

*The Long Road to Public Diplomacy 2.0: The Internet in U.S. Public Diplomacy.*<sup>1</sup>

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The revolution was not unexpected. Way back in November 1967, President Lyndon Johnson's public diplomacy tsar, Leonard Marks, who as director of the United States Information Agency (USIA) oversaw U.S. engagement with public opinion around the world, spoke to the National Association of Educational Broadcasters. He presented "a Blueprint for a New Schoolhouse." A vision of what he called "a worldwide information grid" lay at its core. Educators, he argued, needed not only to "collect knowledge electronically" but also "learn how to route it sensibly... or it will surely rout us." This had ethical implications: "we must learn to share our knowledge with our neighbors so that all may benefit." Marks imagined this *worldwide grid* linking Cambridge, Massachusetts with Cambridge, England; Moscow, Idaho and Moscow, U.S.S.R.; and centers of learning across the

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<sup>1</sup> Note: This paper began life as a contribution to the International interdisciplinary symposium Unclenching Fists: Dialogue and Diversity in Diplomatic Interaction, organized in Hamburg in May 2010. It was revised for the workshop "International Relationships in the Information Age," April 1, 2012, International Studies Association, and I am grateful to all participants for their input and most especially to J.P. Singh who coordinated the process. Daniel Drezner, Archon Fung, Beth Simmons and J. P. Singh all provided extensive and helpful feedback. I am also grateful to the numerous serving and former Foreign Service officers of the United States and other governments whose perceptions and experiences have informed this project. Of the administrators of U.S. public diplomacy Joseph D. Duffey, the late Penn Kemble, James Glassman and Goli Ameri were especially helpful. I also appreciate the help of the now-retired director of the Office of Innovative Engagement, William May.

developing world: “a unique method of plugging together human minds between any points on earth.” Marks highlighted the coming revolution of electronic data exchange: “A system of electronic interchange of information could readily be set up within the next five years – provided we make imaginative use of the satellites, and link them to information storage and retrieval systems already in existence” (Marks 1967). Marks returned to this theme in a further speech in February 1968: a world information grid of linked computers would, he argued, be “a fundamental step toward lasting world peace...” (Marks 1968).

Forty years on from Marks’s prophecy, USIA is gone – merged into the Department of State in 1999 – but the electronic network he imagined has superseded his predictions. In 1968 Marks imagined only major institutions – universities and libraries – connecting on massive computer systems. Today individuals are able to connect internationally using devices small enough to fit in a pocket. More than this, Marks imagined complete messages and data sets being transferred rather than an electronic architecture capable of allowing individuals to collaborate and generate their own content. But technology was only a means to an end imagined by Marks. His vision was one of peace built from equitable exchange between minds around the world not the digital hegemony of one preeminent actor. Not all the advocates of U.S. public diplomacy – digital or otherwise – have shared Marks’s vision. The debates that have characterized public diplomacy in the analogue era have continued in the digital. This essay will not only chart the diffusion of digital technology within US public diplomacy, but also the limits on the process and more especially ways in which institutional biases and outmoded priorities have slowed the full embrace of the on-line social media. The analysis is based on sustained discussion with practitioners of the U.S. public diplomacy, and the reader is asked to excuse the absence of identification of the sources still serving.

*Foundations and Definitions.*

The emergence of America's digital diplomacy sits at the confluence of several narratives. The international context lies in the transition from the Cold War, through the moment of American unipolarity to the challenges of the post-9/11 era. The institutional context is U.S. public diplomacy's journey from being the concern of a vibrant Cold War agency – USIA – in the 1980s, through a period of post-Cold War decline to an uncomfortable position in the 2000s as an initially neglected subdivision within the Department of State. During the same period the technology of the internet has evolved from the basic structure of the early 1990s, in which most actors simply used the technology as a mechanism of display, to complexities of the new century in which interactivity, social connection and user generated content have become the norm and as Singh (2013) argues, the medium has become a component in the formation of individual human identity. This quantum leap in web technology was marked by the term first coined in 1999: Web 2.0 (DiNucci 1999: 32). Although coined as part of a discussion of page design and the coming explosion of different web platforms, by 2004 Web 2.0 had come to be used as a convenient way to speak about the new wave of blogs, the crowd-sourced encyclopaedia site Wikipedia (founded 2001), and social media sites including Facebook (launched 2004), file-sharing sites like Flickr (also launched 2004) and YouTube (launched 2005). Needless to say, the evolution of the web and the evolution of public diplomacy intertwined. The communications revolution increased the significance of public opinion in the conduct of foreign policy and the concept of a new public diplomacy was born. Precise definitions of the new public diplomacy vary, but most analysts agree that it includes an emphasis on greater exchange, dialogue and mutuality in public diplomacy (Melissen 2006). By 2008 the term new public diplomacy had been joined by a term for the public diplomacy use of the new on-line media: Public Diplomacy 2.0.

Although like Web 2.0 the term Public Diplomacy 2.0 has never been used with particular precision, three key characteristics emerge: The first characteristic is the capacity of the technology to facilitate the creation of relationships around social networks and on-line communities. The second

characteristic is the related dependence of Public Diplomacy 2.0 on user-generated content from feedback and blog comments to complex user-generated items such as videos or mash-ups. The third characteristic is the underlying sense of the technology as being fundamentally about horizontally arranged networks of exchange rather than the vertically arranged networks of distribution down which information cascaded in the 1.0 era. While the technology is entirely new the underlying pattern of relationships underlying the operation of Public Diplomacy 2.0 is not. Moreover, as Marks' argument suggests, that pattern maps on to a set of attitudes which had a longer standing existence within the history of U.S. public diplomacy. It is to that history that this discussion must now turn.

