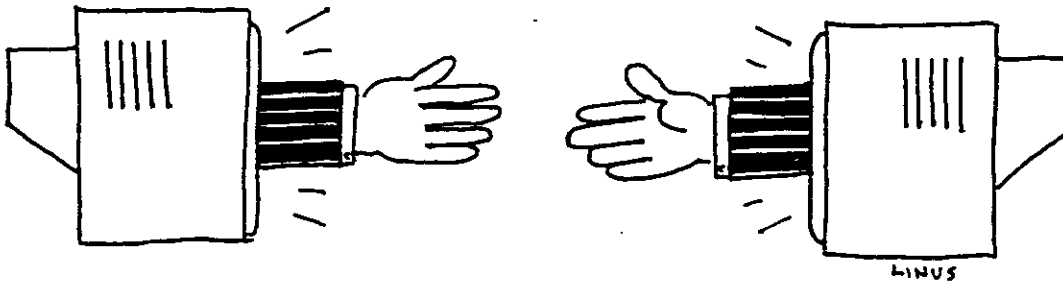


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# Diplomatic Signaling in the Television Age



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*The world diplomatic community is, figuratively speaking, a gigantic monastery teeming with dedicated friars whose labor is devoted to wringing every nuance and hidden meaning out of such screeds as the transcripts of television shows.*

Alexander Haig, 1984

*There is no question that television has become the sixteenth member of the Security Council.*

U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Madeleine Albright, on CNN, February 13, 1994

The multifaceted impact of television on contemporary life is the topic of much discussion and research. One aspect which thus far has been given scant scholarly attention is the way television interrelates with time-honored habits of diplomatic signaling. To what extent does television interfere with, and complicate, diplomatic signaling via other channels? Conversely, to what extent can statesmen and diplomats use television to their advantage in signaling to the world?

I approach the subject matter from the vantage point of an international relations scholar, not as an expert on communication and media. My effort is explorative and tentative. In the first part of the paper, I try to outline some essential aspects of diplomatic signaling, as compared to other forms of social communication. The second part is devoted to a preliminary discussion of the questions: How has this been affected by the advent of television? What changes and continuities can be discerned in diplomatic signaling as we have entered the TV age?

## **Diplomatic signaling<sup>1</sup>**

Communication is the essence of diplomacy. The international diplomatic system may be described as a universal communications network where the exchange of signals is a professional preoccupation.

All acts, verbal or nonverbal, intentional or unintentional, are potential signals which feed into the network and are liable to reach all listeners and be read by them for the message which they convey. Moreover any message may be read together with, and understood in the light of, the collective body of evidence already communicated or later to be communicated.<sup>2</sup>

Signaling, in short, is as essential to diplomacy as to a busy airport. One crucial difference is that there is much more scope for *ambiguity* in diplomatic signaling. Am-

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<sup>1</sup> This section draws on my previous research on communication in international bargaining (see Jönsson, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Cohen, 1981, p 30.

biguous signaling between pilots and traffic controllers may be a prelude to disaster, but in diplomatic communication ambiguity is considered constructive and creative.<sup>3</sup>

There are several reasons for the ambiguity characterizing diplomatic signaling. First, it may be a deliberate means to retain flexibility and make signals disclaimable. Ambiguous signals allow the sender to argue "I never said that," "this is not what I meant," and the like, if the situation calls for it.

Second, and perhaps more important, ambiguity is often prompted by the need to take multiple audiences into account. Take, for example, the then much-debated question whether the Soviet Union gave the United States advance warning of impending war in the Middle East in October 1973. The conspicuous evacuation of Soviet dependants and civilian personnel from Syria and Egypt three days before the fighting started may have been a tacit warning and a signal to Washington that the USSR was not involved in the Arab decision to go to war. At the same time, it may have been a reminder to Egypt and Syria not to expect direct Soviet intervention. The point is that Moscow could not have given the United States an explicit and unequivocal warning without openly acknowledging its complicity in the Arab military preparations and betraying its clients.<sup>4</sup>

This is but one instance where explicit and unambiguous signaling, while desirable vis-à-vis one category of receivers, would have had disastrous effects on the sender's relations with another category of receivers. In diplomatic signaling, the potential audiences may be both international and domestic.

