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by Daryl Copeland
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POLICY UPDATE

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These are bewildering times.

We appear to have entered a post-empirical era in which ideology, emotion, conviction and dissembling have displaced evidence, fact and truth in public life, policy development and decision-making.

Amid the current blizzard of startling [developments](#) in national and global affairs, it is altogether too easy to retreat and recoil, and to focus instead on issues much closer to the front door.

That would be a mistake.

As an alternative, why not limber up and stretch our minds a bit in the analytical gym?

Think, for instance, of the relationships among these distinct fields of professional practice: diplomacy, sport, politics and the media. At first glance, given the amplitude of such divergent topics, this task might seem a rather daunting, even ungainly enterprise. Upon closer inspection, however, I would suggest that there exist not only significant parallels among and between these strange bedfellows, but also some intriguing paradoxes and potentially consequential pitfalls.

In an increasingly globalizing and [heteropolar](#) world, diplomacy has never mattered more. Imperilled by a new threat set of [wicked](#) science and technology-driven issues — for which there are no military solutions — [soft power](#) has a demonstrable comparative advantage over the international policy alternatives. Today, the time-honoured tools of dialogue, negotiation and compromise have been reinforced with knowledge-based, technologically enabled problem-solving and complex balancing. Diplomacy alone is capable of resolving differences and securing win-win outcomes by positively affecting behaviour on all sides of the exchange. This stands in stark contrast to hard power, which relies on the use or threat of armed force to compel or coerce adversaries to submit. The exercise of persuasion and influence through non-violent political communications aimed at winning over others through the power of attraction, is, or should be, diplomacy's strongest asset.

Unfortunately, all three elements of the diplomatic ecosystem — the foreign ministry, foreign service and diplomatic business model — are in crisis. In [Canada](#) and elsewhere, they have not adapted fully or well enough to the challenges of the 21st century; marginalized and side-lined, they are facing a perilous performance gap. If progress is to be achieved, this chasm must be [bridged](#).

The association of sport with diplomacy, and what we now refer to as international relations, goes back a very long way. In ancient Greece, the often warring city states would declare an [Olympic truce](#) during the games at Olympia. Not unlike the Super Bowl today, which serves effectively as an agent of Americanization (if not globalization), the Greeks used the popularity



of those encounters to spread Hellenistic culture, values, and influence throughout the Mediterranean. In terms of “media”, and well prior to the age of live streaming and cable television, the significance of these historic contests was recorded by the likes of Pausanias. By way of additional parallels in the contemporary setting, consider the role of ping-pong diplomacy in preparing the way for the resumption of China-U.S. relations, or the highly politicized process of selecting venues for the World Cup or Olympic Games.

In its essence, however, sport, with its highly competitive animus and zero sum orientation, more closely resembles war than it does either diplomacy or politics. Hard power rules. The over-arching purpose of sport is to win, and although there are occasionally ties, typically the only other option is to lose. That said, and not unlike diplomacy, politics and the media, although the contest itself is central, organized sport still brings together otherwise hostile opponents who share a devotion to the game. Like politics, sport also features fierce competition, stars and teamwork, as well as action in concert to achieve identified goals.

At that point, the resemblance largely ends. In sport, players are hired or drafted, whereas in politics, at least in democracies, the members are elected, and their success or failure is often tied to the policies adopted by their party. Unlike much of diplomacy, sport is played out almost entirely in the public eye, and does not turn upon earning the confidence, trust and respect of interlocutors. Not unlike right-wing populists, media celebrities often resemble contestants in a beauty pageant engaged in a race to the bottom. And politicians too often reach for the gun when responding to perceived [threats](#).

Organized sport diverts even as it entertains. It is a mainly commercial enterprise — owners, sponsors and investors exercise influence accordingly. While political decision-making and direction are not without relation to the objectives of corporate donors, in most jurisdictions this relationship is closely scrutinized and regulated. Diplomacy, although not practised in the absence of important financial and budgetary dimensions, is, with the notable exception of political appointees, several dimensions removed from immediate private sector influence.

Politics is architectonic, and is in many respects the over-arching function among the four. The political process in most Western countries, as with sport, is highly contested. Heads of state and government, ministers and legislators are responsible for shaping the rule of law, crafting the content of diplomacy (as expressed through international policy) and for regulating important aspects of the media. Yet in many instances, the political and democratic process is facing very hard times.

Developments such as Brexit, the Trump ascendancy, and the generalized rise of regressive populism have defied rational analysis, public opinion research and the considered opinions of most experts. Today, there are fewer freely elected governments in the Middle East, Africa or Latin America than was the case a decade ago. Notwithstanding the outcome of the recent French, Dutch and Austrian elections, the rise of demagogues and populist leaders and parties in Europe, Latin America and the U.S. has shaken established patterns of belief and behaviour



to their foundations. The hard-line right is no longer on the fringe. Deeply embedded, it can no longer be shrugged off or ignored. We are now in political *terra incognita*, and the way forward is anything but clear.

Diplomacy, politics and sport all make intensive use of, and are in considerable part dependent upon the media, both conventional and social. However, as is the case with diplomacy and politics, the mainstream media's business model has broken down. With the rise of the Internet and the revolution in information and communication technologies, conventional journalism has taken a terrible hit. Papers have closed, foreign bureaus have been shuttered, investigative units disbanded, reporters sacked and journalism schools cut back. This has deprived diplomats of some key intelligence contacts in the field, robbed the citizenry of a key source of analysis, fact-checking and truth-seeking, and removed from the public realm a critical driver of scrutiny and ventilation.

Governments everywhere are now less closely watched, even as the surveillance state (as detailed in the Snowden [revelations](#)) grows by leaps and bounds. Now that everyone with a hand-held digital device can become a reporter, professional standards related to objectivity, fairness and balance have been degraded. Infotainment, sensationalism, "alternative facts" and fake news, in contrast, are flourishing. The public interest has suffered a body blow.

To conclude, provisionally: We have seen the parallels — diplomacy, politics, sports and the media are in varying degrees of crisis. We have observed the pitfalls — democracy, governance and the public good have endured significant setbacks. And the paradoxes? Among others, even amid the gathering gloom, there just may be a strategic opening here to turn adversity into opportunity. It is high time to break the habit of regarding diplomacy, sport, politics and the media as distinct fields of practice. That would involve finding ways to identify synergies, and a search for alternative perspectives and new ways of seeing, which is never easy.

Still, I would suggest that in these troubled times, that quest has never been more vital.

But that assessment is for another day.

► About the Author

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