The term public diplomacy – the conduct of foreign policy by engagement with a foreign public – is relatively new, acquiring this meaning only in 1965. The activity is, in contrast, as old as statecraft. As this author has argued elsewhere the principle areas of public diplomacy work have been: listening (engaging a foreign public by listening to it and channeling what is learned into policy formation); advocacy (engaging a foreign public by explaining one's policies and/or point of view); cultural diplomacy (engaging a foreign public by facilitating the export of one's culture such as arts or language); exchange diplomacy (engaging a foreign public by facilitating direct contact between one's own people and a foreign population) and international broadcasting (engaging a foreign public through the provision of news according to the accepted mores of international journalism) (author 2009). The advent of the single term public diplomacy in the U.S. in 1965 did not mean that these constituent elements were especially compatible; rather it reflected a desire within the Cold War United States to make them so. In reality the story of America's public diplomacy is one of centrifugal tension between these elements and their champions within the bureaucracy. While the interplay is complex, advocacy has tended to dominate in the U.S. approach; culture and exchange have tended to be neglected (Ninkovich 1981; Arndt 2005), but the listening function has fared least well of all with frequent budget cuts and only rare examples of input into the highest levels of foreign policy making.

It is a testament to the particular power of Public Diplomacy 2.0 that it has something to offer all five core categories of traditional public diplomacy. It is a form of listening in as much as it provides a mechanism for views from the public to be transmitted back to the actor in the form of comments, tweets, likes and the highly revealing path of re-tweets, re-postings and tracking of particular phrases or ideas across the blogosphere. It is a form of advocacy in as much as its channels can be used to present the actor's point of view. It is a form of cultural diplomacy in both the sense of transmitting culture through content and being a culture in its own right.<sup>2</sup> It is a form of international broadcasting in as much as it facilitates the circulation of news across frontiers and has provided a new platform for the traditional international broadcasters. Perhaps its greatest potential and closest fit is as a form of exchange diplomacy, which like the social media seeks to operate through networks and people-to-people connections. Here then was the perfect medium for the new public diplomacy. Yet as will be seen the uses of the Web 2.0 technology have been determined not by the inherent nature of the tool or the culture and mores of the wider on-line community but by the priorities and prejudices of the bureaucracy. While the value of exchanges and networks was always understood by USIA personnel, America's digital diplomacy had the misfortune to arrive at the very moment that the agency was being marginalized within a largely unsympathetic Department of State.

*The Road to Public Diplomacy 1.0: Technology in US Public Diplomacy.*

From the start Americans have understood the value of technology in projecting their national image and influence overseas. The young republic's first public diplomats – Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson – were both accomplished scientists. American technology was show-cased at

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<sup>2</sup> The United States may enjoy an advantage in this regard given the overlap between the culture on the internet, the culture of the internet and some notions of American culture. Hence the governments of Russia and Iran have sometimes cast the internet as an American conspiracy. There is of course plenty in the culture of the internet – its diversity, openness to new ideas and protean energy -- which does not overlap with Middle American culture in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. It may be truer to say that the internet is an extension of Californian culture.

international exhibitions and the country was swift to deploy technology to actually carry messages. Woodrow Wilson sent out his Fourteen Points by Morse code broadcast and from 1935 a daily data transmission of the most significant American speeches and newspaper articles known as the Wireless File went to every U.S. diplomatic post. In 1942 the US government began shortwave radio broadcasts with Voice of America, and public diplomacy became used to having a range of “fast media” at its disposal to communicate with the world. Technology played its role during the Cold War as the United States government both continued to exhibit its technology to enhance its prestige and share technology with those states it wished to cultivate. The United States Information Agency assisted many allied states in their acquisition of television and was glad to provide its own programming to fill their schedules (author, 2008). With this precedent it was only to be expected that computer technology would be added to the mix.

The first use of computers in U.S. public diplomacy was purely as a totem of modernity. Early IBM machines featured at the World’s Fairs and Expositions of the later 1950s alongside the more famous objects of American technological supremacy such as the model kitchen seen in Moscow in 1959. These machines were programmed to answer “frequently asked questions” about the United States from a menu, and branded in rather overblown terms as “mechanical brains.” Such exhibits had the ability to keep track of audience preference within the limited range of questions, which provided an early hint at the potential of computerization for facilitating the listening dimension of public diplomacy. Audiences responded well to such encounters and they remained part of the USIA repertoire through to the end of the Cold War (Haddow 1997). But large scale use of computers in the field required a technological leap. As Marks recognized, remote connection would be the key. In the 1970s the United States Information Service post in Paris experimented with a computer terminal linked long distance to a databank in Washington DC. The experiment failed to provide anything of operational value but the concept remained in play (Hansen 1989).

During the Reagan administration the United States Information Agency had both the budget and the energetic leadership of a forward looking director (and close friend of the president) Charles Z. Wick to undertake a massive program of technological investment. The best-known of these initiatives was in the field of satellite television where Wick launched WORLDNET: an initiative to beam regionally-tailored TV feeds to US embassies around the world for on-ward distribution to local television channels. The concept embraced a dimension of interactivity as projects included staging special press conferences in embassies to connect local journalists to administration “newsmakers” back in the U.S. USIA personnel understood that the journalists were more likely to report Reagan administration views if those journalists themselves had had a share in eliciting them and would be seen on the screen asking the question (Snyder 1995; author 2008). While not as high-profile the use of computers also moved forward. Offices in Washington acquired a Wang system for word processing and by the end of the Reagan administration the agency had several centralized databanks and databases of information which could be accessed from the field. The working concept was still to use technology to connect the field officer with headquarters rather than link straight to the public (Hansen 1989).