A third factor, contributing to the ambiguity of diplomatic signals, is the prevalence of nonverbal messages and "body language" in communication between states. Diplomatic body language encompasses everything from personal gestures and the shape of a negotiating table to the mobilization and movement of military troops and hardware and the actual use of force. In fact, both behavior and non-behavior may constitute messages. The observations of one student of interpersonal persuasion are equally applicable to diplomatic communication: "Activity or inactivity, words or silence, all have message value: they influence others and these others, in turn, cannot *not* respond to these communications and are thus themselves communicating."<sup>5</sup>

Consider, by way of analogy, the story about one psychoanalytically oriented school of social work where students were considered hostile if they came to class late, anxious if they came early but compulsive if they came at the appointed hour.<sup>6</sup> By the same token, whatever diplomats or statesmen do or don't do is willy-nilly scrutinized and interpreted by their counterparts. All of their behavior and non-behavior, words and silence, assume message value. We can, for instance, recall Metternich's reputed reaction to the death of a Russian ambassador in the midst of sensitive negotiations: "I wonder what he meant by that."

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Bell, 1971, p. 74.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jönsson, 1984, pp 178-79.

<sup>5</sup> Simons, 1976, p 50.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p 42.

An episode from the 1971-72 American-Chinese parleys resulting in President Nixon's momentous visit to China may illustrate the value of well-orchestrated non-verbal signaling. During one of his trips to Beijing, Henry Kissinger was taken for an ostentatious public appearance at the Summer Palace in plain view of hundreds of spectators. Among them was a North Vietnamese journalist taking photographs, as his host, Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, later told Kissinger apologetically. Zhou could thus signal to North Vietnam—and ensure that Washington grasped—that China would not permit North Vietnam's problems to stand in the way of a *rapprochement* with the United States.<sup>7</sup>

The example captures well the three outlined dimensions of "constructive ambiguity," which characterize diplomatic signaling. The Chinese were able to exploit *non-verbal* behavior to send desired messages to *multiple audiences*, while retaining *deniability*.

### All the World's a Stage...

Classic diplomacy rested almost entirely on linguistic skills, and diplomatic language was governed by the principle of non-redundancy. In addition, diplomatic body language was constrained by protocol which limited the leakage of nonverbal information. The diplomatic dialogue, in short, was based on a code that was shared by the members of the profession.

The significance of nonverbal signaling and body language is enhanced in the television age. At the same time, signaling via the TV screen does not abide by old conventions of diplomatic protocol. Rather, contemporary diplomacy can be analyzed and understood in terms of a *theater* metaphor.<sup>8</sup> Just as in the theater, diplomatic signaling takes place within a setting contrived for that purpose; in the performance actors manipulate gestures, movement and speech to conjure up a desirable impression for a watching audience; policy makers and their aides assume the role of producer or stage manager, moulding the total performance.

Perhaps no one better epitomizes the theater metaphor than actor-cum-president Ronald Reagan. His deputy chief of staff, Michael Deaver, has written about his role in staging Reagan's exposure to the media. His account of Reagan's trips to Normandy in 1984 and to the Demilitarized Zone on the border between North and South Korea in 1983, symbolic high points of Reagan's appearances on the world stage, is telling:

...when you stood at a distance and surveyed the Normandy coast, or the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea, you had the sense of sweep and panorama that any director

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<sup>7</sup> Cohen, 1991, p 122.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Cohen (1987) explores the theater metaphor in some depth. The following discussion draws heavily on Cohen's work. In the literary sphere, William Shakespeare is perhaps the best known proponent of the theater metaphor. In *As You Like It*, Act Two, Scene VII, he has Jaques exclaim: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players."

must feel. And it is in this kind of environment that Ronald Reagan did more than star. He glowed. ... At such moments, the world really was his stage.<sup>9</sup>

The advent of television, in short, has expanded the scope for "theatricality." Statesmen and diplomats now need to be television performers and, whether they like it or not, are continuously on stage. International relations today are carried out on a great stage where the states and their representatives are, at one and the same time, both actors and audience. Every encounter, every gesture, every handshake is watched, interpreted and reviewed. Like any actor on stage, state representatives know that they must not allow the mask to slip for an instant. "In a nutshell: since everything is staged and known to be staged, everything has to be staged."<sup>10</sup>

Television amplifies the visual aspects of the diplomatic drama. It is the visual impression more than what is said that counts for the viewers. This also means that "if an issue is difficult to cover visually, it is often overlooked by television, regardless of its importance."<sup>11</sup> In brief, the image is the message. As an ideal medium for conveying nonverbal messages, television therefore accentuates the symbolic aspects of diplomatic signaling.

