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# Diplomacy: An Open-Source Alternative

SIOBHAN MACDERMOTT

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Before the news out of the Middle East turned almost universally distressing, many Westerners were wide-eyed over what some called the Arab Spring and others, the Arab Awakening. Technologists, especially those in and around Silicon Valley, were quick to attribute the Middle Eastern uprisings that began in 2010 to a combination of social media and mobile phones. Tech-oriented socio-economist Clay Shirky wrote of digital technology having created in the Middle East a “networked population” that, thanks to the Internet, enjoyed “more opportunities to engage in public speech ... and ... undertake collective action.”<sup>1</sup>

The popular movements in Tunisia and Egypt were blithely dubbed the “Twitter Revolution” by Western journalists—though not by Shirky. While many now take for granted that the Internet can create instant revolution via inherently democratic, open, and decentralized leadership, Shirky explains that Internet-enabled networking “can help loosely coordinated publics demand change,” but does not cause revolution on its own.<sup>2</sup> As Charlie Beckett wrote in 2011, the digital networks in Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab Spring were organized around “nodal figures who all tended to resist conventional leadership roles.”<sup>3</sup> Beckett, in part, ascribed what he called the “diffuse, horizontal nature” of the Arab Spring movements to the decentralized nature of the Internet itself, and he found this structure “very difficult [for governments] to break.”<sup>4</sup>

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**Siobhan MacDermott** is an expert on the future of the Internet, cybersecurity, privacy, and business-government relations globally. In both advisory and executive roles, she has helped direct strategy, communications, investor relations, government relations, and policy for companies such as Intel-McAfee, AVG Technologies, Oracle, HP, RSA Security, Betrusted and Sprint PCS. Ms. MacDermott has an MBA from the Thunderbird School of Global Management, and a Global Master of Arts from the Fletcher School at Tufts University. She is the Vice Chair of the Fund for Peace.

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The early successes of the Arab Spring notwithstanding, the ensuing years show that the legal, coercive, and technological power of nation-states limits the capacity of the Internet to transcend governments and

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create a genuinely global community, let alone a digital super state. This admitted, I nevertheless believe the Internet *does* offer an alternative source of global governance, one that is largely untapped and potentially paradigm shifting. Call it open-source cyberdiplomacy.

“Dispersed but still connected,” Philip Seib wrote in *Real-Time Diplomacy*, “that is the basic geography of [digital] networks. It was a perfect

model for the agents of change during the Arab Spring.”<sup>5</sup> It is a view that harks back to the early visions of the Internet as a kind of anti-government government. On February 8, 1996, Electronic Frontier Foundation founding member (and sometime Grateful Dead lyricist) John Perry Barlow published “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” which begins: “Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather ... I declare the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us.”<sup>6</sup> A year earlier, Nicolas Negroponte, co-founder and director of MIT’s Media Lab, flatly declared that the Internet was beyond the reach of national laws, not because these “laws aren’t relevant,” but because “the nation-state is not relevant.”<sup>7</sup>

Amid those who saw the Arab Spring and other popular movements—such as People Power II in the Philippines (2001), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), and the first Obama presidential campaign (2008)—as vindication of Barlow and other early techno-romantics, were such dissenting skeptics as Evgeny Morozov and Malcolm Gladwell, who believed that champions of the sovereign political potency of the Internet suffered from what Morozov called “the net delusion.”<sup>8,9</sup> And it is indeed difficult, in 2014—amid the horrors of Syria and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the retrograde movement to military rule in Egypt, the strangely neglected chaos in Libya, and the reactionary religiosity of Tunisia—to believe uncritically in the transcendent qualities of the

so-called cyberspace. Yet if one still believes that the Internet is unlimited in its ability to transcend nations and borders, all that is necessary is to look at the likes of China. Intensively networked within its own borders, China's connections to the greater global Internet are so severely curtailed, intensively filtered, and strictly controlled that some have called the barriers the modern equivalent of the Great Wall. The fact is that despite the ethereal, other-dimensional name we give it, cyberspace is the product of *physical* infrastructure. Internet data enters and leaves China at relatively few points, each of which is regulated by sophisticated gateway router systems built by Cisco, a U.S.-based corporation.

