

Conference Report

International Symposium

Cultural Communication—New Communication Tools and the Future of International Relations

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On Thursday, December 12, 2013 the Japanese-German Center Berlin (JDZB) and the Japan Foundation (JF) jointly hosted the international symposium titled “Cultural Communication—New Communication Tools and the Future of International Relations.” In three sessions the symposium aimed at clarifying how the rapid and global spread of the new and evolving electronic communication tools and styles, often labeled “new” or “social” media, is changing international politics and diplomacy. Furthermore, the opportunities and risks involving the new media tools’ application in cultural and political diplomacy were discussed in depth, focusing particularly on the case of Japan and Germany.

The Symposium started with opening remarks by Dr. Friederike Bosse, Secretary General of the Japanese-German Center Berlin, and Tokiko Kiyota, Director of the Japan Cultural Institute in Cologne. Dr. Bosse stressed that the new shapes and tools of (inter-)cultural communication, e.g. *Facebook, Twitter, YouTube* etc., already have had a profound impact on global politics and societies. Furthermore, Dr. Bosse argued that the new media tools harbor both great opportunities and risks. The new methods and styles of communication follow different rules and logics. For instance, they are much harder to suppress or censure, therefore making them apt tools for communication out of governments’ reach in totalitarian regimes. Concluding, Dr. Bosse emphasized the general importance of international cultural communication today. It is, therefore, important to have a close look at how cultural communication has already changed and continues to change against the backdrop of the ongoing digital revolution. It is of high significance to understand who the

actors are that are using new communication means, and how and for what ends the new media tools can be utilized.

Ms. Kiyota reaffirmed the important role of new media and pointed out that so far they have played a sometimes rather unexpected role, whether during periods of political change or other events such as severe natural catastrophes. The new media contain risks that are hard to manage, and yet it is of great importance to use them in a meaningful and responsible fashion. This poses large challenges to politicians and governments. Ms. Kiyota stressed that for Japan and Germany, both countries with great political power as well as a highly developed IT infrastructure, it is of great importance to meet these challenges.

After the welcome remarks the first session titled "Changing Media and Changing Communication Style" began. It was chaired by Anja Türkan (Research Fellow "Digital Diplomacy" in the program "Culture and Foreign Policy," Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations [ifa]). Speakers were Prof. Dr. Alexander Görke (Freie Universitaet Berlin) and Mr. Hirotugu Aida (Kyodo News). In his lecture Prof. Görke, Professor for Communication Science, examined to what extent the many hopes and promises applied to the new media's rise have been coming true. After presenting several utopian expectations voiced at the dawn of the Web 2.0—e.g. the new media leading to expanded global cooperation and participation, and thus to a general advance of global equality and democracy—Prof. Görke explained that these expectations have been met only sporadically. However, the new media's quick growth has strongly influenced the composition of the media market and subsequently the media's general role in society. Firstly, the new media's success did not necessarily boost the quality of news coverage and, secondly, it came at the expense of the traditional media's prevalence and financial success, especially of the print sector. Furthermore, the rise of the new media has caused novel media behavior. Especially young people often engage in "connective action," i.e. short-term, risk-free digital collaboration on specific issues. This, however, does not equal the much hoped for ideal of the well-informed, concerned and politically active citizen who concertedly pushes ahead global democracy. Thus, in spite of the unbroken and continuing euphoria about the new media's opportunities, several associated myths, especially about its role in development of global democracy, must be treated cautiously.

In the session's second lecture, Mr. Aida, a columnist for Kyodo News, gave an overview of the distinctive shapes and roles of the new and traditional media in Japan. Firstly, Mr. Aida explained that when it comes to news coverage, the new media are generally still viewed very skeptically in Japan. However, occasionally important news stories "broke" via new media tools, for example the boat collision incident involving a Japanese Coast Guard patrol boat and a Chinese fishing vessel in 2010. In this case, a video by a Coast Guard serviceman leaked via YouTube made the story public. Furthermore, Mr. Aida described the way, in which new media take distinctive shapes in Japan, often being localized and resembling versions of globally known new media vanguards such as *Facebook* & co. Some media types, however, are particular to Japan, especially in terms of their huge prevalence and success. An example is the Internet message board *2-Channel*, the most widely used electronic communication platform in Japan. Interestingly, there are examples on how the new media have transformed traditional media, especially in television. For instance, internet users can now comment in real time on press conferences streamed online by mainstream media—a technical feature adopted from the social media platform *Niconico*. However, Mr. Aida stressed that the traditional media in the news business, i.e. newspaper and television, remain relatively unfazed by the new media's steady rise. He put this down to Japanese media consumers being still skeptical with regard to new media, especially when it comes to the accuracy of news coverage. Nonetheless, Mr. Aida argued, it is likely that the stronger financial pressures become for the traditional media, the more they will rely on or copy styles and tools of the new media.

The second session focusing on "New Communication Tools and International Relations" was chaired by Mr. Aida. Speakers were Prof. Dr. Yasushi Watanabe, Professor for Cultural Anthropology from Keio University, and Ambassador Dr. Heinrich Kreft, Deputy Director General for International Academic and Educational Relations and Dialog among Civilizations from the German Federal Foreign Office. Prof. Watanabe gave further illuminating examples of how the new media have influenced and changed political events (e.g. protests in Iran 2009), diffused power relation by dissipating monopolized information and created globally shared (pop-)cultural experience like the "Gangnam Style" dance. The rapid rise of the new media, Prof. Watanabe argued, offers promising opportunities for political participation, international diplomacy, and flow of information. The new media provide tools for direct

communication between politicians and public; they make real-time diplomacy possible; and they provide new sources of information and images, to name just a few of their positive features. Prof. Watanabe furthermore pointed out the advantages of accessing online educational programs and creating common educational experience, for example through joint university classes in different countries via real-time video transmission. These allowed for mutual understanding and trust about the respective cultures to be built. However, the new media also contain some problems and risks. For instance, Prof. Watanabe pointed out the "paradox of plenty" i.e. a scattering of interests that might eventually lead to only little attention being focused on issues of high importance.