Recent years have seen an abundance of symbolic TV images which have proved to be potent ingredients in the diplomatic dialogue. Pictures of people tearing down the Berlin Wall have come to symbolize the crumbling of the cold war world system and of diplomats' and observers' simplified tools for understanding world politics. The image of a lone young man confronting and halting a column of tanks at Tiananmen Square in Beijing in June 1989 was "perfect for television, because it encapsulated television's interpretation of the event—the weak against the strong, the morally superior against the corrupt, the fragile individual against the totalitarian state."<sup>12</sup> By virtue of its symbolic power, this image has no doubt contributed to the reluctance on the part of many governments to improve relations with the Chinese government. The symbolic handshake between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasir Arafat on the White House lawn in September 1993 has made it virtually impossible to discontinue the peace process and has created widespread expectations of an end to decades of hostilities.

In a sense, television adds little new, since symbols have always played a prominent role in diplomatic signaling. There are several aspects of international relations which require symbolic representation. Expressions of *status and power*, short of war, have traditionally been symbolic. Thus, the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 was delayed for half a year because of a dispute on the order in which delegates were to enter and be seated at the table; similar problems of relative status at the Potsdam meeting in 1945 were solved by having Churchill, Stalin and Truman enter the signing ceremony simultaneously through three different doors; and the long argument about the shape of the negotiating table prior to the Paris talks seeking an end

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<sup>9</sup> Deaver, 1988, pp 141, 176.

<sup>10</sup> Cohen, 1987, p 188.

<sup>11</sup> D'Amato, 1991, p 347.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p 360.

to the Vietnam War in 1968 concerned the status of FNL. In the nuclear age, even weapons have assumed a symbolic quality. Deterrence has essentially come to be the art of manipulating the symbols of nuclear arms rather than actually using them as military instruments.

Symbolic expressions of friendly or hostile *relations* between states are equally common. A handshake is an accepted visual sign of friendly relations, whereas a refusal to shake hands is taken as an indication of hostility. The Rabin-Arafat handshake is but the latest in a long history of conciliatory symbols. Conversely, John Foster Dulles's refusal to shake hands with Zhou Enlai at the 1954 Geneva Conference was read by the Chinese as a signal of American rejection and contempt toward the People's Republic of China.<sup>13</sup> After the fall of the Wall, the picture of Brezhnev and Honecker embracing and kissing was much used in the former Eastern Germany to symbolize an illegitimate relationship. And Willy Brandt's conciliatory gesture in Warsaw in 1970, when he knelt at the Warsaw monument to the Jewish rebellion against the German Nazis in 1943, became a powerful symbol of his *Ostpolitik*.

A third area where symbols are essential for diplomatic signaling concerns the demonstration of *resolve*. The history of superpower crisis management during the cold war era offers numerous instances of symbolic behavior. To mention but one graphic example from the Yom Kippur War of 1973, Moscow undertook a series of preparedness moves, as the agreed ceasefire failed and the Israelis encircled the Egyptian Third Army. These included firing several Soviet-operated, Egyptian-controlled SCUD missiles at Israeli troops. American fears that the Soviets might next turn to nuclear warheads were raised when a Soviet freighter, transiting the Bosphorus en route for Alexandria, gave off neutron emissions, indicating the possible presence of nuclear weapons onboard. As it turned out, no nuclear arms were delivered to Egypt, and after the crisis neutron emissions were recorded for the same ship returning from Alexandria to the Black Sea. If Moscow had intended to send nuclear warheads to Egypt, they presumably would not have been sent by ship. Only if it was meant as a symbolic gesture of resolve did it make sense to send such weapons through the heavily monitored Turkish strait.<sup>14</sup>

Such symbolic expressions are no less important when signaling resolve to cooperate. The prelude to the nuclear test ban treaty in 1963 is instructive. Khrushchev's invitation to the United States and Britain to high-level talks in Moscow was accompanied by a series of conciliatory gestures. Moscow signed the "hotline" agreement and stopped its organized jamming of BBC and Voice of America broadcasts. Washington responded in kind. President Kennedy made his famous American University speech, which represented an unprecedented departure from traditional cold war rhetoric. The Americans accepted Moscow as the site of the talks, instead of Geneva as they had themselves suggested, and selected Averell Harriman, a well-known figure in Moscow, to lead the U.S. negotiating team. In the words of one of-

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<sup>13</sup> Cohen, 1981, p 36.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Jönsson, 1984, pp 186-87.

ficial from the Soviet embassy in Washington, "as soon as I heard that Harriman was going, I knew that you were serious."<sup>15</sup>

As all these historical examples show, symbolic communication has been a permanent feature of diplomatic signaling. Television has amplified the symbolic dimension but has also changed some basic parameters of the international dialogue. Let us now turn to these changes.

