levels. In terms of maturity levels, Freedom House (2009) explained that the extent of achieving diplomatic excellence cannot be expected to be done at an equal pace among all countries. For this reason, there are those who will be novice and others who will be mature. It is based on this principle that the maturity levels are introduced as part of e-diplomacy. As far as maturity with e-diplomacy is concerned, there are two major variables that are noticed. These are levels of interaction and level of complexity.

3.1.1.Level of Complexity

Comprehensively, the level of complexity has been explained to entail the extent to which foreign ministries and diplomats can inculcate the use of sophisticated and advanced technological tools that serve specific people-oriented goals (Graffy, 2009). Overall, for a country to be said to be mature with diplomatic excellence, it is expected that it would have a more complex interface of technological infrastructure that does not only make internal processes of the embassies possible but also fosters a strong international relation with the world at large (Glover, 2011; Schlechter, 2000). For countries at the early stages of maturity; however, the use of technology is seen to be restricted among a few people, agencies and departments who use these to only undertake internal duties.

3.1.2.Level of Interaction

The second aspect of e-diplomacy maturity level is a level of interaction. The level of interaction can generally be explained to be the extent to which the ministry of foreign affairs is able to use technology to reach out to people concerned with its activities (Schlechter, 2006). On the surface, people concerned with the activities of the ministry may be seen as workers (for instance, diplomats) within departments and citizens who may require services from the ministry. It is, therefore, expected that countries exhibiting high levels of maturity with e-diplomacy will use their IT systems to interact with and affect host countries, citizens, the public, and other international organizations who may either have a direct or indirect stake in the activities of the ministry.

3.2.E-government Maturity models

Electronic government Maturity model is employed in the analysis of the web portal that is used for e-governance. The model is made of several stages. The stages that are used can be as simple as the mere sharing of information or as complex as the capabilities needed for transaction in the determination of maturity of the portal used for e-governance (Lee, 2010).

There are several studies that have been done over time to review the concept of models of the maturity of electronic government. A case in point is a comparative research done by Faith Allah (2014). The comparative study considered the models that are used by 25 electronic government models. The findings of the study are used by the researcher in recommendation of what was termed as model for best practices for directing electronic government portal maturity. Another study for the models of portal maturity for e-government was done by Siau & Long (Siau and Long, 2005) . The meta-synthesis that they performed focused on five models of e-government maturity. The result was a derivation of a new model for e-government stage. Finally, Lee carried out a qualitative research that analyzed twelve models for e-governance (Siau and Long, 2005). The findings of the study were in agreement with the aforementioned studies concerning the nature of electronic governance models and staging.

In summary, it is possible to analyze the staging of most models from the above studies. The above studies indicate that a majority of the models have a range of four to five stages in electronic governance. The stages also indicate that there are similarities between the different portals that are used by the government in communicating electronically. In other words, although the names that are used in referring to the maturity stages might differ, the nature of the content remains relatively similar (Fath-Allah, 2014). The stages can be categorized as initial, middle, and final stages generally. Therefore, it can be concluded that the information stage appears as the initial stage for a majority of the models. The information or presence stage is characterized by a consideration of the ICT services availability together with the online portal. The focus of the middle stages is limited to the interaction between the government and the citizens. The nature of interaction between the two entities is expansive and cuts across all stages in the electronic governance

models. The last stage for many models is the maturity stage. In this stage, the attention is focused on the development of advanced features of communication that allow for a complete integration of all functions.

3.3.The Stages of the Maturity Framework

The e-diplomacy maturity framework's stages below (also shown in figure 1) are a derivation from the stages of e-government discussed earlier. They are also derived the theory and practice of diplomacy.

3.3.1.Stage 1: Intra-organizational capabilities

The Foreign Ministries have developed an advanced computer system with a common suite of software as well as an identical configuration of that particular software. This kind of software has been installed on every computer of foreign ministry department, such as HR, finance, decision making, knowledge sharing software's. Besides, the foreign ministry has used the technology in an efficient manner for maintaining internal as well as external global network (Batora, 2008)

3.3.2.Stage 2: Mobile access

The diplomats exchange texts that are drafted in electronic format at the same time. The diplomats are increasingly utilizing social networking sites like Facebook and blogs. This has reduced the mobility of the diplomats. By the reduction of mobility, it means that the diplomats do not need to physically travel from point to another or one country to another. Using the social media network, the diplomats can easily address the audience with the specific message that they want to convey to them. This is to mean that the diplomat does not need to travel to meet his or her audience so that he or she can deliver the message; hence, this platform is reducing the mobility (Gaida, 2013).

The use of phones, social media, tablets and smartphones have greatly affected the mode and speed of communication that has been efficient and very fast (Free, 2013). They have allowed ease in communication sharing between different diplomats.

