
Twenty-First Century Statecraft in Action

MICHAEL A. HAMMER

The United States State Department's Bureau of Public Affairs engages domestic and international media to communicate timely and accurate information. It does so with the goal of furthering U.S. foreign policy and national security interests, as well as broadening an understanding of American values.

We carry out this mission in an extremely dynamic media environment, one that has accelerated exponentially beyond the 24/7 news cycle to which we adapted a few short years ago. Events in even the most remote corners of the world go global instantly. Press and public interest are often driven by a 140-character tweet or an amateur YouTube video. We at the State Department usually get the first questions seeking confirmation or comment on a breaking development overseas and bear the responsibility of providing an accurate and appropriately calibrated response to drive the global conversation. Working to promote America's position as a world leader, each day we seek to set the agenda, respond quickly, and amplify our message to ensure U.S. policies and initiatives are well understood and gain support.

Attuned to the demands of a constantly changing media landscape, Secretary Hillary Clinton ushered in what she termed "Twenty-First Century Statecraft"—that is, harnessing the networks and technology of today's interconnected world to advance America's interests. The Secretary

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motivated the Department—and the Public Affairs Bureau in particular—to be at the forefront of the new digital age.

The results have been tangible: our website is consistently rated among the top in the federal government, we have over 175,000 Facebook fans, we have over 390,000 followers on Twitter, and we now tweet in 11 languages including Arabic, Chinese, English, Farsi, French, Hindi, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Turkish, and Urdu. Moreover, our counterparts in foreign ministries around the world recognize our efforts and seek our advice on effective public diplomacy and best practices on social media. Much has been written, spoken, and even tweeted about the State Department's innovative communications approach. Brookings scholar Fergus Hanson recently published a study about how the adaptation to the new media environment is one of the greatest challenges facing public and private sector entities. In his analysis he wrote, "at the vanguard of this adaptation is the U.S. State Department."

These accomplishments should be understood within the context of the State Department's wider objectives, however. We are not employing digital technology because it is the latest media fad; instead, we are pursuing Twenty-First Century Statecraft because it advances U.S. policies and highlights American efforts to tackle today's tough national security issues. Social media not only expands our reach to new, broader, and younger audiences, but it also enables us to rapidly gauge reactions to policy pronouncements. The immediate feedback is valuable because it can be fed into the policy-making process to validate, fine-tune, or even change the approach. We compare notes with gurus in the digital field at places like Stanford and MIT, as well as with innovators at Facebook, Google, and Twitter, in order to keep pace of developments in the field.

And, as we learn and master these communications tools, they are becoming among the most versatile in our diplomatic toolbox.

Communicating in the digital realm is only one component of the work we do as the State Department's face to the public and press. We also continue to aggressively engage mainstream news organizations to get the message out. Yet, adopting a fresh communications strategy is not just about innovation; it is about integrating the practices that have worked over time with new methods and approaches—platforms that present a real challenge in our traditionally risk-averse world of diplomacy. As the Secretary delivers speeches, conducts press conferences, or participates in town hall meetings, and as our spokesperson takes questions from a cadre of seasoned journalists at our daily press briefing, their words are now disseminated through every conceivable media platform, both traditional

and digital, exponentially increasing our reach across the globe. In fact, now everyone with a Twitter account has the opportunity to probe high-ranking State Department officials by tweeting questions to #AskState during our Twitter Q&A sessions, which we are also doing in Spanish as well as other languages.

This work must be done in all spaces, at all times, and without erring. *But how is it being done in practice?*

Secretary Clinton, in a seminal speech to commemorate Human Rights Day in December 2011, declared, “human rights are gay rights, and gay rights are human rights.” This simple but poignant message lit up the Internet. To date, the video of the Secretary’s consequential remarks is the highest performing live video since the State Department began publishing video products, and it has been viewed through the State Department’s properties in over 100 countries. To further amplify her remarks, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Dan Baer used our new online press conference platform “*LiveAtState*” to engage journalists from such diverse locations as Argentina, Ireland, Suriname, and Ukraine. When a journalist from Kosovo asked how to bring Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) reforms into a conservative society, Baer localized the Secretary’s words and discussed how Americans and Kosovars could enter a dialogue to work towards policies tailored to the Kosovar context.

