

Data diplomacy: Big data for foreign policy

Summary of a half-day event at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland

Helsinki, 9 October 2017

As part of the policy research project on data diplomacy, conducted by DiploFoundation (Diplo) and commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, this event brought together the diplomatic and policy-making communities from Finland and other Nordic countries to discuss the potential of big data for diplomacy and foreign policy.

The event was opened by Ms Sini Paukkunen, head of policy planning and research at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland. In her address, she stressed that diplomacy ‘has always adapted to changing circumstances, including technological changes, and will continue to do so’. At the same time, the average diplomat ‘is most likely better with narratives than with numbers’. Yet, this should not mean that new methods in data analysis should be ignored. She furthermore emphasised that investments in new technologies such as big data should not be ‘purely based on wishful thinking and

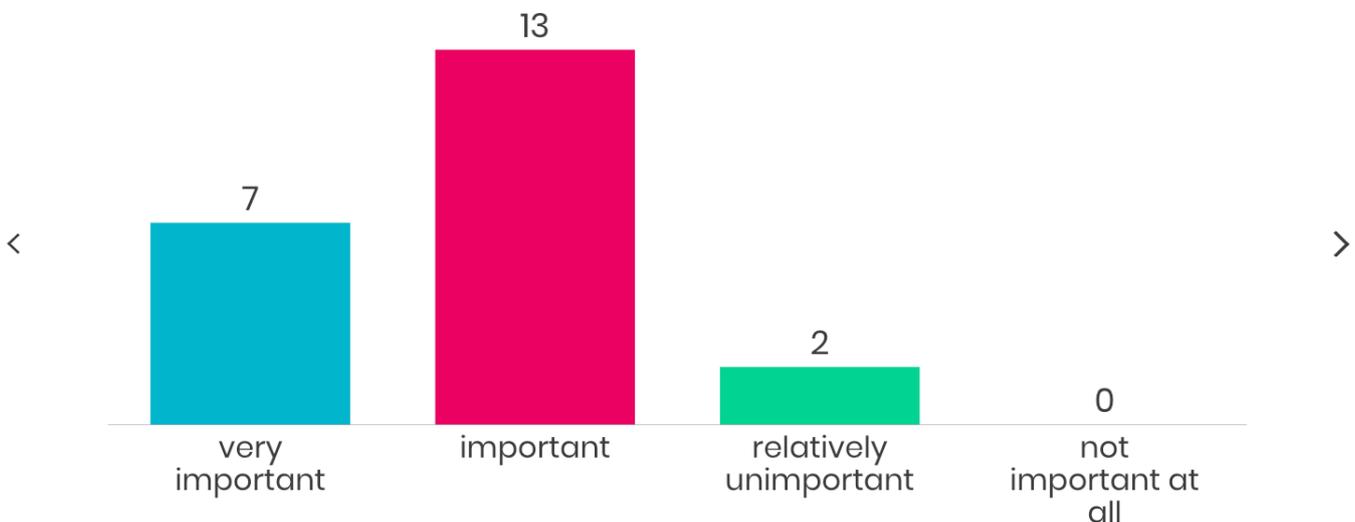
over-driven hype’, which is why it is important to exchange experiences and share information.

After Paukkunen’s introductory remarks, the audience’s perception and concerns regarding big data were gathered using interactive presentation software. Unsurprisingly, those assembled in Helsinki judged the potential of big data to be either important or very important for diplomacy. Further, a majority associated big data with the potential of predicting crisis. Last but not least, some of the main concerns related to data were privacy, security, and transparency. Audience members were also concerned about finding meaningful results in a haystack of data, creating knowledge, dealing with inaccuracies, and the drive towards quantification.

The participants’ input was followed by an introduction to data diplomacy by Dr Katharina Höne, research associate in diplomacy and global

How important could big data be for diplomacy?

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Image 1: The importance of big data for diplomacy according to the event’s participants

governance and lecturer at Diplo, and Ms Barbara Rosen Jacobson, programme manager at Diplo. They introduced the main concepts, opportunities, and challenges that they have been able to distil from their research. They also added recommendations for effective data diplomacy based on their summary report of the [Data Diplomacy Roundtable](#), which was held in April 2017.

Moving further into the practice of data diplomacy, Mr Graham Nelson, head of the Open Source Unit of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), provided examples of his unit's work in analysing open data to improve foreign policy. This includes observing social media to measure the impact of public diplomacy efforts, analysing geospatial data to corroborate reports, and looking at Google Trends to identify developments in Daesh-related search terms in different countries. Besides identifying patterns and trends, he also argued that the big data analysis carried out by his unit is able to corroborate as well as challenge previously held assumptions. From his presentation, it was clear that big data analysis can and does complement traditional data and qualitative reporting.