## Exploited by Television

Global actors may either exploit or be exploited by the television medium. Let me start by identifying some important—but by no means the only—ways in which television interferes with diplomatic signaling beyond the control of statesmen and diplomats. I shall concentrate on television's role in (a) global agenda setting, (b) the speed of communication, (c) actors' commitment, and (d) actors' choice of signaling instruments.

**Global agenda setting.** Today television images frequently determine the agenda for foreign policy-makers. Statesmen have to respond not only to external and internal pressures, such as diplomatic probes and national public opinion, but also to dramatic TV footage which may provoke such pressures.

For instance, TV reporting about Iraqi atrocities against the Kurds after the Gulf War placed the Kurdish issue on the international agenda, against all the *realpolitik* wishes of Western governments.

Governments could not ignore the horror of the Kurdish catastrophe which unfolded hourly on their TV screens. The pictures were politically uncomfortable and strategically inconvenient. But no government could dare avoid them.<sup>16</sup>

Ambassador Albright's characterization of television as the sixteenth member of the UN Security Council was made as a comment on the massacre in the Sarajevo marketplace in February 1994. The effects of the horrible TV images from Sarajevo on foreign policy-making in Washington was described graphically in *Newsweek*:

The president knew he was under pressure to respond. After walking up to, then away from, intervention for more than a year, Clinton was still resisting taking stronger action in Bosnia. But the horror of the marketplace massacre shown on CNN pushed him and his advisers into the Oval Office on Saturday afternoon to review once again what, if anything, America could do to stop the slaughter.<sup>17</sup>

As a result of the unbearable TV images, NATO issued its ultimatum, and Serbian forces were withdrawn. This example indicates that the presence of TV cameras is a crucial aspect of whether an event or a problem will enter the global policy agenda.

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Seaborg, 1981, p 252.

<sup>16</sup> Nik Gowing, as quoted in Tiffen, 1992, p 51.

<sup>17</sup> *Newsweek*, Feb. 14, 1994, p 10.

War atrocities that take place in other parts of Bosnia, where no TV crews are present, do not have the same agenda-setting function. The mass medial map of Bosnia includes almost only Sarajevo, and all the players in the gruesome drama are well aware that this is the stage where you can send messages to a global audience (and that actions in other places do not affect the global agenda to the same extent).

Among cognitive scientists one enigmatic question has been whether a falling tree in the woods makes any noise if no person is present. Today it may be equally appropriate to ask whether an event is an event if it is not covered by CNN. For example, at the same time as the Gulf War attracted all the media attention and absorbed the global agenda, a cruel civil war went on in Liberia without media coverage and therefore almost unnoticed by the world at large. One could also contrast the TV presence in Somalia with the relative absence in Rwanda and ponder over the different global responses. I have been told that voluntary aid agencies have recruited cameramen and compete in their efforts to get footage of "their" famine onto the TV screen and thereby onto the global agenda.

Another consequence of television's agenda-setting function is the lack of constancy in agenda items and national policy.

The ubiquitousness of CNN cameras helps to draw the United States into Third World quagmires. Yet at the same time, images of dead GIs, especially ones being dragged through the streets of a hellhole like Mogadishu, can just as quickly force the United States to back out.<sup>18</sup>

One study documents how South Africa's place on the U.S. foreign policy agenda in the 1980s varied with the presence or absence of graphic, action-oriented pictures of social unrest on television. In 1985-86 the South African government introduced regulations prohibiting the filming of public disturbances. "Once American television screens no longer carried violent images from South Africa, South Africa began to recede as an issue, and the networks'—and America's—interest turned to other, more accessible areas."<sup>19</sup>

**Speed.** In the words of an experienced diplomat, "the information revolution has compressed the time and distance which once separated one's own country and others in all parts of the globe."<sup>20</sup> The speed of communication is a decisive variable in the evolution of diplomacy, according to Hans Morgenthau:

Diplomacy owes its rise in part to the absence of speedy communications in a period when the governments of the new territorial states maintained continuous political relations with each other. Diplomacy owes its decline in part to the development of speedy and regular communications...<sup>21</sup>

Though originally made before the breakthrough of television, Morgenthau's diagnosis has been reinforced by the new medium. A contemporary student of the evo-

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<sup>18</sup> *Newsweek*, April 25, 1994, p 14.

