



PERSPECTIVES

THE NEW PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

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The new public diplomacy*

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As recently as November last year Eric Schmidt, CEO of Google, told the Council on Foreign Relations “I think most people don’t appreciate how fast this mobile phenomenon is going to occur, especially outside of the developed world”.¹ If anyone was underestimating the spread of these tools it only took the social media-infused revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt a few months later to spell out how wired the world has become and how unpredictable the uses of social media will be. For public diplomacy practitioners it served as a reminder: the world has undergone some rapid and dramatic changes that require them to adapt quickly.

The numbers Schmidt was talking about are simply extraordinary. The world now has somewhere between four and five billion mobile phones; and nearly one billion of them are smart phones with some capacity to access the internet, like iPhones and Blackberries. And because of their rapidly declining cost, Google expects another one billion people to join these web-enabled networks in just the next two to three years.² That is a population the size of China’s, suddenly being connected to a global network that gives them access to the sum of all human knowledge and the capability to connect with millions of other people in the space of three years.

In fact, smart phones are predicted to overtake desktop computers as the preferred means of accessing the web somewhere between 2013 and 2014.³ Internet penetration rates have also been increasing dramatically over the last decade, from less than half a billion users in 2000 to around two billion in 2010.⁴

As if that were not enough of a disruption, add in the demographics as well. The majority of the world’s population is under 30 years of age, and in the developing world the proportion under 30 is even larger. These are the people who have grown up seamlessly integrating these new technologies into their daily lives.

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These are some of the mega-trends changing the behaviour of everyone from bankers to peasant farmers. Public diplomacy practitioners are not exempt.

Until very recently it was not uncommon to hear people scoff at Twitter. What on earth could you do with a 140-character message? For many it was just another example of inane Western narcissism. However, after the central organising role social media has played in many of the recent protests across the Middle East and North Africa, critics of social media have been noticeably quieter. The point is not just that some people have underestimated the change that is afoot as a result of a networked world, it is also that predicting how these tools will be used is incredibly difficult. Facebook was not invented to help topple regimes.

Yet while it might be hard to predict specific outcomes of this change, it does seem possible to draw out some of the major implications for public diplomacy practitioners. Here are three.

New communications platforms are different

First, social media platforms appear to be qualitatively different from other communications technologies we have seen in the past, which means diplomats can and should be reaching much bigger audiences. It also means they will be competing for a voice in a much more crowded space.

Other communications technology revolutions like the printing press, radio and television – while facilitating communication with mass audiences – still operated under a hierarchical structure where gatekeepers regulated the number of voices that could be heard and who could be heard.

New digital communication platforms like Twitter, Facebook and blogs are far more democratic. In what will be an incredibly short timeframe, the world will soon reach the point where almost every single person on the planet has the potential to be a publisher, writer, photographer, video producer and blogger. What is more, the communications system is now networked; this means that someone like P.J. Crowley, the former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, who has around 26,000 Twitter followers, can still reach millions of people through re-tweets and the network effects that Twitter enables.⁵ The individual has been empowered like never before.

These tools also allow diplomats on the ground to reach much bigger audiences. No longer are a few hundred contacts sufficient. With social media, a single diplomat at the US Embassy in Jakarta is reaching more than 300,000 Indonesians through the Embassy's Facebook account.⁶ According to a cable recently released by WikiLeaks the Embassy in Jakarta is also growing its audiences through sophisticated digital campaigns.⁷

Attracting mass social media followings in such a crowded space is not easy and requires adaptation. Carefully vetted messages will not work in an information-saturated environment. The stuffiness and traditional inaccessibility of diplomacy needs to be discarded in this online space, where engagement and interactivity are key. That involves foreign ministries trusting their staff online just as much as they trust them to negotiate major international deals behind closed doors.

Audiences and debates are moving online

Each time I visit North America, I am amazed how frequently area experts cite blog posts in conversation or during formal public discussions. Here in Australia, even though this shift is still in progress, increasingly, audiences and debates have moved online. If foreign ministries do not adjust the way they communicate then increasingly they won't be heard.

Take the example of Islamic extremism. Western countries are spending billions countering this threat in a variety of ways; Australia has deployed forces to both Iraq and Afghanistan. It is received wisdom that Islamic extremists are using the internet to radicalise youth. Despite this, only a handful of Western governments are present in the online space. The State Department has nine full-time Arabic-language bloggers, two Farsi bloggers and two Urdu bloggers, for example. The Pentagon and UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office also maintain full-time bloggers.⁸ But given the modest cost of this sort of campaigning compared to the potential benefits, it seems odd that more governments are not working to counter these threats online.

Beyond the narrow world of extremism, there are other reasons public diplomacy campaigners need to be online. A big reason is that increasingly that is where national and international debates are taking place. During a visit last year to the headquarters of a major international newsgroup I was surprised when one of its 60-something year-old editors pulled out his blackberry to show me news items rolling in on his Facebook news feed. Through the feed he was connected with all the leading opinion-makers within his bailiwick, from ambassadors to politicians, business leaders to think-tankers. It alerted him to developments as they happened and also provided context and nuance to news he would otherwise have only seen via press release or a transcript.

