

Diplomatic Communications

Dwayne Small

DePaul University, Chicago, USA

[Abstract] The breakthrough in communication between Iran, the United States and other Western countries in 2013 was done through underground and back channel diplomacy. This kind of diplomatic relation illustrates how important diplomatic communications are in the international arena. Without diplomacy there is no communication and without communication there is no diplomacy. Diplomacy and communication work together in both friendly and hostile nations. Iran and the United States have not been communicating publicly since 1980, yet back channel communication continued. This article ties Ed Paulson research in *Beyond Chat*, directly into media richness and the importance of communication. Research in media richness helps individuals, organizations, the international community, and more, choose the best communication media to use for any form of communication.

[Keywords] Communication, diplomacy, diplomat, government, communication media, negotiation

‘Our ability to communicate is arguably the most important and unique of human traits’ (Paulson, 2012, p. 1). Communication in various institutions, technology, law, law enforcement, education, the international community, and many more institutions and organizations are critical to their functioning, Paulson notes that ‘without effective communication, the organizational likelihood of success and future sustainability [would be] seriously hampered’ (Paulson, 2013). In this article, communication in the International community between unfriendly states will be focused on. This type of communication within the International arena is known as diplomatic communication. Diplomatic problems between hostile states can be complicated and difficult to solve without communication. When diplomats are communicating, who are they communicating to and are their messages clear enough for a desired outcome? This essay will attempt to evaluate diplomatic communication with Ed Paulson’s communications research model from *Beyond Chat* dealing with media richness. Even though Paulson’s examples are more business related, they can also be applied to diplomacy. When a person transmits information, they communicate with an audience. If there is no audience then there would be no need for communication. In the field of diplomacy, there is always need for this transmission. That is what diplomacy is all about, communication between: heads of states, diplomats and diplomatic missions in different countries. When we communicate, ‘we [do so] with someone or a group of someone’s to achieve an outcome of some type’ (Paulson, 2012, p. 5). Diplomatic communication can be complicated when two hostile states are negotiating for a positive outcome with different agendas.

Communication first starts with an audience where the ‘typical outcomes include information transfer, specific actions, obtaining agreement’ and more (Paulson, 2013, p.5). In some cases, however, a desired outcome between hostile states cannot be achieved. One explanation for this is communication between groups and or individuals are not always clear because meaning can be misconstrued. The reason for this is the media level or richness that is used by that person or group might not be the right channel for communication. Media richness is an instrument used to communicate with. Each media instrument has a different level of communication richness (Paulson, 2012, p. 57-58). The 5th level is a very rich form of media that includes face-to-face and video teleconferencing, the 4th level is telephone conversations and voice mails, the 3rd level is e-mails and interactive messaging, the 2nd level is written personal notes and memos, and the 1st level is general memos and third part communication. So, when diplomats are communicating, in order to get a clear and precise message across, they must use the best communication media outlet (p. 57-58). The media richness used by the United States with Iran before 1980 was very high, at level 4 and 5. This meant face-to-face meetings as well as telephone conversations, but after ‘fifty-three American hostages [were] held in the US Embassy in Tehran’ in 1979, that media richness level dropped to levels 1 and 2. Less personal and impersonal where communication only through written general memos

as well as through third party communication such as written notes and personal memos (Scahill, 2013, p. 49).

However, even though diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States have been cut off since 1980, behind the scene communication would take place from time to time. Since the election of Iran's new president Hassan Rouhani in June 2013, diplomatic communication between the two hostile states have eased to the point where direct talks between the two heads of state, though brief, took place for the first time since 1980. According to the Wall Street Journal, the public chat between the two was orchestrated over a long period of time. Before their telephone chat, communication both in-person and through telephone between the two states would previously take place but only in secret (Solomon and Lee, p. 1). Their phone conversation was something of an announcement to the international community and as a way to unfreeze their dormant diplomatic relations. This kind of communication is known as 'unconventional diplomacy' (Berridge, 1994).

Unconventional diplomacy, according to Berridge (1994), is when two states that are hostile to each other do not have diplomatic representations in each other's countries. Nevertheless, diplomacy of some sort must be in place. So, in order to keep the flow of communication, though at a very lean level, underground diplomacy would be that option. The reasons for any breach in diplomatic relations between states are non-recognition of that state or a breach in relations due to international hostility, routine breaks between states from time to time are common. For example, 'In the period between 1976 and 1989...there were almost 200 new, complete breaks in diplomatic relations' (Berridge, 1994, p. 5). Before the 1960s, most reasons given for severing diplomacy with a nation was a prelude for war, and that occurs when all other options are exhausted. In the 21st century, diplomacy can be cut off without the intention of going to war, but merely in protest due to language and behavior from a nation. Like most politicians, businessmen, NGOs, and other organizations act as stake holders in the international community. Their input for a desired outcome can disrupt diplomatic communication between hostile nations. A good example of this is the diplomatic relationship between Iran and the U.S. (Berridge, 1994, p. 8).