By 1988 there was an awareness of imminent change. Veteran public diplomat Alan Hansen perceived that a new form of public diplomacy was taking shape. Like Marks before him he saw the opportunity to shift the centre of gravity within public diplomacy away from advocacy and towards exchange for mutual benefit: “The communications revolution of the last half of the twentieth century” he wrote “has given U.S. public diplomats a historic opportunity to de-emphasize their role as propagandists and become truly modern pioneers in an endeavour that would serve U.S. interests as well as the interests of all who seek political, economic, and social development” (Hansen 1989). The George H. W. Bush presidency saw up-grades to the digital links between headquarters and the field

known as US-INFONET, but it was not until the early Clinton years that plans materialized to link directly to the public.

At the beginning of the Clinton administration the Deputy Director of the United States Information Agency, Penn Kemble, proposed a single on-line user-friendly U.S. public diplomacy network, initially connecting agency employees at home and abroad as an on-line community, and then bringing in the agencies foreign interlocutors. He understood its limits: “Technology can only be a means for this Agency: our end goal is not the new electronic network, but a human community of values and interests, linked through these new technologies and in other ways, that can help us strengthen peace, democracy and prosperity.”(Kemble 1993) USIA prepared for the coming digital age by restructuring the mechanisms by which content was created within the agency. The content-creators were moved into a single “Information Bureau” or “I Bureau” for short. Whatever its effectiveness in the field, the new bureau was welcomed by USIA’s political masters because it saved resources.<sup>3</sup>

The first steps in reaching directly to a global public came in January 1994 when USIA’s radio element Voice of America launched an on-line text service using the Gopher protocol. By the summer of 1994 audio files for fifteen VOA languages were available online. VOA soon reported 50,000 downloads across fifty countries each week including use in China. By 1996 VOA was streaming its audio services in real-time. But there were limits to the broadcasters appetite for innovation. In 1997 the incoming director of the oversight body, the US International Broadcasting Board, Kevin Klose nixed a proposal to launch an on-line video broadcast stream for just \$250,000 a year on the grounds that the internet was not a “proper” broadcast medium and the U.S. needed to maintain investment in shortwave radio. USIA was quick to catch up. The agency launched a Gopher service of its own in 1994, including a resource for English language teachers. The first World Wide Web based materials

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<sup>3</sup> The creation of the i-bureau earned a “silver hammer” award from the Vice President for helping to re-invent government.



appeared on 12 April 1995 when USIA's first website went live (McGregor 1995). The quality of services was well regarded in its time. In 1996 an independent survey of web sites ranked USIA in second place in terms of "total experience" in the "government politics and law category" (behind the site for Court TV). Content included five "e" journals: *Economic Perspectives*, *Global Issues*, *Issues in Democracy*, *U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda* and *U.S. Society and Values*, launched in early 1996 in multiple languages. Digital Public Diplomacy 1.0 had arrived.

From the outset the USIA officers working in the exchange field understood the unique potential of the internet to sustain virtual communities and worked to use digital links to maintain links already made through face-to-face exchange. In 1995 the agency began providing participants in its Russian teacher exchange with training in email and internet use during their time in the U.S. and equipping their institutions with computers on their return home. (Turner 1995; Nakas and Witting 1995) The program worked well enough to justify launching a full blown Internet Access and Training Project across the former Soviet Union the following year. USIA succeeded in setting up internet access points in fourteen Russian cities. Similar projects included "Technology for Peace" created for the divided island of Cyprus where Greek/Turkish Cypriot internet communication was impossible because of the absence of direct phone lines between the two halves of the island. USIA established a dedicated mail server at the University of Maryland so that Cypriots who met one another in the agency's program of bi-communal peer-to-peer groups could maintain contact by email. The networks survived and flourished. The agency also developed a new internet based system to connect the field and headquarters called PD-NET. With an emphasis on band width it provided a valuable mechanism for the agency's practitioners to share digitized materials in real time.

In 1998 the original prophet of on-line diplomacy – Leonard Marks – persuaded the Washington DC-based think tank the Center for Strategic and International Studies to launch a study called

*Reinventing Diplomacy for the Information Age*. Its advisory panel comprised sixty-three “concerned citizens” including academics, journalists, leaders in business and in the NGO community, and USIA veterans. The eventual report charted the rapid and profound changes in international affairs: globalization of capital, the rise of NGOs and the astonishing leaps in information technology. It predicted that the internet would shortly become the “central nervous system of international relations.” Yet it also raised serious concerns. The report found that the U.S. State Department remained locked in a traditional approach and largely unresponsive to the digital media. Certain key embassies still lacked internet access. Public diplomacy as a whole had yet to move “from the sidelines to the core of diplomacy.” (CSIS 1998) The report led to an energetic multi-year planning document at USIA but true to its own analysis was largely ignored at State, which also squashed USIA plans following the merger of the two agencies in 1999.

By the end of the 1990s as Dunn Cavelti (2013) notes, U.S. defense analysts had begun to flag America’s vulnerability to cyber attack and “securitize” cyber space. Certain events played into their concerns. In August 1997 the Chinese government began blocking access to VOA and other western news sites. By the end November 1997 VOA stopped logging any connections from inside China. The VOA’s parent body, the International Broadcasting Bureau, began its search for countermeasures, but its materials still circulated via an email service. The Department of Defense responded to the emerging threat of network disruption by creating a Joint Task Force-Computer Network Defense (JTF-CND) which began operations at the end of 1998. The Kosovo War saw pitched battles on-line as organized groups of Serb hackers bombarded the west with what became known as “Yugospam.” USIA countered as best it could by assigning six officers to monitor chat rooms and chip in with corrective statements when appropriate. Of more practical value, USIA drew on private sector help to establish a chain of internet points across Kosovo and in Kosovar refugee camps, to help refugee

families reunite and connect to the outside world. It also used the web to circulate documentation on Serb atrocities in multiple languages including Russian. The Kosovo crisis as a whole showed the value of digital diplomacy and USIA's contribution to US foreign policy, but the agency's fate was already sealed. On 1 October 1999 the research, advocacy, culture and exchange elements of USIA were folded into the Department of State while the international broadcasting elements (principally Voice of America) became officially independent under a Broadcasting Board of Governors (author 2012).