The Open Source Unit has existed for a year and consists of a small team of diplomats and data scientists, who have been given space to innovate on

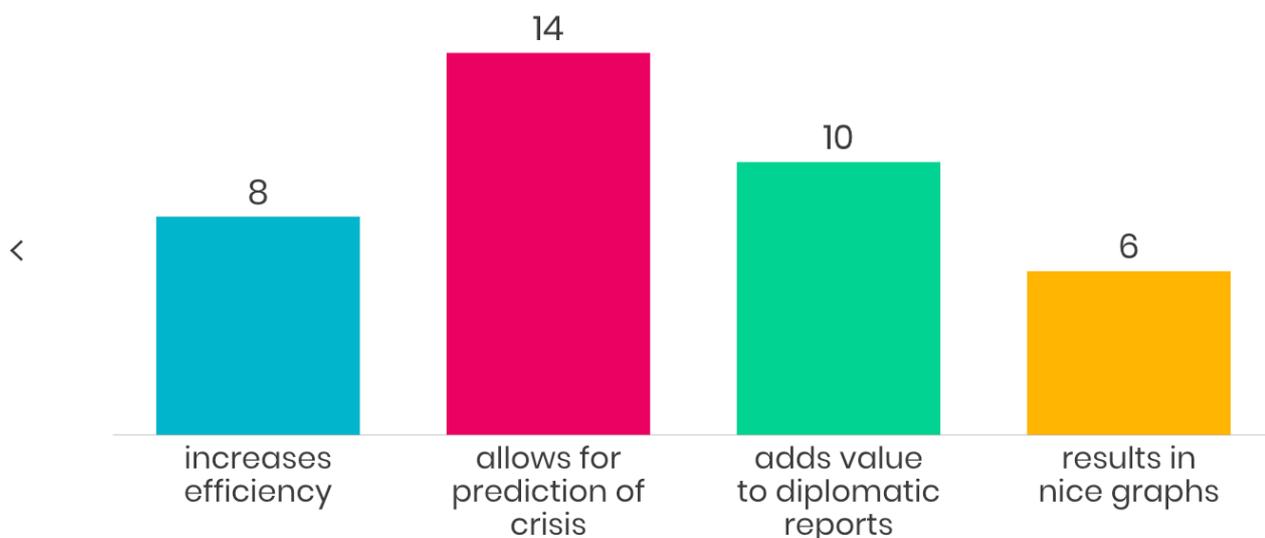
open data. Nelson emphasised that the data analyses need to comply with the 'proportionality test': data collection and analysis need to be necessary, proportionate, accounted for, and be conducted with oversight.

Looking at the Finnish perspective and bridging the gap between statistics and big data, Mr Timo Koskimäki, deputy director-general of Statistics Production at Statistics Finland, spoke about Finland Statistics' engagement with big data. He explained that big data might be able to improve the office's analyses, yet the office is bound by quality criteria that the data needs to comply with. In addition, there are challenges to overcome regarding access to big data, which is often generated by platform economies and controlled by the private sector. Finland Statistics is now attempting to start collaborating with these dataholders, yet, this proves to be a challenge due to a lack of clarity and regulation about how these agreements should be framed.

Höne provided a zoomed-out view of data diplomacy, looking at the ways in which it might affect knowledge creation in diplomacy. She argued that the big data trend might yield a new type of knowledge: those engaging in big data analysis are dealing with a completely different scale of input as the basis for knowledge; this allows for inaccuracies because of

Big data ...

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Image 2: The most relevant use of big data for diplomacy according to the event's participants

size; this means that a move from causation to correlation as the basis of understanding takes place; and that the new kind of knowledge creation rests on the identification of trends and patterns. She argued that there are also clear limits to the use of big data, at the very least, potential for misrepresentation and limited predictive powers need to be taken into account. She concluded by relating big data's potential contribution to substantiating known knowns and uncovering known unknowns as well as unknown unknowns. Nelson added that big data can also identify 'unknown knowns', referring to the things that we do not know that we know, especially in relation to the vast amounts of data already held within foreign ministries.

Finally, Mr Rafael Prince, second secretary at the Embassy of Brazil in Helsinki, described his experience as a diplomat who is also a PhD candidate in the

area of big data analysis. He highlighted his work on large-scale text analysis to better understand multi-stakeholder negotiations in the case of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). He also described the very different mind-sets that he encounters in his role as a diplomat and his role as a researcher, hinting at the potential need for furthering understanding and cross-fertilisation.

The discussions that took place throughout the day addressed some of the key questions around data diplomacy. Those who are sceptical towards the role of big data in diplomacy often point at data quality as a predominant concern. Nelson challenged this idea, as he explained that the alternative – obtaining data from more traditional avenues – can lead to even less accurate results. Rosen Jacobson pointed out that while this may be true, perceptions around big data are often misleadingly optimistic, and data

My most pressing big data concern is ...

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Image 3: The most pressing concerns related to the use of big data for diplomacy according to the event's participants

quality concerns should be taken into account to paint a more realistic picture of what big data can and cannot do.

In sum, this event highlighted that big data has great potential for diplomacy and foreign policy. A key insight is that the best way forward lies in the creation of small units within ministries of foreign affairs that are allowed to innovate with a degree of freedom. At the very least, such units will be able to challenge existing knowledge and open a dialogue about the scope and kind of data needed for better foreign policy decisions. Big data can also lead to

a better understanding of emerging trends, by analysing past documents, and improved knowledge of the present, by identifying real-time developments, which better enables the foreign service to formulate an accurate and targeted response. With a better understanding of past patterns and current trends, we might be able to stipulate scenarios of the future. Yet, we need to be realistic about the value of such predictions. Even if predictions were the most desired attribute of big data for foreign policy among the participants, the future will always carry a large degree of uncertainty which big data can only address to a certain extent.

If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact the programme organisers: Barbara Rosen Jacobson and Katharina E Höne at data@diplomacy.edu

For more information, go to

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