<sup>19</sup> D'Amato, 1991, p 351.

<sup>20</sup> Roberts, 1991, p 113.

<sup>21</sup> Morgenthau, 1966, p 546.

lution of diplomacy, proceeding from a postmodernist vantage point, reaches similar conclusions as the father of realism. Speed has become a crucial component of today's "techno-diplomacy," he argues:

when communications, weapons delivery, and response time are instantaneous, diplomacy becomes governed as much by the velocity of events as by the events themselves. As time replaces space as the significant mediation of diplomacy, crisis-management takes the place of reflective decision-making.<sup>22</sup>

The immediacy of television images, in particular, calls for instant responses. In the words of a recent *Newsweek* report:

Television puts leaders on the spot before they are ready to decide. "There's an immediate, reckless nature to foreign-policy crises these days," said Rep. Lee Hamilton, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. "Policymakers are forced to react instantaneously. If you don't respond, it appears that you are ducking your responsibilities."<sup>23</sup>

To mention but one graphic example, President Kennedy in 1961 could wait eight days before making a public policy statement on the erection of the Berlin Wall. By contrast, President Bush was compelled to make a statement within hours of the dismantling of the wall in October 1989.<sup>24</sup>

The need for instant responses tends to disrupt the normal decision-making process. Reflecting on the Gulf War, White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater has said:

In most of these kinds of international crises now, we virtually cut out the State Department and the desk officers. ... Their reports are still important, but they often don't get here in time for the basic decisions to be made.<sup>25</sup>

There is also the manifest possibility that speed affects the quality of decision-making. One U.S. policy adviser notes:

There's really no time to digest this information, so the reaction tends to be from the gut, just like the reaction of the man on the street. It is worrisome that high-level people are being forced essentially to act or to formulate responses or policy positions on the basis of information that is of very uncertain reliability.<sup>26</sup>

**Commitment.** In his seminal study of strategic thinking among interdependent actors, Thomas Schelling refers to commitment as "a move that induces the other player to choose in one's favor. It constrains the other player's choice by affecting his expectations."<sup>27</sup> The art of commitment involves "the power to bind oneself."

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<sup>22</sup> Der Derian, 1987, p 208.

<sup>23</sup> *Newsweek*, April 25, 1994, p 14.

<sup>24</sup> McNulty, 1993, p 67.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p 71.

<sup>26</sup> Carnes Lord, Vice President Dan Quayle's National Security Adviser, as quoted in McNulty, 1993, p 72.

<sup>27</sup> Schelling, 1963, p 122.

"One constrains the partner's choice by constraining one's own behavior."<sup>28</sup> In this conception, commitment is an instrument to be manipulated by calculating actors. The trick is to bind oneself strongly enough to influence the other's choice in a favorable direction, yet avoid the loss of flexibility and the risk of stalemate which follow from incurring too firm a commitment.

This manipulative conception of commitment is undermined to a great extent by television. Whatever appears on TV screens tends to create commitments, whether statesmen and diplomats like it or not. An instructive comparison can be made of John Foster Dulles's refusal to shake hands with Zhou Enlai in 1954 and the famous Rabin-Arafat handshake in 1993. Taking place in a closed conference hall beyond the limelight of the media, Dulles's behavior—whether deliberate or not—did not bind the United States excessively. The symbolism of the gesture could be denied at any time by the U.S. leadership and be explained away as a manifestation of Dulles's idiosyncracies rather than state policy. Yitzhak Rabin, by contrast, did not have a chance to avoid commitment, when Yasir Arafat stretched out his hand before the TV cameras broadcasting live to a world audience. Had he chosen not to accept the outstretched hand, it would have sent strong signals of lingering hostility. By accepting it, he made an equally strong commitment to friendly relations. On the TV screen, Rabin's dilemma becomes almost palpable, as you see him hesitate for a split second before taking Arafat's hand. Faced by TV cameras, he is denied the luxury of choosing a commitment strategy at will, à la Schelling.