Public diplomacy did not initially flourish in the Department of State. The Department had its own traditions, hierarchies and priorities.<sup>4</sup> It displayed little interest in digital innovation and then only as an alternative form of fast media/advocacy rather than listening or exchange. The department seemed terminally risk averse and terrified of attracting negative attention on Capitol Hill, where supporters of public diplomacy were a rarity. For ex-USIA personnel trying to advance digital or any other innovative public diplomacy approach it was an intensely frustrating experience. One USIA new technology expert spoke the experience as "running into a buzz saw." Another senior USIA officer recalled a dozen years on from consolidation: "Once we got to State all we did was go to meetings. Everything needed fourteen clearances before we got to "no". It went downhill from there. No independent thought went unpunished." (quoted author 2012: 163). One point of friction was the need to consolidate USIA's PDNET (which was now managed by the successor to the I bureau, the State Department's Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP) with the State Department's more limited OpenNet Plus system. PDNET and OpenNet Plus operated in parallel until 2004, but the PD practitioners were loathed to downgrade and argued fiercely that their work required the ability to

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<sup>4</sup> Specifically the new structure cut the link between public diplomats in the field and the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, by obliging the field to report in the first instance to the relevant regional Assistant Secretary of State.

send large files including video, without these being held overnight for a security review. While the State Department eventually accepted that their system would have to accommodate PD needs considerable energy which might have gone to other purposes had been expended in the process.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 provided a brutal wake-up call for U.S. diplomacy, in general and digital diplomacy within this. The new Secretary of State, Colin Powell, moved swiftly to bring the entire Department into the Twenty First century as rapidly as he could. He established an Office of E-Diplomacy staffed by a mix of technical specialists and Foreign Service personnel, but its priority was not public diplomacy but rather digitizing the inner working of State. All U.S. diplomats were issued with blackberries and all embassies acquired websites; where the internet was used externally, the operating philosophy one of “pushing out” material to supplement press conferences, and digitizing to compensate for the deficiencies of the budget. In the summer of 2003 the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy published a report focusing on E-Diplomacy and the on-line PD techniques including “Virtual Consulates” a system of web-pages designed to “use the power of the Internet to communicate with local publics and Americans in a locally branded product” (which was to say that the pages would be available in local languages and, even if created remotely, would be titled so as to emphasise a direct engagement with that particular place). Such sites were thought able to handle up to half a consulate’s workload. The first Virtual Consulate had been launched in Yekaterinburg, Russia. Supportive, the commission offered helpful ground rules for their expansion (U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy 2003; Weiser 2003). The much criticised “Shared Values” campaign launched by Undersecretary Charlotte Beers to rebuild America’s relationship with the Arab world included an innovative interactive digital component in the shape of a website called [www.opendialogue.org](http://www.opendialogue.org) operated in conjunction with the Council for American Muslim Understanding which invited Muslims around the world to share their experiences of the U.S.A. and its people. Soon

over one thousand stories had been posted but it was insignificant when set against the enormity of America's public opinion challenge in the Islamic world. It was a sideshow of a sideshow. The budget went elsewhere. The Bush White House resolved to compete directly with Al Jazeera and directed public diplomacy resources into a new Arabic language satellite television channel called Al Hurra (Seib, 2008). The advocacy approach reigned supreme.

The Pentagon, ever the legislative branch's favourite for resources, rode high ever higher. As Senator Lugar noted in 2003 "for every one dollar spent by the United States government on the military, only seven cents is spent on diplomacy, and out of that seven cents only about a quarter of a penny is spent on public diplomacy." (Lugar 2003). With money providing little restraint and a can-do institutional culture the Department of Defence launched multiple projects to engage foreign publics, which looked very much like a militarization of the face of U.S. public diplomacy within the frame of projecting American power and prevailing over adversaries. Matt Armstrong, the leading blogger on public diplomacy issues, observed in mounting alarm: "American public diplomacy wears combat boots."<sup>5</sup> As part of this the DoD continued to expand its own digital work. Projects included the launch of a new office called the Office of Global Engagement which planned to confront Al Qaeda in cyberspace and work to promote internet connectivity around the world by mass producing and distributing such things as solar powered laptop computers. The initiative was torpedoed by a rival within the Pentagon, but the process of on-line engagement continued elsewhere in the DoD structure, specifically a seventy-person unit called the Joint PSYOP Support Element (JPSY) attached to the U.S. Special Operations Command in Tampa. This trend was deeply worrying to State Department practitioners and outside observers alike (Rampton and Stauber 2003).

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<sup>5</sup> Armstrong made this remark frequently in both his MountainRunner blog and spoken presentations; see for example Armstrong (2008).

While the Bush-era State Department shivered in the shallows of the new media river, other players plunged into mid stream and embraced the first generation of Web 2.0 tools as platforms for exchange. As Fung (2013) and others have shown, civil society and even some levels of government readily embraced the full range of Web 2.0 capabilities. Foreign policy agencies elsewhere in the world also moved forward successfully.<sup>6</sup> Such activities seemed too uncertain for the Department of State as though the conventional diplomats who called the shots opening any conversation or channel whose end result or parameters they did not control.

During the Bush years U.S. public diplomacy was hampered by a sporadic leadership. Some had good ideas for digital initiatives. In 2004 Under Secretary Margaret Tutwiler rolled out some special projects to connect American college classrooms with classrooms overseas and also a plan to divert scholarship funds to teach substantial numbers of young people at risk of radicalization enough English to read English language websites (and maybe get a job too).<sup>7</sup> But neither she nor any of the other Under Secretaries for Public Diplomacy in the first administration remained around for long. It was no foundation for a major re-design. An element of stability came in 2005 with appointment of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her energetic Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Karen Hughes. As a friend and close adviser of President Bush dating back to his days as governor of Texas Hughes brought a personal clout to the direction of U.S. public diplomacy of a kind not seen since Ronald Reagan's friend Charles Wick headed USIA. Early achievements

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<sup>6</sup> In the UK the British Council routinely ran blogs to support its participation in major conferences or advance its goals in locations including Northern Ireland. The Maldives and Sweden opened "virtual embassies" in the virtual world of Second Life, for discussion see author (2009). Bloggers focusing on the diplomatic capabilities of the new media included Joshua Fouts and Rita J. King at The Imagination Age ([theimaginationage.net](http://theimaginationage.net)).

