

Public Diplomacy @ State

Written by Fergus Hanson

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FERGUS HANSON, OCT 26 2012

Social media is driving some intriguing changes to the way public diplomacy is being practiced. There have now been so many examples of its disruptive influence on international relations the point has now been reached that it is negligent for a foreign ministry to ignore the change.

Take the Kony2012 video depiction of the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army – which singlehandedly wrote a global narrative of the conflict. Or the deadly fallout from the viral video, The Innocence of Muslims. Or the seemingly local case of a Chinese student who was punched on a Sydney train in April this year but quickly attracted the attention of a former prime minister after he posted a message about the attack on Weibo that was soon reposted more than 10,000 times (China is Australia's largest source of foreign students).

However, social media is not just being used by foreign ministries as a way of responding to these new forces. It is also opening up direct two-way communications between foreign ministries and the general public on an industrial scale.

One foreign ministry in particular is leading the integration of these new tools into its public diplomacy: the US Department of State. After nine months looking at how it's doing this I identified six different ways it is using social media in its public diplomacy programs.

1) Official Messaging

The Bureau of Public Affairs manages 11 official Twitter language feeds as well as the official State Department Facebook page, YouTube channel, blog, Flickr account, Google+ page and Tumblr.

As a vehicle for providing the world with quick, official lines from the State Department, social media is excellently suited. It allows State to clarify or push out official lines without the need to organize and host a press conference, as well as to broadcast a wide range of relatively minor events and messages. It can also prevent escalation of false stories. The range of platforms also provide considerable flexibility in the way State can respond; for example, in a sentence or two on Twitter, by a video statement on YouTube, or more informally on the blog.

2) Official Messaging-Public Diplomacy Hybrid

Social media accounts run by U.S. embassies and consulates vary in style, but they tend to sit somewhere on a spectrum between communicating and engaging with influencers (such as journalists and officials) and the interested general public (often in the relevant local language).

Collectively, these platforms reach a large audience, with the single largest embassy account, the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta's Facebook page, which has over half a million fans and is written in Bahasa squarely aimed at the Indonesian public.

3) Consular Affairs

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Social media is also playing an increasingly important role in consular affairs. It is being used to provide foreign publics with U.S. visa information, to provide travel information to U.S. citizens abroad and to coordinate in disaster response situations.

4) Diplo-Media

State's rapidly growing social media audience (now over 16 million on Facebook and Twitter) is at least in part the result of a move into 'Diplo-media'. This new category of media appears to have three core qualities:

- 1) Content that seeks to advance broad national interests.
- 2) An editorial approach that downplays associations with the State Department or U.S. government.
- 3) Content that is participatory and towards the entertainment end of the content spectrum.

5) Network Extension and Retention

An emerging use for social media at State is in the area of network extension. Some senior diplomats at State make a point of highlighting their twitter handle or Facebook page every time they speak at an event. Diplomats like Alec Ross get between 10 and 20 per cent of the entire audience signing up after each event. The theory is that these ever expanding networks can be harnessed for ideas when you need to find a new contact or expert, and allow for sampling of a wider audience than just the elite VIP networks embassies traditionally maintain.

6) Resiliency Capability

At a big picture level, State's widespread adoption of social media has given it a new resiliency capability. The rapid spread of social media around the world has increased all countries' exposure to nation brand-damaging events. A single event that might previously have been reported in only limited circles can now explode into a media firestorm that can have real costs in lives, standing and money.

To some extent it is impossible (and contrary to Western principles) to try to prevent this communication taking place. But it is still the job of the foreign ministry to do its best to protect the national interest of the country and people they represent.

State has the makings of this sort of resiliency capability, although it is not yet necessarily conceived of in this way. This capability has three components:

- 1) *Real-time monitoring*: The Bureau of Public Affairs' Rapid Response Unit has a small team monitoring social media responses to developments that have the potential to impact U.S. national interests. They produce short daily briefing reports with an anecdotal look at the online response to specific events/issues (for example, on the closure of the U.S. embassy in Syria) across the Arabic, Chinese, English and Spanish social media spheres.
- 2) *Identification and cultivation of key online influencers* : It is now possible to create maps of online influencers by subject area, which would allow diplomats on the ground to have a better sense of who is driving discussion on specific issues and who they should be reaching out to (in the same way diplomats currently use intuition to identify and build relations with politicians, officials and journalists they think influential).
- 3) *Capability to speak (and engage) directly with a mass audience* : State now has a global reach of over 16 million people on Facebook and Twitter alone and that remains on a very strong growth trajectory.

Combined, these three facets amount to a nascent resiliency capability that would allow State to quickly identify social media conversations with the potential to affect national interests, to put their own case directly to a large online audience, and to reach out and explain their perspective to key online influencers.

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That's a snapshot of the changes afoot. There's a lot more detail in my new Brookings policy paper: *Baked in and Wired: Ediplomacy at State*.

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