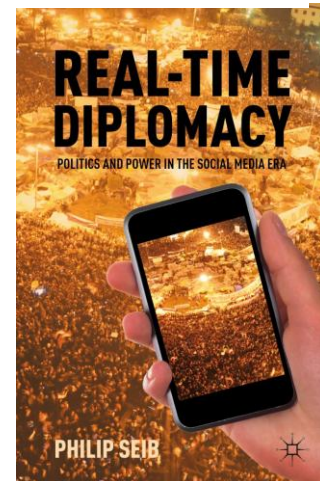


Philip Seib, **Real-Time Diplomacy: Politics and Power in the Social Media Era**, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 212 pp., \$26.00 (paperback).

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It has been more than two years since unprecedented protests first began in Tunisia and then rapidly escalated to Tahrir Square, causing the most sustained period of political unrest in recent memory across the world's few remaining authoritarian state-systems. Considering Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak's 20- to 30-year-long successful reigns of oppression, these cascades of outrage have proved remarkably substantive. Scholars of global communication and international politics alike have observed several times over that it was not the long-existing opposition movements and banned political parties that sparked or led this Arab Spring. Instead, protests began from within the loose networks of cosmopolitan 20- to 30-year-olds—individuals who felt meaningfully empowered and connected by a new matrix of tools and strategies that have proved to be politically consequential, this time. To only lament the lack of stable democratic institutions being formed within these few years—a process better measured in decades—would be to miss several illuminating opportunities about how political change is being organized and mobilized. Thoughtful explications of these complex phenomena and what they mean for both theory and practice are therefore high in demand and necessity.



Several books have been published about the Arab Spring, but Philip Seib's **Real-Time Diplomacy: Politics and Power in the Social Media Era** offers several excellent contributions to bridge the practice of diplomacy with theories of technology and media change. And it does so with the aid of carefully parsed stories from across the globe and history. By doing so, it helps to build a balanced narrative illustrating the ways that relations between states and societies have been impacted by the “new media technologies” of different times and places—but centered around the Arab Spring. Here are some of the fascinating case studies that *Real-Time Diplomacy* offers: America (1770s), Great Britain (1940s), Vietnam (1960s), Qatar (1990s), China (2000s), Ukraine (2000s), Manila (2000s), Iran (2000s), United States (2000s), WikiLeaks (2010s), Tunisia (2010s), Egypt (2010s), Syria (2010s), and the United Kingdom (2010s). In that narrative arc, the Arab Spring is important not in its isolation as a rare and important moment in recent history but rather in its integration with global networks of civil society and non-state actors. This is one of the main tensions that the author elucidates to inform the challenges being faced in diplomacy efforts worldwide.

The book is organized in three thematic parts of nine chapters. Part I introduces readers to two recent revolutions: the political revolution and the media revolution, and it is helpful for any reader seeking to refine their understanding of the intersections of politics, media, and technology in the Arab Spring. Part II confronts the book's central task of observing diplomacy work and the significant disruptions that media developments have time and again caused in the coherent practice of public

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diplomacy; this section may appeal particularly to practitioners, as it is filled with the best historical lessons and the latest examples of innovation and failures from recent times. Part III will appeal to both scholars and policy makers, because it offers a theoretical map and agenda for further integrating the study of networks with their impact on the organizational capacities of publics and governments.

With several points of entry for students, theorists, and practitioners, *Real-Time Diplomacy* is well-timed and very necessary. It would be incomplete to engage an emerging domain of inquiry by privileging only one interpretive lens. Many of the existing trade publications on the Arab Spring tend to overestimate or unrealistically appraise the role of technologies (or disregard them). Even less useful are labels like "Facebook Revolution," "Twitter Revolution," or "WikiLeaks Revolution" that offer little in analytical power. What are needed are more critical but balanced appraisals, and in this regard, the book excels. Readers will find the writing considerate of the range of optimistic and pessimistic lenses that have populated our understanding of these complex challenges. Also, the reader will not find the discussion limited to a couple of theories, a few data sets, or several years of ethnographic work. Instead, it engages the work of different theorists, from various methodological approaches, and draws them into a necessary interdisciplinary conversation.

Here is one example of how this was done: Rather than limit the range of inquiry to only activists' mobilization strategies, or only governmental responses, or only the design and use of media technologies, Seib's book elucidates the complex and evolving relationships that increasingly connect these stakeholders in complementary and problematic ways. Chapter 6 is especially important in this regard, as it charts the linkages among the mass self-communication potential for citizens, the reorganization of state power under network logics, and the development and diffusion of "liberation technologies" that actively support civil society actors in repressive environments. These issues are being investigated, but it is increasingly challenging to do so separately due to the shared political economy of global information infrastructure that undergirds them. Information infrastructure is not a central analytical frame of this book (media systems and public diplomacy are more central), but Seib's argumentation helps us move toward this emerging research agenda: Where do authoritarian regimes acquire the technological capabilities on which their media systems are anchored? What role do advanced democracies have in the innovation and distribution of communication control technologies? How might we secure some of the democratic consequences of information technologies and limit the coercive potential that autocrats may exploit?

The answers to these questions are not simple, but they do converge in the struggle between network logics and institutional logics of public engagement and participation in nondemocratic societies. The recognition of networks and their inherent complexity proves a direct challenge to standard modes of method and inquiry that promote the pursuit of mono-causality over the real causal complexities that define international politics. Seib's treatment of this issue is decidedly complex, as readers will not find simple explanations that simply emphasize the role of broadcast media over social media or of personal networks over institutional networks. The narratives traced in the analysis do the difficult work of detailing points of network convergence with new forms of political mobilization. For diplomacy practitioners, doing so will allow for more accurate understanding of the full range of actors that are now politically relevant in the causal process of democratization.

The "media history" of this Arab Spring will continue to be reassessed and rewritten as the successes and setbacks in meaningfully replacing recalcitrant institutions with democratic ones continue. But this should not limit us from actively fostering debate and critical evaluations of the political actors, connective tools, and the new matrix of strategies that have enabled them in powerful ways. While the underlying grievances and motivations for revolution may still be the same, the processes behind conceiving and mobilizing these revolutions have been unprecedented and therefore require systematic analysis and explanation. Seib's *Real-Time Diplomacy: Politics and Power in the Social Media Era* is a well-organized reflection on several of these demands. The author's set of arguments and accessible writing bridge the study and practice of statecraft and diplomacy with the science of networks that continue to infringe on it.