**Signaling instruments.** For fear of bad TV, policy-makers tend to narrow the range of available instruments for signaling. This applies especially to forceful military instruments which are frequently used for signaling purposes. Again, Thomas Schelling is a pioneer in elaborating the notion that "the power to hurt" is essentially a kind of bargaining power, signaling intents and resolve to the adversary. To exploit military force "is diplomacy—vicious diplomacy, but diplomacy." Even in warfare, he argues, "coercion depends more on the threat of what is yet to come than on damage already done."<sup>29</sup> Alexander George and his colleagues have coined the term "coercive diplomacy" for this calculated diplomatic use of just enough force "to demonstrate resolution to protect well-defined interests and also to demonstrate the credibility of one's determination to use more force if necessary."<sup>30</sup>

The usefulness of military instruments of diplomacy has been altered by television. One observer, close to U.S. presidential policy-making, puts it thus:

I firmly believe that television has absolutely changed our military strategy, that we will never fight a major ground war. Americans simply do not want to see mass killings on the TV screen in their living rooms—or wherever they keep their TV sets. You can strafe Libya for thirty minutes, but you can't do it day after day, and you can't send in the troops.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp 22, 160.

<sup>29</sup> Schelling, 1966, pp 2, 172.

<sup>30</sup> George et al., 1971, p 18.

<sup>31</sup> Deaver, 1988, p 147.

TV reporting of the Gulf War, the first war to be broadcast via satellite "in real time," included very few pictures of fighting or, indeed, of dead and injured.<sup>32</sup> TV images conveyed an impression of a "clinical" air war, "a spectacular sound and light show," whereas after the war it has been revealed that U.S. bombing was highly imprecise and overwhelmingly low-tech with considerable "collateral damage" and human suffering.<sup>33</sup> To domestic and foreign audiences—including Saddam Hussein, a regular CNN viewer—the TV pictures signaled U.S. technological superiority and its ability to use military instruments with a minimum of negative side effects on the battlefield as well as among public opinion.

The projection of a clean, precise and surgical war was the result of a well orchestrated media strategy with the U.S. military in relatively firm control of the contents of the television coverage. It is doubtful if such control will be possible in the future.

The speed of modern media technologies and the mobility of media personnel have made effective censorship over a long period all but impossible. ... Unlike World War II or the Falklands war, reporters are not dependent on the military's infra-structure to communicate with their employing organisations. The media's mobility and its ability to broadcast in "real time" make effective censorship far more difficult than ever before.<sup>34</sup>

Discussing what signals the U.S. and NATO might send in order to deter Iraqi actions against the Kurds and Serbian violence in Bosnia, *Newsweek* reporters conclude:

Air power is generally ineffective against ground troops unless the attacker can use "area munitions"—napalm or cluster bombs that can clear out large swaths of terrain. NATO commanders have decided to use neither weapon. The reason? Bad TV. Napalm leaves its victims shriveled and charred. Cluster bombs tear them into shreds. The West is worried how this might look on the nightly news.<sup>35</sup>

While the exclusion of certain military options may be a good thing in many respects, it also inhibits diplomatic signaling. There is no doubt, for instance, that Western hesitancy, inconsistency and reluctance to use forceful instruments have sent the wrong signals to the perpetrators of military violence in Bosnia. For better or worse, television has contributed to limiting the range of acceptable instruments.

## Exploiting Television

While diplomacy has been affected by television in uncontrollable ways, it is also true that statesmen and diplomats may exploit television for their purposes in signal-

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<sup>32</sup> One study of the contents of the war coverage on CNN, Sky World News and four British channels indicates that only one percent of visual images were of death and injury. See Morrison, 1992, pp 72-73.

<sup>33</sup> Kellner, 1992, pp 157-63.

<sup>34</sup> Tiffen, 1992, p 54.

<sup>35</sup> *Newsweek*, April 25, 1994, p 13.

ing to the world. Just as the use of the press as an ally is as old as Swift and the Treaty of Utrecht and statesmen have never been above fabricating articles and letters which served the uses of their policies,<sup>36</sup> so contemporary international actors try to use television to their advantage.

"Media diplomacy" is moving rapidly ahead of the normal diplomatic channels. Leaders on both sides make appeals to their citizenry through direct television exposure.<sup>37</sup>

Several governments invest in building foreign TV networks in conscious efforts at image building and cultural diffusion. The French government, for example, considers this a matter of national survival.<sup>38</sup> In addition, governments have considerable possibilities to plant items on news broadcasts which transmit desirable signals to foreign audiences. Conversely, in order to prevent undesirable signaling, governments frequently implement censorship measures curbing television's access to critical events and places.<sup>39</sup>

International crises and wars enhance the possibilities for governments to use television for their own signaling purposes—"in a crisis situation, without independent sources of information, mainstream journalists tend to rely on official sources who are able to manipulate them."<sup>40</sup> The Gulf War is a recent and graphic illustration of this. Through the largely acquiescent media, the U.S. government was able to disclose to the public and the adversary just about what it wanted them to know. Similarly, by allowing CNN to be present in Baghdad, Saddam Hussein retained an important signaling channel.