<sup>7</sup> The pilot project linked East Carolina University in Greenville North Carolina and the University of the Gambia in Banjul, West Africa. 29 similar projects followed. The English language project was called the English Access Micro Scholarship program and remains in effect.

included an assertion of State as leader in the inter-agency aspects of public diplomacy, which began to roll back the presence of the Pentagon in the field. Her innovations across the public diplomacy field included an expansion of exchanges diplomacy, with a new program directed towards journalists called the Murrow Fellows. Her approach to digital media was dominated by approaches learned on the campaign trail. She was at heart a propagandist for the Bush White House and a proud one, deeply invested in its involvement in Iraq. She encouraged State Department officials to be more present in on-line and off-line spaces by increasing the flow of pre-approved talking points which they were free to discuss without the cumbersome procedures of referring back to headquarters for clearance. The cultural pressure against engaging in anything approaching an honest conversation was reinforced in October 2006 when a senior Arabic language spokesman Alberto Fernandez was vilified by the U.S. press for daring to concede during an Aljazeera interview that the U.S. had shown “arrogance and stupidity” in Iraq. (Kamen 2006)

As with the Powell period, the most significant advances in the use of electronic media were internal to the Department of State. They included the use of Web 2.0 platforms. The Office of E-Diplomacy launched a Diplopedia: a user-generated wiki resource of information on countries and issues within the State Department’s firewall which soon accumulated 10,000 entries. 2007 saw the launch of the State Department’s blog “DipNotes” and the E-Diplomacy office also established a series of “Communities@State” on-line groups to link diplomats interested in particular issues who might not otherwise have been able to maintain connections or even been aware of one another’s interest or existence. Within a few years there were more than sixty such groups (Boly 2010). There was also a unit within the State Department’s Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP) able to innovate beyond the State Department’s firewall. The PD officers who had managed PDNET until 2004 were reconstituted as a unit with the title PD IT (Public Diplomacy Information Technology). They had their

own small Planning Budget and Applied Technology group (PBAT) which had just enough “bandwidth” to develop some online diplomacy initiatives of IIP and the sister PD bureau: Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA). Their efforts came on-line in the course of 2008.

Karen Hughes left office before the end of the Bush presidency but her successor as Under Secretary – James K. Glassman – had a more nuanced interest in the potential of digital work. Glassman was a journalist and political commentator who understood America’s challenge as being at its core a war of ideas. Noting the application of Web 2.0 in a variety of sectors each of which acquired its own version of the Web 2.0 formulation – Library 2.0, Medicine 2.0, Government 2.0 and even Porn 2.0 – he proclaimed the era of Public Diplomacy 2.0. The coinage both recognized the cluster of existing initiatives and stood as an attempt to rally a more substantial, cultural change within the State Department and awaken a deeper awareness of the transition to a new era. The point, as Glassman knew and Karen Hughes perhaps realized at the very end of her tenure, was that the Department could no longer expect to control its message, but merely offer the message to the world and be open to subsequent discussion, which it would not own either. Glassman was only in office for the last six months of 2008 but whether by his own force of personality or as a result of a belated cultural shift, those months brought innovation. He found IIP and ECA both willing and able to deliver. PD's IT shop supported Glassman's engagement and interview with Middle Eastern journalists at an event in the virtual world of Second Life. PD IT later held a pilot Second Life Jazz Festival with an audience from around the world and performers from five countries – a true virtual cultural exchange event – and supported the development of ECA's technology strategy and assisted in the launch of its social network for exchange participants - including a video competition to promote exchanges. The idea of a YouTube competition also surfaced in the bureau of International Information Programs which in 2008 launched the Democracy Video Challenge – a competition to create a three minute video about



democracy in the hope that entries might circulate virally within their makers' peer communities and beyond.<sup>8</sup>

The Glassman period also saw a closer monitoring of on-line conversations and the revival of the kind of “digital engagement” work first launched by USIA in the Kosovo campaign. A small group of public diplomacy officers was charged with the task of going on-line to seek out forums in which issues of U.S. foreign policy and the war on terror were being discussed and intervening with the U.S. official line. In keeping with the clear division of roles within US strategic communication which allocated the Department of State overt and attributed communication, members of the unit were required to declare their official U.S. government status. Glassman's final innovation was to launch a program to share best practices of social media work among NGOs whose work was in line with the broad aims of U.S. public diplomacy: the so-called Alliance of Youth Movements. The Alliance of Youth Movements conference took place in the fall of 2008. Participants included US and foreign new media activists including Oscar Morales, the founder of a phenomenally successful Facebook group One Million Voices Against FARC which had coordinated global protests against terrorism in Colombia earlier that year.