3.3.3.Stage 3: Citizens' interaction

One of the main functions and goals of the ministry of foreign affairs of a country is to provide excellent services to citizens abroad. For instance, the Qatari's ministry of foreign affairs mission statement is "To have a distinguished foreign policy for the State of Qatar at both regional and international levels, and care for the interests of citizens abroad" (MOFAQ). At present, the consular affairs have been working towards the use of technology. As stated earlier one of the main functions of the consular departments of the foreign ministry and/or embassies of a country is to communicate with citizens, protect as well as care for their interests. Presently, ICT can facilitate and enhance the consular affairs tasks. Thanks to ICT tools such as social media, websites, online services, and applications, embassies can reach the citizens in a very effective and fast ways.

The ministry of foreign affairs can collaborate with foreign countries by sharing information with other embassies and people through online communities. The organization will develop some communities and a website for connecting effectively with the people. With the help of communities and website the ministry of foreign affairs will communicate all its policies to everyone.

Embassies use the internet as a tool for cultural exchange and promoting the home country, it offers various readings, documents, videos and other sources for promoting cultural exchange (Permyakova, RIAC).

Provision of online services is another tool that is regularly used by embassies to enhance consular services. The visa information and other associated documents can be delivered online by the citizens from any part of the world. Thus, the processing of visa documents have been simplified by e-diplomacy tools. Furthermore, it has facilitated the direct with citizens who are at different countries (IRM's *Office of eDiplomacy, n.d*).

3.3.4 Stage 4: Open diplomacy

With the rise of ever evolving networking technologies, such as virtual private network (VPN), computer security encryption methods, and remote access technologies, full integration among all stakeholders and departments could be achieved in which all missions can be linked with the headquarter and with the public.

The implementation of advanced technology by the foreign ministry enabled better communication process among a large number of significant elements such as headquarters as well as embassies. Apart from this, the technology also enabled better communication between large numbers of embassies within the same region (Batora, 2008).

Additionally, networking can also reach other departments in the government. This will enable the bringing together of all the activities of the administration in a relation that is external both at the decision-making and the preparatory level and when the policies are being implemented for instance, by the acting abroad. An additional circle may be added by the extension of the network to the non-governmental bodies and to the private sector of all types having a stake in the relation that is external (Kappeler, 1998).

3.4. Potential Factors Influencing the Implementation and Diffusion of the Framework

Bátora (2006) correctly asserts that traditional diplomacy is characterized by three main features, hierarchy, secrecy and one-way communication with the public. This section illustrates that these factors can serve to critically limit the use of ICT tools in the diplomatic function in addition to providing a description of other factors that can influence the successful diffusion and implementation of ICT into the diplomatic functions.

3.4.1. Organizational Structure

The character feature of the hierarchy can greatly limit the use of ICT tools in the diplomatic function. This is because bureaucracy can have the effect of slowing down the flow of important information across the various boundaries of organizational units, as well as across the authority line levels (Kettani and Moulin, 2014). It can take a considerable amount of time for information to be approved for sharing by the bureaucratic system. As such, it can be surmised that despite the implementation of ICT tools in diplomacy, the existing bureaucracy can still create considerable challenges for the inclusion of external actors within the foreign affairs community in shared databases and information-sharing systems.

While the use of ICT tools in the diplomatic function can help to better integrate the organizational actors in a given country's foreign service across the globe, this potential is observed to be impeded by the fact that foreign ministries tend to cling to the traditional hierarchical relationship that exists between embassies and headquarters (Cornago, 2013). Although the use of ICT tools can cause embassies and their headquarters to all act on the same level playing field, diplomats are observed to still cling to the traditional hierarchal relationship where information must first be forwarded to their headquarters before it can be approved and then be disseminated to other embassies. This tendency is observed to limit the effectiveness of the use of ICT tools in diplomacy.

3.4.2. Privacy and confidentiality

Secrecy has for years been a central norm in the organization of all the various diplomatic establishments (Kurizaki, 2007). As the application of ICT tools has grown to become increasingly more popular in the communication of foreign policy and the diplomatic information exchange, a number of concerns have been raised pertaining to the proper application of information security standards by foreign ministries. This is because most ICT tools tend to be designed with the objective of helping government systems to be open in the spirit of democracy. According to Roeder and Simard (2013), the use of open ICT tools in diplomacy is encouraged as secrecy in diplomacy and government has historically been linked to a rampant abuse of power as well as both human and civil rights. In addition to this, critics of secrecy in diplomacy and government systems also argue that the use of secrecy can greatly undermine global peace as was evidenced by the circumstances that led to World War I. However, this position is countered by arguments that while secrecy in diplomatic and government systems can serve to greatly undermine democracy, the essential truth is that when utilized in an effective manner, secrecy can be of great service to a country's people. It is

essential for governments to sometimes enter into secret negotiations, have secrets as well as set up intelligence services. Secrets are sometimes required in the interest of the greater good (Wanis-St, 2011).