Paulson states that 'stakeholders are those with some type of vested interest in a situation and they are also typically the audience...for most of [the diplomatic communication] because they are the people whose actions are needed to help [in achieving a goal]' (Paulson, 2013, p. 20). During the 2013 negotiations between Iran, Western countries (the U.S. Russia, China, Britain, Germany), and a top European envoy – Catherin Ashton, there were in high hopes of getting Iran to finally putting a cap on their ability in making nuclear weapons. But one stake holder in the group, France, interrupted the negotiation because they felt Iran was not willing to give up enough of their nuclear program. This was a surprise move to other Western countries, mainly the U.S. who was pushing for a breakthrough with negotiations with Iran this time around. According to a French analyst, France's abrupt objections were due to its 'tough stand against the spread of nuclear weapons, skepticism about Tehran's trustworthiness, and the longstanding French tradition of speaking out on the world stage' (Keaten, 2013, AP).

With the breakdown in talks, an exception developed. An exception according to Perrow (1967) is when an expected outcome to a problem is not achieved. This exception can easily become ambiguous because the makeup of this international team of negotiators are of different cultural backgrounds with personal interest, hidden agendas, goals, and expectations.

According to Paulson's communication model, Iran and its Western counterparts encountered a problem during their negotiation caused by miscommunication. Before France's objections, the idea of any problems developing did not seem to be an issue especially on the U.S. side. Paulson went on to give several examples of categories of filters: language, jargon, cultural, and political filters. The political filter can be a focal point in diplomacy, because in political diplomacy, confusion in language can be the norm. A communication filter is:

'When clearly is defined as communicating in a way that is not open to alternate interpretations. There are many environmental issues waiting to disrupt clear communication and anticipating them enables both sender and receiver to adapt their communicating in the interest of clarity. These environmental factors are often referred to as communication barriers in that they are potential stumbling blocks to clear communication. Typical barriers include cultural (such as language) and educational differences between

the sender and receiver, physical factors such as noisy or broken connections, mental distractions that may be present for the sender or receiver, and any situation-specific factors that would interfere with complete communication' (Paulson, 2013, p. 30-31).

In other words, a message from the sender can be confusing for the receiver based on various conditions. France's non-routine objection stalled negotiations between Iran and the West putting them in an ambiguous terrain on the way forward. Iran strongly believed that they had put enough ideas on the table and most of the world leaders agreed except for France. According to Perrow, a situation like this is 'less structured due to the vagueness of the situation presented by the exception. Due to its intrinsically unfamiliar and unstructured nature [, negotiators] would not have an obvious solution and would [require] people to draw upon unanalyzed experience or intuition, chance, or guesswork to find a solution' to this stalled negotiation (Paulson, 2013, p. 70). This is where those international negotiator's education and expertise in international hostile negotiations comes' in. Berridge stated that diplomats and consular officials must have the expertise, experience, and must be well aware of their perspective country's needs (Berridge, 1994, p. 45). In other words, having the best quality education with the highest degrees is not enough to play a role in certain aspects at the international level.

Most, if not all, of those international teams of negotiation on both Iran and Western countries are well experienced in their fields. For example, Mohammad Khazaei, a U.N. ambassador who worked under the former United States National Security Advisor, Susan Rice, set up the September phone call between Obama and Hassan Rouhani the President of Iran. Javad Zarif, a former foreign policy advisor under the previous Iranian President, was appointed Foreign Minister which makes him well versed in international negotiations. John Kerry, also included in this group of skilled individuals on the negotiation team. He is the Secretary of State under the Obama administration and former Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations committee (Hulse, 2009). And finally, Catherine Ashton who is the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Union (Barber, 2010, p. 55).

All these men and women are well versed in their profession. Paulson stated that the chances of a positive outcome in [any situation] are greater when there are experts in the field. Reasons being, they would be able to view the situation from various viewpoints, have 'greater insight, see more interrelationships, and more potential avenues of approach than a more novice [person]' (Paulson, 2013, p. 23). In the past, most western leaders have been in unison against Iran. This strong media richness between Iran and Western countries has been the most productive in a long time. The makeup of the international negotiation team is from a broad spectrum of various cultures across the globe. Moving this organization in one direction was the main goal, and this requires all parties pulling in the same direction. But out of the six heads of state, France decided to go in another direction, abandoning its Western allies, bringing this new reality of the negotiation's to a stumbling block. France's objection had caught the U.S. by surprise. The abandonment was not positive for the U.S. as it could result in chaos (Paulson, 2013, p. 23, 83) because the United States' credibility was now on the line. U.S. power to negotiate various conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa can be weakened because it 'sends very bad signals to America's other allies. Washington's ability to navigate other pressing security issues: Egypt's civic unrest, Syria's civil war, and Mr. Kerry's drive to secure a Palestinian-Israeli peace agreement' can be jeopardized (Solomon and Lee, 2013, p. A11).

