

Twitter diplomacy new face of foreign relations

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(AP) -- When Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt couldn't reach his counterpart in Bahrain by traditional means of communication, he turned to Twitter.

"Trying to get in touch with you on an issue," Bildt tweeted to Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa early Thursday.

A shout-out on [Twitter](#) - is this the future of diplomacy?

"It shows that in the modern world you can seek contact in modern ways," Bildt told The Associated Press.

Many politicians and diplomats worldwide have already embraced social media as a tool to communicate with the public - Bildt and others tweeted prolifically Thursday about the arrest of war crimes fugitive Ratko Mladic.

But they don't typically communicate among each other that way.

So was Bildt's mission to find Al Khalifa on Twitter successful?

"Yep," Bildt said. Al Khalifa saw his tweet - Bildt's 1,000th - and got in touch with the Swede, who noted that social media isn't the only way he contacts his peers: "I know which ones are on Twitter."

With nearly 32,000 followers, Al Khalifa is something of a Twitter

celebrity in his Persian Gulf nation. Many of his tweets during Bahrain's pro-democracy uprisings reflected the Al Khalifa monarchy's viewpoint. But others have contained shout-outs to fellow diplomats, a mother's day greeting and even the occasional travel snapshot.

His activity has also generated spoof Twitter accounts, some of which poke fun at the minister's weight. One of those parody accounts replied to Bildt's tweet to Al Khalifa on Thursday: "(at)carlbildt He's eating right now, try again later (hashmark)bahrain."

Despite the risk of such spoofs, diplomats are likely to use social media ever more frequently, even in contacting each other, if only to show that they move with the times, analysts say.

John Einar Sandvand, who blogs about media trends in Norway, suspects Bildt's Tweet was not just aimed at Al Khalifa, but at the Swedish minister's almost 30,000 other followers.

"I don't know Carl Bildt. But I'm quite sure he knows what he's doing," Sandvand said. "He wouldn't tweet private information. He does this in a way to build his brand as a politician."

Bildt, 61, may seem like an unlikely [social media](#) pioneer. He's quite formal when you meet him in person - neatly dressed in dark suits, always eloquent and with the air of a professor.

But he's eager to promote Sweden as leader in information technology and figures he must set an example. On his blog, he proudly noted that he made "IT history" when he as Swedish prime minister in 1994 sent an email to President Bill Clinton.

"It was the first email at this level and got quite a lot of attention at the time," Bildt recalled in 2007.

When it comes to social networking, Bildt has a strong challenger in Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb, who has a more casual tone on his Twitter and Facebook accounts and official home page. It shows the 43-year-old Stubb posing in jeans and sneakers and on a bicycle in full racing gear.

On his Twitter page Thursday, Stubb disclosed that members of his conservative party, during a break in government formation talks, quarreled over "how to spell ice cream. I lost. Wanted a hyphen. Life is unfair..."

Stubb was fast to tweet about Mladic's arrest - within an hour of the news breaking. But not as fast as Bildt.

"Was he 20 minutes before me?" Stubb asked AP. "I'm a faster runner than Carl Bildt, but he's faster tweeter."

British Foreign Secretary William Hague, seen as serious and reserved in person, is an engaging figure online. In recent weeks, he's answered impromptu questions via Twitter on the Middle East peace process and Syria - he even offered a birthday greeting to a voter in his Parliamentary district.

Like Bildt and Al Khalifa, Hague has also sparred on Twitter with his counterparts - trading jokey messages about cricket with Australian Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd.

In December, Mexican President Felipe Calderon and Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg used Twitter to exchange views on their hopes for the U.N. climate change summit in Cancun, Mexico.

Earlier this month, Rwandan President Paul Kagame attacked a British journalist after the reporter branded him "despotic and deluded" on

Twitter, and raised questions over the leader's human rights record.

Kagame sent 14 messages back to Ian Birrell - formerly deputy editor of The Independent newspaper and an ex-speechwriter for British Prime Minister David Cameron.

Hundreds of people read and commented about the unusually frank exchange between a foreign leader and reporter.

"Shame he doesn't allow such debate in Rwanda with his own people," Birrell noted in one of his own Twitter updates.

The jury's out on whether Twitter diplomacy will lead to more insight into what governments are up to. Given the embarrassment caused by WikiLeaks' releases of U.S. diplomatic cables, foreign affairs officials are likely to be cautious about discussing matters of state online.

Jimmy Leach, head of digital engagement at Britain's foreign ministry, said ministers messaging their counterparts on Twitter can help humanize international relations - but doubts a public forum is the place for sensitive discussions.

"What you are not going to get is high level diplomacy via Twitter," he said.

Al Khalifa eventually replied to Bildt on Twitter, but didn't divulge the topic of their conversation: "(at)carlbildt nice to hear from you to catch up on matters .. Your tweet caught the world's interest."

Neither Al Khalifa nor Bildt responded to [tweets](#) from AP reporters Thursday. Al Khalifa also couldn't be reached by email or through a government spokeswoman.

Bildt, who was in Istanbul, called AP in Stockholm after a message was left with his spokeswoman. But he wouldn't say what "issue" he brought up with Al Khalifa: "I don't want to get into that."

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