3.4.3. Nature of communication

In their capacities as mediators of official and authoritative information pertaining to the foreign affairs of their states, diplomats have traditionally been required to exchange information not only with their diplomatic counterparts located in other countries but also their own heads of state (Bedjaoui, 1991). However, Ghosh (2013) points out that the public was at first not involved in this exchange of information.

Dhia (2006) observes that in their communication with the public, most foreign ministries have traditionally employed the use of a one-way and ex-post model of communication to provide the public with information on the decisions that have been made affecting foreign policy. The use of ICT tools such as chat-rooms, e-mail, social media and interactive websites is observed to call for a greater involvement of a country's citizens in the formulation of foreign policy (Potter, 2002). However, the involvement of a country's general public in the ex-ante discussion affecting the priorities of foreign policy or the particular proposal on government initiatives affecting foreign policy has been unusual in diplomacy, and this factor can serve as a significant hindrance to the use of ICT tools in the diplomatic function.

3.4.4. Socio-Cultural norms

Ministry of foreign affairs (MFAs) involve building relationships with citizens in States that have different cultures and traditions. Technologies used in communication have to be developed in a way that individuals and businesses from countries with different languages are able to understand. Technologies used for communication should integrate a variety of languages so that individuals are able to read instructions in the manuals on how to use the new technologies. Some communities are slow to changes and fear the use of ICTs because of transparency and lack of privacy; hence, discourage the MFA ministers from promoting growth. Some individuals from states that were colonized and forced to change their cultures strive to protect their traditions by rejecting changes in the organizations.

3.4.5. Political, Legal, and Economic context

The promotion of ICT adoption in diplomatic functions is observed to require both long-term and large scale investments (Hanna, 2010). As such, most governments are observed to display a degree of reluctance in making huge financial investments to implement the use of ICT tools in diplomatic functions. This is primarily as a result of the fact that it can at times prove to be especially difficult to fund these projects with their limited budgets (Potter, 2002). While the political heads of a country's foreign ministry might display enthusiasm and initiative in the adoption of ICT tools as part of their diplomatic functions in the event that they happen to have access to externally available funding, the same top leadership can however lose interest in the adoption of these ICT tools as a result of a general lack of sufficient financial resources. Also, According to Salazar (2007), The economies of different countries affect their ability to integrate new technologies in their MFAs

Some countries have tough restrictions that prevent other countries from introducing new technologies. The heads of state could control the foreign policies made and decide on the types of technologies to be integrated by the organization.

4.Conclusion

The literature review was performed to pave the way for the e-diplomacy maturity framework that has been developed by the researcher. That is, it was necessary to justify the suitability of the framework in the literature by looking at the overall concept of e-government maturity and diplomatic excellence and how the framework can be used to attain this.

The concept of the e-diplomacy maturity level was reviewed in detail. There are four stages in all, each of which shows the level of advancement with diplomatic excellence.

The use of innovative ICT tools such as e-mails, social media, interactive websites, and e-services can greatly improve the effectiveness of a country's foreign ministry, of note is that there are a number of factors that

are observed to limit the adoption of these technologies. These factors essentially range from bureaucracy, secrecy, and communication with the public to political, social and technological factors. It is essential for foreign ministries to carefully analyze these factor before implementing programs aimed at integrating ICT into their operations as this can have massive ramifications on the ministries.

In conclusion, it will be stressed that the attainment of diplomatic excellence is a process rather than an event. This means that diplomatic excellence cannot be achieved overnight. Again, in undertaking the process, it is very necessary that countries will recognize the need to introduce new technology into diplomacy so that they can successfully go through the stages of maturity in a faster and more efficient manner.

5.Research contribution and future work

This study aimed at providing a means of reviewing literature that makes it possible to develop a framework based on which e-diplomacy maturity levels can be formulated. The motivation for this review is to highlight the basis for developing the e-diplomacy framework based on the theory of both e-government maturity models and diplomacy. The review performed in this paper is the first study to conceptualize and evaluate the e-diplomacy maturity framework. This review could assist researchers who are seeking knowledge and references by providing them with useful resources for further investigation and study. It can also help practitioners (e.g.: diplomats and ICT mangers) to evaluate their current status within ICT evolution in the diplomatic context and hence can improve their capabilities.

Finally, this paper contributes to the digital government literature with the development of a conceptual e-diplomacy maturity framework. As part of future research, this framework is to be evaluated at different foreign missions (e.g. embassies). A qualitative methodology will be adopted where interviews will be conducted with employees within foreign missions to collect empirical evidence which will be used to evaluate and validate the framework.

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