



SOCIAL MEDIA ARE A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY

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By Carlo Antonelli

“The Arab Spring was clearly the most astounding demonstration of the plea for freedom and democracy swept like wildfire by social media. These tools have created an unbroken “freedom network” between our homes and the world’s most remote areas, especially where conventional mass media are still censored.” Minister of Foreign Affairs Giulio Terzi di Sant’Agata acknowledges how important a role the web plays in free speech for men and women throughout, including those living under authoritarian regimes. Today, he is in New York (with Prime Minister Mario Monti for the U.N. General Assembly meetings) and is also attending “Armed Conflicts and Social Media,” which is being streamed live from Turin as part of Social Media Week. He released this exclusive interview to Wired.

In what way has new digital media changed diplomacy and since when? Was last year’s ‘Arab Spring’ a turning point?

“New forms of communication and social media are a unique opportunity for diplomacy to provide, and at the same time also receive, information and suggestions from citizens at an unprecedented pace. It is safe to say that no other technology has ever brought diplomacy closer to the people.

The Internet is becoming more and more like a conversation between people who can instantly verify information and discuss it with one another. This is how it’s changing communications: the Internet is an extensive and densely populated assembly, which is at the same time becoming more and more complex. As Minister of Foreign Affairs of a great country like Italy, I think it advisable that we study, monitor, and actively use digital media because I believe they have become an essential component of international relations as well.

For example, social media allows people to closely follow political, economic and social events, especially those guided by younger generations. The Arab Spring was clearly the most astounding demonstration of the plea for freedom and democracy swept like wildfire by social media. What we have witnessed in the countries affected by the demonstrations is the potential that everyone can quickly become both wit-

nesses to and participants in what is happening around them. These tools have created an unbroken “freedom network” between our homes and the world’s most remote areas, especially where conventional mass media are still censored.

I am reminded, for example, of the young Tunisian blogger Lina Ben Mhenni for example, an active supporter of peace and tolerance in Tunisia that I met in Tunis and again in Turin at the ‘Twiplomacy’ event. Lina’s role was crucial in bringing worldwide attention to Mohamed Bouazizi’s tale, which ignited the movement that overthrew President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali. As an active Twitter user, and from our digital correspondence, I cannot but admire what Lina does every day to inform about what is happening in her country, and thus by corollary, contribute to a transition process that covers political and social representations.”

In what way has the information generated by citizens through digital media changed the geography of the sources available to you? Is there a service that monitors the information generated by social networks that overlaps with the official network of information gathered by the embassies exist?

“Social media has certainly enriched the number of sources available to us. The monitoring process thus becomes essential. Nevertheless, we must bear in mind two aspects. On the one hand, integration with other, “traditional” sources demands that content be carefully selected and verified.

Too often, there is the risk of contributing to the spread of information that is not verified and several hours later turns out to be false.

I’m sure you recall the news—which later turned out to be unconfirmed—on the release of Rossella Urru reported by Al Jazeera based on information from Mauritanian and Senegalese media. Just minutes after the first reports appeared on Twitter, the network began to rejoice at her release, setting off a viral short circuit of information. I daresay this was a classic example of an irresponsible use of the Internet and proof that traditional journalism and digital information are in no way at odds. If we are to have genuine and credible information, the new world of fast technology must abide by the same standards and the same method of checking content as in the past.

Secondly, we should bear in mind that use and access to Internet is not evenly distributed throughout the world. There is a significant “digital divide” between the euro-Atlantic area and, for example, Africa, which we should strive to fill by strongly supporting access to new technologies and information. Digital media can play a key role in the democratic growth of nations, and for this reason, Italy actively supports the use of common rules, such as the UN resolution on freedom of the Internet.

Since my arrival at the Foreign Ministry, I have wanted to give a strong boost at both the central level and at the level of diplomatic and consular network throughout the world, to open and routinely use institutional profiles on major social media, including Facebook, Twitter and Youtube. This is why I believe it is necessary for our diplomats

who are posted abroad to take training courses so that they can acquire these proficiencies.”

How has Julian Assange and Wikileaks affected the concept of confidentiality of information in your possession. More generally, is the possibility by citizens to process enormous quantities of information and/or data modifying what you do?

Clearly, we should not perceive the internet as a utopia: technology in and of itself is neutral, assuming the values of those using it. The ‘public diplomacy’ we are discussing is, just like negotiations, correspondence and confidential contacts, one instrument of diplomacy. There are communications and assessments that must necessarily remain confidential, and in some cases, violation of their confidentiality not only invalidates content, it seriously endangers the subjects involved. I am thinking of the revelations (never confirmed) of Wiki Leaks on alleged points of contact of the USA in countries like Afghanistan where freedom-loving men and women of freedom were then fighting and still are to give their country a better future.

What are the planet’s geopolitical hotbeds today?

Just this week, together with Prime Minister Monti, I am participating in the 67th UNGA and discussions on all the most pressing issues.

In addition to traditional Euro Atlantic concerns and major crisis areas, the focal points of Italian foreign policy driving our action, also in the UN, are the promotion and protection of human rights and basic freedoms, the commitment to ending the violence and setting in motion a transition phase in Syria, the Iranian nuclear matter, international security, the war and terrorism and piracy, and mainly, especially in these months since the installation of the administration of which I am part, a determined action by our diplomacy to support the country’s economic growth, promote the presence of our companies abroad, and attract foreign investments to Italy.

What new elements (or more generally, new strategy) in Italian foreign policy has the Monti administration introduced? More specifically, in the Mediterranean area?

The activity of the MFA during the administration presided by Prime Minister Monti has been focused on relaunching Italy’s profile in Europe and globally. In Brussels, we are recognized as playing a leadership role in orienting and strengthening the external action of the EU. I have seen the same acknowledgement in New York as well. There is most definitely a particular focus on the Mediterranean, a priority area for Italy and Europe alike. Because of its geographic proximity, historical and cultural bonds, robust trade flows, strong economic complementarity, and a deep friendship between peoples, we Italians have always had a privileged understanding of the real-

ity of the southern shore of the Mediterranean.

In the framework of 'growth diplomacy', the Ministry plans to pursue the national development program, consolidating our positions precisely in North Africa and Middle East. Exports can strongly fuel the country's growth as demonstrated by the extraordinary 2011 data in the so-called Greater Mediterranean: +20% exports, +4% exchange overall, with over 3,300 Italian companies present in the area.

The free elections in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya were the first chapter of an important phase of transition toward a democratic regime. The broad participation in the elections of so many men and women who were voting for the first time corroborate Italy's stand in support of the processes from the very outset. We must now keep watch on the constitutional rules that will serve as the foundations of the new governments. I trust that human rights, respect for freedom of religion, and the protection of minorities will be guaranteed and protected straightaway."