Not all the Web 2.0 work was hailed as a success. The press had much sport at the expense of the State Department's Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Diplomacy for Europe, Coleen Graffey who had launched a personal Twitter account as a way to reveal a person behind the diplomacy and build both a positive context for U.S. foreign policy and an audience for advocacy messages when

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<sup>8</sup> The object of the exchange community – exchange.gov – was to encourage and sustain contact between exchange-ees as they navigated the experience of life as an exchange visitor from the culture shock of arriving to the post-visit reflection phase, looking back on life in the United States. One did not need to be an exchange participant to join and participants soon included people simply interested in exchanges. Winning videos from the Democracy Video Challenge may be viewed at <http://www.videochallenge.america.gov/winners2009.html> (accessed 11/20/2012).

needed. As the Middle East lurched into crisis her personal tweets included details of her difficulties finding a bathing suit in Iceland to visit a spa. She was attacked for unseemly triviality (Kamen 2008) by people who failed to understand that the whole point was to present herself as a real person. At much the same time the PBAT team was pushing to launch the first formal Twitter feed for the Department and running into all sorts of objections about the inability to say anything significant in 140 characters. Graffey's troubles notwithstanding, the role of new media in the Obama election campaign of 2008 finally tipped the argument their way. Thanks to a last minute scramble the Department's official Twitter feed was live in time for election night.

Barak Obama's victory created a general buzz around social media and made a number of reputations for digital gurus, whose talents turned to public diplomacy issues once the Obama administration took office. America's international image soared as the world fell in love with Obama but behind the scenes U.S. public diplomacy stalled. Glassman hoped that he might stay on to continue his work but this was not to be. In his place the Obama administration appointed a former television executive named Judith McHale. Her confirmation hearing was a long time coming and in the meantime U.S. digital engagement lost momentum. When McHale finally arrived it was with a promise to "listen more and lecture less." In June 2009 PBAT's applied technology component became a dedicated new technology group with the unofficial title of the Office of Innovative Engagement (OIE) directed by USIA veteran William May and a budget to get projects up and running.

Digital innovations included the launch of Virtual Presence Posts – an expansion of the virtual consulate idea of five years earlier – to establish websites to present U.S. materials in a particular regional language unaddressed by a physical post (such as Mayan). Secretary of State Clinton also announced "Virtual Student Internships" using U.S. college students as on-line auxiliaries for posts with new media projects. There were on-line projects to help particular constituencies, like digitizing of the Iraqi National Museum, and no shortage of initiatives to push U.S. materials out across new

platforms. OIE worked to make the President's major speeches in Cairo and Ghana available on handheld devices in Africa and the Middle East (Zeleny 2009). The Cairo speech was simply sent out by SMS text; the Ghana speech had been built on an interactive campaign to whereby the Department invited input from West Africa via traditional media, collected feedback via TXT and then passed the material to the White House to steer the issues addressed by the President. It was a small step towards McHale's pledge "listen more" but the wider Department still did not take the relational aspects of the social media seriously.

The most successful on-line initiative still seemed to be that occurring within the State Department's firewall as the "Communities@State" continued to grow and the Department launched "Statebook" – its own equivalent of Facebook. The Secretary of State also commissioned what she termed "The Sounding Board" as an on-line place where suggestions could be left and discussed. This led to a minor plumbing revolution at State following the suggestion that more people would cycle to the Department if showers could be located close to the bike parking. Such developments may seem trivial and were hardly a full-blown digital revolution, and yet they were an essential precursor to more concrete work as they built confidence in the web 2.0 realm within the Department and helped a change-averse community see what the new media could do close to home (Boly 2010).

The Obama administration continued to place rhetorical emphasis on the importance of the web. Secretary Clinton spoke of protecting and advancing the digital rights of the world, by which she meant helping the citizens of Iran, China and elsewhere circumvent censorship. Some posts made extensive use of new media, most famously in Indonesia, where the U.S. embassy (after direct assistance from OIE) acquired over 200,000 additional friends on Facebook and established a digital post in a shopping mall as a new kind of internet-age alternative to a cultural center. The embassy noted ample evidence of real dialogue online and not just pleasing numbers: posts sometimes received hundreds of comments within ten minutes of being posted on-line. There was also innovative mixing of digital media into

conventional exchange projects as with OIE's "Virtual Exchange" program called (borrowing an alliterative line from President Obama's Cairo speech) "Kansas2Cairo", which introduced architecture students in Cairo to those based at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. The students worked together in Second Life for three months before meeting in person for a week of direct contact, and connected far more effectively as a result.<sup>9</sup>

The higher levels of the Department of State were receptive to new media as never before. In 2009 Anne-Marie Slaughter joined the State Department hierarchy as Assistant Secretary of State for Policy Planning. Slaughter's work on network power had underlined the value of the digital age to the U.S. (Slaughter 2009) and her presence ensured a voice at a high level in support of network-centric thinking. The Secretary of State retained the services of Condoleezza Rice's new technology adviser, Jared Cohen, and also acquired advisers of her own with reputations from the 2008 presidential campaign including Alec Ross and Katie Jacobs Stanton. Alec Ross avoided talking about his new media work as Public Diplomacy 2.0 preferring to use a new term "Twenty First Century Statecraft". It may have been simply a quest for a catchy brand, but the term had none of the emphasis on relational work implicit in Glassman's phrase. This was reflected in some of the output. Ross, Cohen and Stanton all launched Twitter streams detailing their activities and opinions (@AlecJRoss, @JaredCohen, and @KateAtState). While all three had great credibility within the U.S. online community, their feeds were angled towards tweeting to the world insights from others in their U.S. centric tech circle and re-tweeting the views and doings of the Secretary. They did little to feed the views of the world back to the U.S. tech community. This was clear to anyone who scrolled down the list of people who the trio followed on Twitter who were seldom "foreign." The neglect of the "following" aspect of Twitter was even more acute in the field where posts and ambassadors launched

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<sup>9</sup> On Kansas2Cairo see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A129TN8Dx10&feature=relmfu>. (Accessed 11/20/2012)

Twitter accounts. It was common to look on the right hand of the screen and find that these accounts were following no one. They were judged within the Department solely by the number of followers. No one seemed to notice the collective missing of the potential of the medium. It was yet more evidence of the ascendancy of the advocacy approach to public diplomacy over those relational aspects of listening and exchange.

