Humanitarian Disarmament Digital Diplomacy Dos and Don'ts

COVID-19 has forced the international community to embrace digital diplomacy. The plenary meetings, the coffee chats, the shoulder taps and the huddles of like-minded have been replaced with virtual meetings, e-mails, online chats and home offices.

This shift to digital platforms has opened up new possibilities while highlighting distinct challenges. Digital diplomacy could end up creating a more inclusive and effective method of informing diplomatic decision making, or not. Respecting social distancing impedes development of the good working relationships necessary for success. At the same time, the spread of digital diplomacy is an opportunity to strengthen informal connections while maintaining our formal responsibilities.

Meeting online reduces participation barriers such as visas and travel costs. It affords opportunities for more subject matter experts and persons with personal experience of the issue at hand to participate directly in discussions, enhancing the conversation. Even hybrid meetings present new opportunities, as long as attention is paid to ensure that at least 40% of attendees are participating remotely to ensure balance and comfortable participation.

It is important to remember, however, that the digital divide is real. Access to technology and internet connections have a large impact on the ability of some individuals and states to participate in virtual meetings. In some cases, technical or financial support could be offered through existing sponsorship programs to ensure that all states have the ability to participate meaningfully.

Civil society, especially within global humanitarian disarmament coalitions, has worked for decades making decisions across continents without the benefit of frequent shuttle diplomacy. There is a breadth of knowledge in the community, from which these Digital Diplomacy Dos and Don'ts are drawn, to make best use of the current situation and think about ways to build towards the future.

Dos for Hosts

- Invite those with direct relevant experience to orient the session or provide kickoff remarks
- Offer sponsorship funds to ensure that all stakeholders have the technology needed to participate meaningfully
- Make clear if the session is recorded or off the record, and repeat that for latecomers
- Have more than one meeting 'host' in order to track chat questions and dismiss unruly participants (zoom bombers)
- Open the online room at least 5 minutes before the appointed time, allowing participants to enter and ensuring the session begins on schedule
- Regularly announce what the session is, what the privacy rules are, and what the process is for participation - this can be done verbally or by repeating key information in the chat box
- Encourage those usually on the margins of events to speak or ask questions
- Ensure gender/age/racial diversity in events with more than one speaker
- Consider a running chat chyron (key points summarized by a designated person, identified at the outset and also a few times through the session)
- Collect and share anonymous information about participants disaggregated by sex, age and location

Dos for Technicians

- Provide a way for all participants to see who is in attendance during the meeting itself so participants can work together
- Ensure the chosen platform allows private chats between participants to allow for negotiation and collaboration
- Consider using multiple access streams at the same time (e.g. Facebook, YouTube, video-conference service)
- Offer additional languages if capacity allows (some systems, such as educational institution Zoom subscriptions, include translation features)
- Share instructions for using the meeting platform ahead of time

Dos for Speakers

- Make use of slides/presentations if logical (it can be difficult to keep focused on a face for a long time)
- Use a clear camera
- Keep speaking time to 10-15 minutes or less
- Drop relevant facts, figures, web links into the chat function
- Test out the meeting platform in advance, if possible

Dos for Participants

- Include your affiliation in your name when entering the meeting platform
- Keep your video off, unless speaking, when meetings are large to help those with limited bandwidth participate easily
- Keep your microphone muted, unless speaking

Dos for Q&A Moderators

- Encourage questions via the chat function
- Repeat by voice, the questions asked by chat
- As much as can be known, make sure questions are asked by diverse participants (age/gender/civil society/government/etc.)

Don'ts

- Assume each key stakeholder has the same level of access - access to hardware such as computers or mobile phones varies around the world and so does internet access and speed
- Neglect accessibility for persons with disabilities
- Let a few states or small group of participants dominate the conversation
- Limit civil society participation
- Talk too fast! (always and forever)
- Go too long without a break (90-minute sessions allow for meaningful participation and focus)
- Assume that participants will be able to see in detail what is on a slide
- Use tiny fonts on slides
- Use really long weblinks
- Forget to follow-up with information on where to access recordings (if available)
- Take screenshots unless it's a public session

Above all, it is important to remember that digital diplomacy during COVID-19 takes the meeting out of conference rooms and into people's offices or homes and to recognize that delegates' care responsibilities, which are often hidden from the professional world, will be more visible.
This situation requires flexibility, patience and understanding from all participants. We are not just meeting online; we are trying to conduct diplomacy from home in the midst of a global health crisis.
Be kind to yourself and one another.