Next, Dr. Kreft outlined how the Federal Foreign Office views and utilizes the new media in its official *Cultural Relations and Education Policy*. Even though they contain some risks, spread and usage of the new media are welcomed and encouraged by the Federal Foreign Office. That is, Dr. Kreft argued, because the new media offer promising tools for intercultural exchange in a world that closes its ranks temporally and spatially. However, challenges in the new cultural tools' diplomatic utilization remain. For instance, governments are struggling to make their voices heard and to deliver distinctive and clear messages within the plurality of communication in the digital world. The internet has changed not only the means of communication, but also its contents. All political developments and communication processes have greatly accelerated, leading to increased complexities and time pressure for decision-making. However, Dr. Kreft emphasized the new media's opportunities for Germany's *Cultural Relations and Education Policy*. The new communication tools, Dr. Kreft argued, contribute greatly to enhance international mutual understanding and to dismantle misunderstandings; they are useful instruments for the transfer of democratic values and norms and make communication with civil society actors in other countries possible. Overall, they help to increase the range and scope of German foreign policy and thus offer a great chance for cultural diplomacy.

The third and final session under the heading of "Social Media and Diversifying Actors" was chaired by Prof. Görke. Speakers were Ms. Anja Türkan (Research Fellow "Digital Diplomacy" in the program "Culture and Foreign Policy," Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations [ifa]) and Prof. Masahiko Shoji from the International University of Japan. Ms. Türkan outlined how

social media have already changed practice and style of diplomacy. *Twitter*, *Facebook* and other social networks, she argued, constitute powerful and increasingly employed tools in international diplomacy. Social media, Ms. Türkan discussed, supply politicians with tools to communicate directly and interactively with the public. This way, politicians can better inform the public about actual goals and try to gain people's support. Ms. Türkan presented several examples of the way social media already have changed and continue to change international diplomacy. For instance, the U.S. State Department massively engages in "Digital Diplomacy" or "eDiplomacy," with *Twitter* and *Facebook* being established communication tools for all U.S. diplomats. However, Ms. Türkan also pointed out inherent risks of social media's political application: a plethora of real-time, unfiltered comments by diplomats increase the risks of posting statements that could lead to political misunderstanding and even international crises. The language on *Twitter* & co., Ms. Türkan cautioned, requires much political and cultural sensibility.

In the session's second lecture, Prof. Shoji presented his findings on a comparative analysis of Japanese and Chinese citizens' protests and communicative behavior during political crises between the two countries. More specifically, Prof. Shoji examined how protesters and internet users had voiced their opinion during the Japanese-Chinese diplomatic crises of 2005, 2010, and 2012 respectively. Interestingly, the basic patterns of behavior among Japanese and Chinese reversed in that period. While in 2005 and 2010 Japanese reacted rather calmly and sometimes even in an ironical way towards the fierce and often hateful comments in the Chinese media and the ubiquitous images of violent street protests, in 2012 serious anti-Chinese demonstrations accompanied by the display of hateful slogans erupted in Japan for the first time. On the Chinese side, anti-Japanese protests and online comments by Chinese citizens showed a serious attitude in 2005 and 2010. In 2012, however, protests often lacked seriousness and even contained humorous elements. Prof. Shoji attributes this to a rising "learning curve" of cultural understanding about Japan on the Chinese side. In this regard, Prof. Shoji pointed out the growing importance of communication efforts of transnational cultural actors like the Chinese blogger Michael Anti, the Japanese commentator and columnist Yoshikazu Kato and even unlikely cultural actors like the Japanese adult movie star Sora Aoi, who all use the internet and other digital media tools to deepen mutual cultural understanding.

During the final discussion the speakers agreed that generally speaking the new media tools offer great opportunities for cultural and political communication as well as international diplomacy. However, they also advised to practice caution on making simplified cross-cultural generalizations about their application and effectiveness. In this regard, Ms. Türkan argued that in order to understand how to use new media tools, it is also important to be attentive to the different characteristics and settings of different countries' respective media systems. Prof. Shoji further underlined the call for attention to cultural backgrounds by pointing out that not only on an international level, but even within each country, different social and status groups use the new media tools differently. Therefore, in order to better understand general patterns of the new media's global usage, he called for further examination of their diverse applications by different actors, on a national as well as international level.

The symposium provided useful insight into the new media's global rise. The new digital communication tools and styles have already shown a profound impact on our world. By transforming media markets and communication behavior on a global scale they have effectively changed fundamental structures of modern information societies. What's more, they are transforming political processes and international diplomacy. And even though the political application of *Facebook*, *Twitter* & co. contains some risks, the new digital communication tools offer great opportunities for more political and social interaction as well as participation, more access to information, transparency and direct democracy. However, the symposium also showed that even in the digital age cultural communication and its tools follow the logics and rules of the distinctive cultural patterns of respective nations. This was particularly pronounced on the Japanese side.