The final weeks of 2010 underlined the power of the new media. Julian Assange of WikiLeaks created a diplomatic furor of the kind not seen since Leon Trotsky published the secret agreements he found in the Tsar's archive in November 1917. Trotsky needed all the upheaval of the Russian Revolution to get access to these treaties; all Assange needed was a single source with a thumb drive and a few strokes of the keypad. Simultaneous with the WikiLeaks episode, social media played a prominent role in the chain-reaction of protest across the Middle East that became known as the Arab Spring. In Tunisia WikiLeaks-ed material about the behavior of the regime further fueled the fire as long-festering popular resentments erupted. The digital media was widely perceived as adding momentum to events not least as local digital entrepreneurs stepped into leadership roles (Seib 2012). In the United States, the advocates for digital diplomacy within the Department of State seized on the Arab spring as a totemic event for "Twenty First Century Statecraft" and immediately linked the changes with a need to advance internet freedom, a stance which conveniently ignored the role of the U.S. government in restricting certain aspects of internet freedom as part of its wish to protect intellectual property (Sell, 2013). It was the digital incarnation of an old paradox in American political thought. Yet the Department also displayed a belated understanding of the full potential of the new media, as evidenced by the publication of a public diplomacy strategy which looked beyond just the idea of "pushing out" material and acknowledge the possibility of an on-line dialogue to mutual benefit.

The first Obama administration also saw the overdue adjustment in the balance of power between the Department of Defense and State Department in the public diplomacy field flowing in major part from the cordial working relationship between Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. Gates went out of his way to lobby for resources to be diverted into State Department programs and re-oriented the DoD's international engagement to an explicitly supporting function.<sup>10</sup> The State Department consolidated its lead role in the interagency use of strategic communication in the on-going struggle against terrorism. Innovative digital work came out of a reconfigured counter-radicalization unit – the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) – which sought to use new media to push back against Islamic extremism. Under the leadership of Ambassador Richard LeBaron the CSCC wisely de-coupled its work from any attempt to sell the United States or to promote its agents. Its innovations included collecting and re-posting on other platforms local materials that showed adversaries in a poor light, even if those materials were not friendly to the United States. Its zone of operation was not the extremist websites where participants had already made up their mind but the more general websites which serve as “zones of recruitment” for the extremists, Staffed by a mix of contractors and foreign residents of the U.S. and operating exclusively in the languages of the regions of concern the unit has a special fast track procedure for clearing its out-bound materials for posting. Its objectives are modest: be involved in the conversation; sow doubt about the claims being made by the extremists and turn discussion back on Al Qaeda and Al Shabaab.

By the end of 2011 the Department of State seemed at last to be at home with social media. In order to promote the usage of social media for outreach OIE – which had finally become an officially recognized unit – had created a Social Media Hub featuring “how-to” guides on the chief social media

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<sup>10</sup> The evolution of Gates position may be tracked forward from remarks he made in July 2008 (Tyson, 2008).

tools, best practices examples and answers to the frequently asked questions. The office also arranged for experts on mobile devices to speak at a special session at the Foreign Service Institute and ran an “Ask The Experts” program which made Silicon Valley gurus available to posts via a scheduled group Digital Video Conference. Also by the end of 2011 the International Information Programs had undergone a major restructuring to better suit it for meeting the digital needs of the field. Signature projects included the launch of four public diplomacy Facebook gateways for materials on democracy, climate, the e-journals and exchanges. Usage soon approached four million visitors a month, though this had to be sustained by a heavy advertising campaign. The world noticed positive examples of US use of social media, specifically by Ambassador Robert Ford who to the chagrin of the Syrian government successfully used Facebook to communicate with the people of Syria (Hersh 2011) and Ambassador Michael McFaul used YouTube in Russia to introduce himself directly to the Russian people (Brown 2012). Despite this progress there was an acceptance by some long term advocates of Public Diplomacy 2.0 that the Department of State might not be the best home for projects to build on-line relationships and that more could be done by an independent public diplomacy entity created at arm’s length from the government and funded only by philanthropy. Proposals for a new and independent public diplomacy agency had surfaced before in the Council on Foreign Relations report *Finding America’s Voice* (2003) and in recommendations presented by the pressure group Business for Diplomatic Action and other groups at the time of the transition to the Obama administration. Now it returned in the form of a recommendation from an inquiry mounted by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars under the acronym SAGE for “Strengthening America’s Global Engagement” (Minnick et al. 2012). Anne Marie-Slaughter endorsed the concept at its unveiling in May 2012. The plan moved in to a pilot phase under the leadership of the former Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs during the Glassman period with Goli Ameri, from

headquarters in Los Angeles and with a new name: Center for Global Engagement. It was potentially a new beginning and a route to recover the best elements of USIA's separate existence.

### *Implications*

Surveying the evolution of America's on-line diplomacy to date, it is hard to point to a knock-out blow which can be credited to digital engagement – but such things are rare in public diplomacy in any case. It is rather easier to see how digital initiatives have been held back when compared to the adoption of the technology in the wider world and by other public diplomacy actors. The level of risk aversion has been mind boggling.<sup>11</sup> It was not always so in U.S. public diplomacy. USIA had a culture of innovation and an understanding of the value of human networks – the most precious tool of an old line USIA public affairs officer was always said to be his or her Rolodex. The Department of State did not have the same culture and following the consolidation of USIA into the Department, State called the shots. More than this the digital approach has been limited by a bias within the bureaucracy to prioritize advocacy and a broadcasting approach at the expense of listening and exchange even when the technology has particular potential in those realms. It is not wholly State's fault. The default setting of U.S. public diplomacy has always been advocacy. Congress, the White House and arguably the American people have all looked to public diplomacy to “push” messages out to the world rather than to provide feedback on the state of international opinion which might shape policies in the first place. It is hardly surprising that official diplomatic Twitter accounts have been used to push out