Early techno philosopher-tribunes believed the Internet's intensive peer-to-peer interconnectivity put the network beyond the control of governments, institutions, corporations, or any other central authority. We now know that they overestimated the inherent potency of decentralization, while underestimating that of centralized authority. Yet, it remains true that pervasive interconnection among peers is a tremendously powerful platform, force, and instrument. Although it is undeniably grounded in physical infrastructure, the Internet has nevertheless removed what Yale law professor Yochai Benkler describes as "the physical constraints on effective information production." This, in turn, "has made human creativity and the economics of information itself the core structuring facts in the new networked information economy." Before the proliferation of the Internet, significantly moving the masses was a costly enterprise requiring control of the infrastructure and personnel of a mass media industry. The daunting capital requirement was a "material barrier that ... drove much of our information environment to be funneled through ... proprietary, market-based strategies." As the Internet displaced old school mass media, however, this material barrier was eroded, making way for "nonmarket, nonproprietary, motivations and organizational forms" to become increasingly "important to the information production system."<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly, the forms these nonmarket, nonproprietary motivations have taken are nothing new. For, in the production of information, nonproprietary strategies have always been foremost. The arts, sciences, education, philosophy, political theory, theological debate, all of these, while certainly tangent to the marketplace, have historically existed

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and functioned apart from it. In short, no one becomes a philosopher, artist, or theologian to make a pile of cash. And so, on the Internet, thousands collaborate on information projects such as Wikipedia without receiving any monetary compensation for their efforts.

Indeed, the Internet itself was the product of peer production. In turn, the Internet empowered the ongoing development of peer production as a method of social production, in which individuals organize themselves into communities to coordinate their labor toward an outcome in which all share an interest or a stake. Wikipedia is one such productive community, but, even earlier, in 1983, Richard Matthew Stallman, a Harvard-and-MIT-educated hacker, launched another, when he unleashed the open-source concept with the GNU project.

Open-source works like this: operating in a peer production network, the maker of a product offers a free license to its design, plans, formulas, or blueprints, so that the product can be used, modified, and, most of all, improved upon by others—who thereby constitute the commons-based peer production community. Stallman's GNU (an acronym for "*GNU's Not Unix*") was a computer operating system (OS) intended to enable the creation of an array of open-source applications usable on machines designed to run on Unix, a closed-source, for-profit, and quite expensive operating system. The GNU alternatives to Unix were collaboratively created by developers who used the Internet to organize themselves outside of traditional hierarchical corporate or institutional structures. Today, some thirty years later, open-source software is widely used, even dominating in some markets.

The success of open-source development has inspired the application of open-source methods in other areas, including the creation of products as diverse as mobile phones, digital processors, and beverages (open-source colas and beer, for example).<sup>11,12,13,14</sup> By far, the most successful application of open-source outside of software development has been in information products, including Wikipedia and other wikis.

Is not diplomacy—the peaceful management of international relations among nation-states—an information product? As such, it seems reasonable to assume that the Internet will enable, empower, and drive, in the near future, a popular peer-to-peer diplomacy parallel with traditional diplomacy and coexisting with it in much the same way as open-source software coexists with traditional closed-source software: open-source cyberdiplomacy, or just plain cyberdiplomacy, for short.

To predict what cyberdiplomacy will be, it is useful to start with what it will *not* be. It will not be *the* new diplomacy. As the Internet has not

replaced the nation-state, neither will cyberdiplomacy replace the state-sponsored profession of conducting relations among nations. But it may become an open source for the development of diplomatic solutions among the peoples of the world. I also believe that wise governments will consult and draw upon these online open-source repositories to craft official solutions—international policy sanctioned by nation-states.