A contradictory yet noteworthy aspect of the manipulative use of television for signaling purposes is the possibilities this medium opens up for non-governmental actors to take part in the diplomatic dialogue. For example, in 1989 student leaders in Beijing took advantage of the presence of television. CNN and other networks had brought their own satellite uplink stations to cover the mid-May visit of Mikhail Gorbachev for an historic Sino-Soviet summit. The students in Tiananmen Square wrote protest signs in English and French; they built a replica of the Statue of Liberty; and they organized a dramatic hunger strike for democracy—well aware that all of this was constantly monitored by Western TV cameras.<sup>41</sup>

Consider, also, the Zapatista uprising in southern Mexico in early 1994. One report, headlined "The Battle of the Sound Bites," describes the situation in Chiapas thus:

Since New Year's Day, when the Zapatistas began their armed uprising in Chiapas state on behalf of exploited Maya peasants, leaders like Capitán Cristóbal have showered sound bites

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<sup>36</sup> Nicolson, 1963, p 97.

<sup>37</sup> Dennis, 1992, p 146.

<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., Grässle, 1992, p 665.

<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, D'Amato, 1991.

<sup>40</sup> Keilner, 1992, p 19.

<sup>41</sup> D'Amato, 1991, p 358.

on all comers. ... Cristóbal knows the global village as well as the *campesino* village. When he sees that a television camera isn't rolling, he pauses and asks the crew, "Are you guys ever going to turn that thing on?"<sup>42</sup>

In sum, television may offer opportunities for statesmen and diplomats in communicating to a global audience; yet at the same time television deprives them of the signaling monopoly they enjoyed during the era of classic diplomacy.

## Conclusions

Several observations follow from this sketchy and incomplete survey of the possible effects of television on diplomatic signaling. First, several of the noted effects are assumed to take the indirect route via *public opinion*. It is the calculated or uncalculated effects of TV images on public opinion which make policy-makers signal or refrain from signaling in certain ways. Similarly, it is through the reactions of public opinion to their televised actions that non-state actors hope to pressure foreign governments to action. Thus, television tends to underscore the *democratic* elements of the contemporary diplomatic communication system.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries diplomats were, by and large, members of an "aristocratic international." Then the Austrian Ambassador to France felt more at home at the court of Versailles than among his compatriots of humble origin.<sup>43</sup> The advent of nationalism and democracy marked the beginning of the end of classic diplomacy. Television has contributed to the continued erosion of classic diplomacy, understood as a deliberately exclusive practice. In the words of one participant observer,

the information revolution has posed a double challenge to the traditional diplomacy by which elite groups within national governments customarily communicated about international problems only with each other, and largely behind closed doors. The first challenge is to make sure that foreign policies have support at home. If they do not, the resulting "support gap" will produce major policy failures. But with the growing impact of one country's actions on other countries in the information age, the second challenge is to make sure as far as possible that foreign publics also are correctly informed about, and supportive of, its foreign policy actions. Otherwise foreign governments, faced with a "support gap" of their own, will be less inclined to undertake joint efforts with it.<sup>44</sup>

The problems associated with "democratic diplomacy" have been pointed out by many observers. Sir Harold Nicolson, for one, lamented the failure to distinguish between policy, which is a legitimate subject for popular control, and negotiation, which is not.<sup>45</sup> Television, it could be argued, has contributed to blurring rather than upholding that distinction.

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<sup>42</sup> *Newsweek*, February 7, 1994, p 13.

<sup>43</sup> Morgenthau, 1966, pp 245-46.

<sup>44</sup> Roberts, 1991, p 113.

<sup>45</sup> Nicolson, 1963, p 82.

Second, signaling via television often implies a *loss of flexibility*. Signals become simplified and tend to incur commitments. The "constructive ambiguity," associated with traditional diplomatic signaling, becomes increasingly difficult to manage. Moreover, visual and dramatic appearances on the global stage tend to compromise confidentiality and secrecy, the lifeblood of traditional diplomacy. Only behind closed doors are diplomats able to probe new ideas and issue trial balloons without committing their countries to a certain course of action. This indispensable component of diplomacy of course remains, but is often hampered by omnipresent TV cameras.