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<sup>11</sup> Even after the State Department began rolling out Facebook pages Diplomatic Security attempted to stop its use in some places as “too dangerous.” They relented only after being told that if Facebook were a country it would be the third most populous in the world and hence really could not be ignored. And while a social media component was soon introduced into the basic training for new Foreign Service Officers offered by the Foreign Service Institute, as recently as 2011 security briefers warned the same incomers away from Facebook or Twitter.



messages rather than to create or enhance a community around an issue of interest to the United States.<sup>12</sup>

However slow the change at the Department of State, the advent of Web 2.0 has transformed the operating environment of public diplomacy; it has made it possible for people around the world to obtain ever more information through horizontal peer-to-peer networks rather than through the old vertical process by which information flowed down from the traditional sources of media authority. With information passing along networks bound together by the special credibility of peer similarity, an outside source such as a foreign government has little chance of making a major impact. Governments have to give up on the idea of being the most credible source on every subject under the sun and look instead to empower someone within the target network and similar to the audience to speak. The exchange element of public diplomacy always worked in this way: connecting peers and benefiting from the credibility of exchanged persons with their networks at home.

In a world of limitless information and limitless access the audience lacks not the ability to hear as much as the time. Media consumption can be precisely tuned to match ones exact interest by personal taste or a logarithm that strives to please. In this world the worst error is to be irrelevant and the fastest route to irrelevance is for a public diplomacy actor to assume that its interests match those of the audience. This is nowhere clearer than in the indiscriminate Twitter feeds cast into cyberspace by inexperienced embassies with no use of hash tags or other filtering techniques. A superior strategy is to

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<sup>12</sup> For an example of what Twitter ‘listening’ might look like see Yepsen (2012).

offer a targeted stream based around an issue which can be followed by those with interest in that issue: to be of real service to a coalition and part of a community of interest.<sup>13</sup>

Skilled practitioners of on-line diplomacy have no shortage of tips for “best practice.” Most urge the would-be digital diplomat to go to the sites where one’s desired audience is located and to engage them in their own language with due attention to the dominant practices of that site.<sup>14</sup> Many also acknowledge that in a networked world one must create information not as an impressive show for a one-time end user (as when VOA broadcast to Russians in the Cold War over the short-wave) but on the assumption that it will live or die as a “meme”: be passed along a peer-to-peer network; variously “liked”, shared and “re-tweeted.” While one can never call up a “viral” message to order one can at least create messages in a succinct form that is easy to pass on to others.

The Web 2.0 environment presents an overlapping challenge to both the scholars who would study it and the public diplomacy practitioners who would operate in it. The first need – as in the SAGE plan or the scholarship of Singh (2013), Fung (2013) and others – is to acknowledge the transformation of the world. Whether in Tunisia or in Topeka, individuals are inherently more powerful than they have been at any time in history, more especially as they connect across networks. This global and wired public cannot be ignored and communication aimed only at its leaders will necessarily fall short. The new technology has a chaotic aspect but it also offers the opportunity for a new kind of politics and a new kind of diplomacy. The first step for the communicator is to

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<sup>13</sup> This strategy was followed by the UK’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office during David Milliband’s tenure as Foreign Secretary with the creation of roving Ambassadors tied to specific issues all of whom are expected to speak and blog around that issue. The best known was the Ambassador for Arms Control Jon Duncan.

<sup>14</sup> The Office of Innovative Engagement preached a three step path to success: 1) Define WHO you are trying to engage; 2) Identify WHERE they live on-line and 3) Go THERE to engage. An excellent example has been the recent use of the Chinese WeiBo social networking platform by the Canadian embassy in Beijing. An enlightened ambassador – David Mulroney – with political clout at home gave his public diplomacy team the authority to respond on-line in real time, avoiding the frustrating need for detailed clearances from head quarters which have hampered Canadian on-line engagement elsewhere in the world.

acknowledge their limitations. The task of public diplomacy should evolve from one of speaking to one of partnering around issues with those abroad and at home who share the same objectives, and empowering those who will be credible with their target audience or connect with the special peer to peer bond inherent to what Cross (2012) terms epistemic communities. Some nations are recognizing that being seen to be of help in building a network can be a valuable act of public diplomacy in its own right.<sup>15</sup> As Zaharna (2010) and Fisher (2013) have emphasized, it is the emphasis on the network that is significant rather than any particular platform or technology. The digital world evolves too fast to become too attached to any one technology. Even the suffix 2.0 is rather tired.<sup>16</sup> The network, however, is here to stay.

Reviewing the experience of the State Department's digital initiatives to date, it is notable how much energy had to be expended within the Department of State itself to get practitioners using digital platforms. That process has taken place. The Department has developed digital literacy and the training wheels have come off but the digital future will include its share of challenges. The recent press controversy over the U.S. embassy Cairo's Tweets during the riots of 11 September 2012 show how hostile some sections of the U.S. media are to the notion of an embassy saying anything more complex than a pro-American slogan and a failure to understand the necessity of responding to events in the cycle dictated by the medium being used (Franke-Ruta 2012; Rogin 2012). Similarly, future Under Secretaries must be mindful of the tendency for the center of gravity of U.S. foreign engagement to drift from the Department of State and towards the Department of Defense and be ready to compensate. Finally, the experience of the first twenty years of digital diplomacy suggests that the

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<sup>15</sup> For a Swiss example of this approach see Fetscherin and Marmier 2010.

<sup>16</sup> The parameters of Web 2.0 were never wholly clear or consistent and its greatest value was most often as a tag to show its users were 'current.' British internet guru Ben Hammersley now points to its use as an indication that the speaker using it is behind the times (Hammersley, 2012).

Department of State may need to strain against habits of advocacy and remind itself of the need to open two-way channels of discussion and to relax rigid message control if it is to succeed in using social media to the fullest extent. These challenges notwithstanding, one suspects that if he could see the digital diplomacy of 2013, Leonard Marks would be delighted.

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