This example, where the U.S. credibility is at stake because of President Obama's strong push for a deal with Iran against other stake holders in the Middle East ties directly into Paulson's research in 'having responsibility without authority' (Paulson, 2013). France is the odd country that stands out in the negotiation proceedings, siding with Israel and Saudi Arabia's objections to the U.S. and other Western countries dealing with Iran. The U.S. is the one who seems to be taking the 'blame'. Though working with a business model, Paulson stated 'it is common for the responsible person [which could be the U.S.] to have little authority over the people or business units [which could be France] who will actually perform the [projected] task needed for goal success' (Paulson, 2013, p. 23).

The possibility of a solution and outcome in the case between Iran and some Western countries can be difficult because in international diplomacy several factors are at play. Individual countries have goals of

their own and these negotiations with Iran are between a total of six nations, each with cultural differences. Diplomatic misunderstanding arise because each diplomat has their own filter system. A filter system is something that exists in the human DNA. People have their own filter system on how they receive and process information. In Paulson's book *Beyond Chat*, Paulson discusses the various stumbling blocks of communication filters. The filter system is the flow of information from one person to another. For example, Person A would transmit an idea or information to Person B, but effective communication only occurs when Person B understands the exact idea or information that was sent from Person A.

The stalled negotiations between Western countries and Iran due to France's objection could be as a result of failure to communicate among Western allies where the outcome leads to an ambiguous situation (Paulson, 2013). A message can be relayed to diplomats, but they may not understand its meaning and even if they do, the outcome is not guaranteed because based on their own political goals. Their filter system may not allow them to carry out those messages (Paulson, 2013). Presently, negotiations are at a standstill because as of November 19, 2013, France has not changed its mind in allowing the negotiation to continue. In order for negotiations to continue, some members of the negotiating team stated that Iran would have to convert 20% of its 'enriched uranium into fuel for its research reactor' (Norman, 2014). This process would make the material difficult to reconvert (Norman, 2014). This would stop its production of near-weapons grade fuel' (Solomon and Lee, 2013, p. A14).

Strong communication between global leaders is the best way forward. The best course of action is to continue with meetings such as the September, 2013 meeting between President Obama and the Iranian President. Diplomatic communication by way of phone calls and face-to-face settings are examples of strong media richness. Political analyst, Hayward Andres (2006) of North Carolina A & T State University, said it best that working face-to-face will accomplish greater results, reduce mistrust and misunderstanding, and received immediate response to any ambiguous situations that may arise. The only way to resolve problem/s among diplomats is to focus on communication media richness of level 4 and 5.

References

- Andres, H. (2006). The impact of communication medium on virtual team group process. *IDEA group publishing*, 19(2), 1-7. North Carolina A&T State University.
- Barber, T. (2010). The Appointments of Herman Van Rompuy and Catherine Ashton. *JCMS*, 48, 55-67.
- Berridge, G. (1994). *Talk to the enemy*. New York, St. Martin's press, INC.
- Hulse, C. (20, 09/01/12). Kerry aims to make a mark as a senate chairman. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/13/us/13kerry.html>.
- Keaten, J. (2013 November 10). *French out-tough US over Iran nuclear program*. The Associated Press.
- Norman, L. (2014/07/19). Iran Nuclear Talks Extended Until Late November: Tehran and Six World Powers Still Deadlocked Over Major Issues, but Dialogue Stays Alive. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://online.wsj.com/articles/iran-nuclear-talks-extended-until-late-november-1405774066>.
- Paulson, E. (2013). *Beyond Chat: Proactive business communication that avoids problems and gets results*.
- Perrow, C. (1967). A framework for the comparative analysis of organizations. *American sociological Review*, University of Wisconsin.
- Scahill, J. (2013). *Dirty wars: The world is a battlefield*. New York, Nation books.
- Solomon, J., & Lee, C. (2013 November 7). Thaw with Iran grew from years of behind-the-scenes talks. *The Wall Street Journal*, A14.
- Solomon, J., & Lee, C. (2013 November 18). Strains with Israel over Iran snarl U.S. goals in Mideast. *The Wall Street Journal*.