The point I took was that public debates and positions are shaping up well before they hit newspapers. Governments that are not even feeding into this discussion are unnecessarily impeding any chance they have of shaping the debate.

The recent protests in Egypt were a good example. In the early stages, the commentary from the US government on the protests seemed ambiguous. Not surprisingly, these early remarks caused a stir on

Twitter. What was fascinating, though, was the response of US officials, who apparently saw the negative tone the remarks were generating and immediately started spinning official government comments in a more positive light. These employees are connected through their followers with all the major US and international media, giving them a chance to shape the tone of reporting well before a single newspaper hit the newsstands or a considered blog post was up.

It is debatable how effective these efforts were in framing the subsequent considered comment, but it would seem counterproductive to US interests for its officials not to be trying their best both to put and clarify the government's view.

The challenge for foreign ministries is that these networks cannot be built overnight. They take time to grow and require continuous cultivation to maintain. So if Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) wants to be able to harness these tools in a crisis situation, it needs to be using and building the networks continuously. As the Egypt example highlights, waiting until newspapers have gone to print is now too late. The implications of a policy or speech have already been debated for hours by expert minds across the globe. As the Prime Minister Julia Gillard put it:

Something that was a blockbuster at 10 a.m. when it's announced has been tweeted about by 10.05, has been blogged about by 10.30....That's the nature of the cycle and I think we are still adapting to that change.⁹

New solutions to old problems

The third implication is that new technologies are enabling new solutions to old problems, which means that foreign ministries will have to broaden their range of traditional partners. The most obvious example of this is taking place right now in the Middle East and North Africa, where Twitter and Facebook are helping to reshape the political landscape in a way no one could have imagined.

Governments interested in spurring these democratic revolutions have had to push for internet and phone networks to remain active. In some cases, like the Iranian uprising in 2009, the US State Department asked Twitter to delay a scheduled network upgrade so protestors could keep using the service to organise themselves.¹⁰

Now that the world has somewhere near five billion mobile phones, a rapidly increasing proportion of which are connected online, foreign ministries have new opportunities for solving problems, particularly those to which solutions have so far been elusive. Many of these opportunities are hard to predict, but crowd sourcing is a good example.

Following the recent earthquake and tsunami in Japan, the Google-developed Person Finder¹¹ was used to trace more than 300,000 people whose names had been entered into a public database of missing and found people. This project was developed in collaboration with the US State Department.

Crowd sourcing has also been used in Mexico to develop a free short code to allow people to report crime anonymously¹²; it has been used to report electoral violence in India;¹³ and is being used by Google to monitor flu outbreaks.¹⁴

Another example in the public diplomacy realm came after the earthquake in Haiti, where a US telecommunications entrepreneur set up a short code for the State Department allowing US citizens to text a number on their phones which would donate \$US10 to the relief effort. The code was set up within 48 hours of the disaster and the State Department raised some \$US35 million. It has been used in several subsequent natural disasters.

Given that most government departments won't have the expertise to properly harness these tools, it will probably result in many more partnerships between foreign ministries and external partners.

E-diplomacy is not a boutique extra for foreign ministries and increasingly will be central to how they operate in the 21st century. Digital platforms will require cultural change, but they also promise a wide range of benefits, whether that is taking a much more active role in managing their public diplomacy messages or engaging audiences that were previously out of reach. For DFAT, it is high time to act.

¹ Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen at the Council on Foreign Relations, 3 November 2010, available online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJAMD5p5tQo> (accessed 29 March 2011).

² *Ibid.*

³ Mathew Ingram, Mary Meeker, Mobile internet will soon overtake fixed internet, GigaOm, 12 April 2010, available online: <http://gigaom.com/2010/04/12/mary-meeker-mobile-internet-will-soon-overtake-fixed-internet/> (accessed 29 March 2011).

⁴ International Telecommunication Union, Internet users, available online: <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/> (accessed 29 March 2011).

⁵ Matthew Lee, US diplomacy embracing Twitter amid global crises, *Washington Post*, 24 January 2011.

⁶ US Embassy Jakarta, Indonesia, Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/jakarta.usembassy>.

⁷ US Embassy Jakarta, Mission Indonesia funding request to amplify social media effort in time for March POTUS visit, 12 February 2010, available online: <http://www.dazzlepod.com/cable/10JAKARTA186/1/> (accessed 29 March 2011).

⁸ Fergus Hanson, *A digital DFAT: joining the 21st century*, Lowy Institute for International Policy, November 2010, available online: <http://www.lowyinstitute.org/Publication.asp?pid=1432> (accessed 29 March 2011).

⁹ George Megalogenis, Trivial pursuit: leadership and the end of the reform era, *Quarterly Essay* No. 40, 2010, p 73.

¹⁰ Lev Grossman, Iran protests: Twitter, the medium of the movement', *TIME*, 17 June 2009, available online: <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1905125,00.html> (accessed 29 March 2011).

¹¹ <http://japan.person-finder.appspot.com/?lang=en>.

¹² See Hanson, *A digital DFAT*, pp 12-13.

¹³ Ushahidi, Vote Report India launches, <http://blog.ushahidi.com/index.php/2009/04/07/vote-report-india-launches/>.

¹⁴ Google, <http://www.google.org/flutrends/>.

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