

Real-Time Diplomacy: Politics and Power in the Social Media Era, By Philip Seib, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. ISBN-13: 978-0230339439. 212pp.

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Real-Time Diplomacy: Politics and Power in the Social Media Era

The book, “Real-time Diplomacy: Politics and Power of the Social Media Era” by Philip Seib, as explained by the author, does not offer a narration of the Arab Spring, but rather presents an analysis of what the uprisings, and the changes they reflect, mean in the context of diplomatic practice. The book examines three major topics: the Arab revolutions of 2011; the altered theories and practices of diplomacy necessitated by the new pace and reach of information flow; and the ways social media-based networks affect political structures and activism. The book also offers some historical background on the amount of time diplomats would take in reacting to events. The author explains how this reaction time has decreased dramatically, due to the influence of television and the Internet. According to the author, this book was written partly in response to criticism that diplomats did not act quickly enough to the rapid events that were happening in 2011 in the Arab world. The question that has been often posed is: How can policymakers keep pace with the large amount of information coming from multiple sources?

Seib tackles the reaction of the United States and the other major powers towards the events of the Arab Spring, which he describes as “inadequate.” While President Barack Obama and other world leaders did attempt to recognize the change that was taking place, they seemed to be slow in interacting with what was happening. Two of the main reasons behind this slowness were: the faulty intelligence analysis that overemphasized the strength of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak’s regime and other dictatorships over protesters; and the delay in recognizing the weakness in the long-established alliances with autocratic regimes. In addition, Seib argues that the major problem of the foreign policy decision-making process was its incapacity to keep up with the speed of developments taking place on Arab streets and to comprehend the new information environment.

One of the limitations of the book is that the author supports his arguments in discussing the Arab Spring by giving examples mainly from Tunisia and Egypt, when many other cases could be examined as well. For example, attention to demonstrations in some of the Gulf countries, such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia and their subsequent

lack of media coverage, would also help us to understand how media contribute to diplomacy.

Seib sheds light on how the quick information flow has influenced the process and the time diplomats take in reacting to events. Recently, citizen journalists and new media have outpaced other traditional information providers. Therefore, although policymakers today are not obligated to act in a rushed manner, they get pressured to move rapidly to catch up with the pace of information dissemination via communication technologies. They need to have systems to scrutinize the information that comes in and they need to counteract the public expectation set by the media that policymakers should solve problems with the same speed with which information is disseminated. He notes that gone are the days when diplomats talked only to their fellow diplomats and scheduled conversations at their convenience. Time has changed, and new diplomatic practices must be formed that can make it in the real-time era.

The author criticizes the tendency to describe the uprisings in 2011 in the Middle East as the “Facebook revolution” or the “Twitter revolution.” He explains that these movements belong to people, not to media, and so describing otherwise underestimates the bravery of citizens who risked their lives to call for change. He warns that it is important not to overestimate the role social media can play in transforming the public sphere or in bringing changes to society. Social media may be significant, but they are not transformative in themselves. The author reasons the political transformation and changes that happened during the Arab Spring are the results of more long existing problems, such as economic issues, oppressive governments, and difficult lives produced by autocratic regimes.

Additionally, the author blames governments for not being prepared for such unlikely events. Governments around the world showed their disconnection and ignorance of how the media were changing around them; and that media are empowering citizens to the point which they can change their circumstances and future. He explains that the public who have access to electronic information expect to see crises resolved quickly, yet this is neither possible nor desirable. However, he notes that policymakers should improve their ways of dealing with political realities, taking into consideration the changing nature of social media. Although there is no particular formula offered in the book to do so, the book can help in establishing the context in which policymakers and the public may consider and react to political events for years to come.

In order to explore these issues, the author delves into the historical contexts of the 2011 revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. He also explains how the Arab Spring in 2011 was not lead by conservative Muslims; however, hundreds of thousands Egyptian Islamists in late July 2011 in Cairo’s Tahrir Square claimed that the Egyptian uprising as their own. Moreover, the author argues that the case of the Arab Spring sheds light on

how important it is for policymakers to recognize the role media play in disseminating information rapidly and in international affairs.

Finally, I would like to note that “Real-Time Diplomacy: Politics and Power in the Social Media Era” offers great insight into how new media can influence international relations and how policy makers can benefit from the fast pace of the new communication technologies. I highly recommend the book to scholars and students who are interested in studying the intersection of media and foreign policy.