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In some cases, open-source diplomacy will create the kinds of programs and activities currently developed and implemented by today's non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In much the same way as current NGOs, which are funded and sanctioned in some part by governments but remain nonetheless independent, cyberdiplomacy that is created and conducted on the NGO model will be closely tangent to traditional diplomacy.

While it is possible that NGO diplomacy will become the dominant model for cyberdiplomacy, I believe that open-source diplomacy will initially be conducted on website forums in which motivated global citizens will collaborate on creative solutions to international problems. The result will be neither diplomacy *by* the people nor an aggregation of demands *from* the people. Instead, it will be a source of continually evolving ideas and initiatives produced not by a handful of career diplomats, but by the heads, hearts, and hands of hundreds or even thousands of committed individuals, whose chief qualification for doing diplomacy will be a combination of their demonstrated concern and the fact of their residence on this planet.

On August 15, 1914, shortly after the "Great War" erupted in Europe, Bertrand Russell wrote a letter to the *Nation* (London): "All this madness, all this rage, all this flaming death of our civilization and our hopes has been brought about because a set of official gentlemen, living luxurious lives, mostly stupid, and all without imagination or heart, have chosen that it should occur rather than that any one of them should suffer some infinitesimal rebuff to his country's pride."<sup>15</sup> It was not so much a protest against war as it was a scathing indictment of traditional closed-source diplomacy created by "a set of official gentlemen." Four years later, on January 8, 1918, President Woodrow Wilson promulgated the celebrated "Fourteen Points" in which he proposed that peace might be justly

restored.<sup>16</sup> The very first of these—open covenants of peace, openly arrived at and diplomacy that proceeds always frankly and in the public view—is nothing less than a pre-Internet-era definition of open-source diplomacy.

I do not believe that public diplomacy in the form of Internet-enabled open-source diplomacy will—or should—replace “official” or “professional” diplomacy. But, if open-source projects such as wikis and cutting-edge software development are any indication, the likelihood of online diplomacy forums producing information and insight of significant value is high. If two heads are truly better than one in developing software, imagine how much more effective a multitude of collaborating heads, hearts, and hands might be when it comes to innovating approaches to international relations and related issues affecting millions in an increasingly complex and diverse world. *f*

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Clay Shirky, “The Political Power of Social Media,” *Foreign Affairs* 90 (1) (January/February 2011): 29.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Charlie Beckett, “After Tunisia and Egypt: Towards a New Typology of Media and Networked Political Change,” *POLIS: Journalism and Society at the LSE*, <<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/02/11/after-tunisia-and-egypt-towards-a-new-typology-of-media-and-networked-political-change/>>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Philip Seib, *Real-Time Diplomacy: Politics and Power in the Social Media Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), Kindle ed., Chapter 6.
- 6 John Perry Barlow, “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” <<https://projects.eff.org/~barlow/Declaration-Final.html>>.
- 7 Jack Goldsmith and Tim Wu, *Who Controls the Internet: Illusions of a Borderless World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.
- 8 Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), Kindle ed., Introduction.
- 9 Malcolm Gladwell, “Does Egypt Need Twitter?” *The New Yorker*, February 2, 2011, <<http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/does-egypt-need-twitter>>.
- 10 Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 4.
- 11 “Openmoko—Open. Mobile. Free,” <[http://wiki.openmoko.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://wiki.openmoko.org/wiki/Main_Page)>.
- 12 OpenCores, Main Page, <[http://opencores.org/or1k/Main\\_Page](http://opencores.org/or1k/Main_Page)>.
- 13 “Soft Drink Formula,” Version 1.113, <[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/bf/OpenCola\\_soft\\_drink\\_recipe.pdf](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/bf/OpenCola_soft_drink_recipe.pdf)>.
- 14 Free Beer, <<http://freebeer.org/blog/>>.
- 15 Bertrand Russell, *Autobiography* (New York: Routledge, 1967-1969; reprint ed., 2006), 265.
- 16 Woodrow Wilson, “Fourteen Points,” <[http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Fourteen\\_Points\\_Speech](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Fourteen_Points_Speech)>.