For example, whereas the televised Rabin-Arafat handshake in 1993 signified a strong commitment to a continued peace process, keeping television away was a major consideration in the stage-managing of the backchannel talks in Norway leading to the Israeli-PLO agreement.

The Israelis and Palestinians often joked with their hosts: "No one will think of looking here. After all, who would think of anything happening in Norway?" Throughout the talks their greatest fear was discovery. Only in secrecy could they demonstrate that real compromise was not only necessary but possible. Their isolation from the demands of the media and the scrutiny of critics back home meant they could function as real negotiators rather than as mouthpieces of political dogma.<sup>46</sup>

Third, television, by highlighting the visual element of messages, has enhanced the symbolic or *metaphorical* element of diplomatic signaling. The term "metaphor" comes from the Greek verb *metapherein*, "to carry from one place to another." "The essence of metaphor is understanding one kind of things in terms of another."<sup>47</sup> We typically conceptualize the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, the nonphysical in terms of the physical, the less clearly delineated in terms of the more clearly delineated. Metaphors provide vivid and, therefore, memorable and emotion-arousing representations of complex realities.

TV images become memorable and easily recalled metaphors for complex international developments and processes. Recall, for instance, the frequent use of the Saddam-as-Hitler metaphor during the Gulf War. While the metaphorical quality of television has added to the arsenal of diplomatic signaling tools, it also tends to place other, nonvisual elements in the shade. The danger is that dramatic and simplistic images come to have a disproportionate impact at the expense of the patient and often tedious use of traditional diplomatic instruments.

Finally, by engaging public opinion and focusing on the visual, symbolic and metaphorical aspects of international relations, television raises problems of *intercultural understanding* in diplomatic signaling. The carefully deliberated verbal and nonverbal language of traditional diplomacy allowed cross-cultural communication with a minimum of unnecessary misunderstanding. Diplomats the world over shared a "code," the preknowledge necessary for understanding messages, and formed a distinct diplomatic culture.

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<sup>46</sup> Corbin, 1994, p 211.

<sup>47</sup> Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p 5.

The enhanced significance of nonverbal signaling and body language in the television age, beyond the conventions of traditional diplomatic language, has rendered the codes of separate national cultures more salient than shared diplomatic preunderstandings. Images are often interpreted and understood differently in different cultures. Ensuing communication problems may range from interpersonal body language to symbolic state action.

For example, the friendship gestures and physical proximity, considered normal in Arab cultures, often embarrass Western statesmen. Henry Kissinger was successful in communicating with Arab leaders, partly because he "had none of the traditional American inhibitions—often mistaken for patronizing aloofness—against prolonged eye-contact, touching, holding hands and embracing."<sup>48</sup> On one occasion during Khrushchev's 1959 goodwill visit to the United States, the Soviet premier, in order to symbolize friendship between the two countries, clasped his hands above his head in a traditional Russian gesture of friendship. Many Americans misunderstood the message, thinking he was imitating a boxer who had just knocked out his opponent.<sup>49</sup>

A more recent example: Saddam Hussein's signaling via television during the Gulf War may have been successful vis-à-vis certain Arab audiences, but it estranged Western viewers. The videotape provided by Iraq to CNN, in which Saddam, dressed in civilian clothes, visits British "guests" (hostages) and pats the head of a reluctant five-year-old boy, has acquired notoriety. To many, it recalled pictures of other smiling dictators patting the heads of children and thus merely reinforced the Saddam-as-Hitler metaphor.

As yet there is little research on the differential interpretation and impact of TV images across cultural boundaries. But there are enough examples to suggest that rather than uniting the world, as is often assumed, global television may sometimes contribute to divisions along cultural lines. Although television may be able to reach out to the whole world, it remains culture-bound.

For example, CNN has global reach, but its content is presented in English, and from an American point of view. CNN's international portrayal of America's actions and opinions points to the fact that truly global communication, whose content supersedes national peculiarities, has not yet arrived. After all, different languages, culture and interests still stand between us and global communication of the kind envisioned by Marshall McLuhan.<sup>50</sup>

In conclusion, the primary purpose of this paper has been to point to a pertinent yet relatively unexplored field of research. I have identified some problems and dimensions of the interface between diplomacy and television. Rather than providing ready answers, I hope to have demonstrated the need for further research.

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<sup>48</sup> Cohen, 1987, p 104.

<sup>49</sup> Condon & Yousef, 1975, p 123.

<sup>50</sup> Dennis, 1993, p 6.

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