From a studio on the second floor of our Foggy Bottom headquarters in Washington, Baer, like dozens of other senior Department officials, connects with journalists and bloggers from Bujumbura to Beijing and Doha to Delhi, who ask real-time, on-the-record questions regarding pressing foreign policy issues. We have addressed U.S. priorities ranging from strengthening our core NATO alliance to our ongoing engagement in Africa to our intensified focus on Asia. We conduct “*LiveAtState*” conferences in other

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languages, including recently in Spanish and Chinese. Through this and other platforms, the scribes of the digital age—in addition to traditional journalists—have a chance to interact directly with senior U.S. government officials more than ever before and, as a result, their stories grace the

covers of major newspapers. This enhanced coverage better informs the public about our efforts to tackle climate change, promote food security, combat terrorism, and advance American economic interests.

My own experience in the communications cybersphere has validated its intrinsic value. For example, while hosting an hour-long global Q&A session on the State Department's Facebook page, I assured a Shi'ite Syrian Facebook user that the United States supports a post-Assad Syria that is a multi-ethnic democracy that protects minorities, reaffirmed to a Venezuelan student the U.S. commitment to fostering partnerships in our hemisphere to address common challenges such as achieving economic prosperity and social inclusion, and helped a young man in Tajikistan collect the proper documents for his visa interview. The response to these types of engagements has been overwhelmingly positive even when those we connect with may disagree with our policies. The old axiom that you get points just for showing up proves true, even in the virtual world.

The Bureau of Public Affairs also has satellite offices around the world connecting with international media outlets in foreign languages. Our regional media hubs in Brussels, Dubai, Johannesburg, London, Miami, and Tokyo are extensions of the State Department's briefing room, broadcast service, and digital strategy center. These hubs are nimble and aware of each region's characteristics and interests. Our spokespeople in Dubai are at the ready to go into the studios of Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, or Al-Hurra to echo in Arabic the Secretary's words, making U.S. policies accessible to millions of viewers who belong to important demographics. On the other side of the camera, our "hubsters" in Brussels and Tokyo focus on production. When Secretary Clinton traveled to Burma on her historic visit in November 2011, our Tokyo Hub Director captured footage that was picked up by stations throughout Asia, including remarkably on Burmese state television. When USAID Administrator Raj Shah visited thousands of displaced Syrians in a Turkish refugee camp in November 2012, our Brussels team gathered images that Syrian opposition networks beamed back into Syria, a country blocked from receiving most outside media. Furthermore, our hub in Miami takes advantage of the city's location as a gateway to Latin America to communicate our policies not only abroad, but also to the growing Spanish-speaking community in the United States. For example, we now participate in a monthly call-in show on a Spanish-language radio station during which Assistant Secretary for Economic and Business Affairs Jose Fernandez takes questions from listeners in Latin America the United States on topics related to American economic policy. In addition, our Miami "Hub of the Americas" establishes linkages with

the American business community and advances the Department's "jobs diplomacy" by connecting those interested in trade and investment in Latin America with our embassies in the region. And when Under Secretary for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman did a multi-country swing through Africa, our Johannesburg hub, tapping into the massive popularity of radio journalism in Africa, made sure the Under Secretary's remarks about supporting government formation in Somalia and the President's recent Sub-Saharan Policy Directive were heard on AM, FM, and even satellite networks.

We also deploy foreign language spokespeople to reach critical audiences in strategic locations. As the international community placed the toughest sanctions to date on Iran in response to its continued failure to abide by its international obligations with respect to its nuclear program, our Persian-language spokesperson took to cyberspace, hosting a Google+ "hangout" with prominent Iranian journalists. He made clear that sanctions are not directed at the Iranian people, but rather intended to motivate the Iranian regime to demonstrate to the world that its nuclear program is for peaceful, civilian use. That "hangout" reached potentially more than seven million people through online news articles in the United States, Azerbaijan and Iran, as well as a global audience of more than 500,000 people on social media. These efforts, coupled with our Virtual Embassy Tehran website, aim to circumvent Iran's electronic curtain and communicate directly with Iranians. Similarly, when protests erupted outside the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad in reaction to a video that was insulting to Islam, our Urdu language spokeswoman immediately did interviews with BBC Urdu, the Urdu Times, and ARY (a major Pakistani outlet) to explain to Pakistanis that the United States is committed to freedom of religion and tolerance, as well as freedom of expression. And, our Dari spokesman went on Kabul's main morning show to tout women's rights and discuss America's long-term commitment to Afghanistan's future.

Furthermore, after we had to close the U.S. Embassy in Damascus, Ambassador Robert Ford returned to Washington determined to stay in touch with the Syrian people. Embassy Damascus' Facebook page was the answer. We used the page to share public, declassified satellite images taken by the U.S. military showing the ongoing battle and reinforcements of the Assad regime, and the page became one of the few trusted sources about actual events on the ground.

Our virtual platforms are also used to engage students here in the United States. Recently, a European Bureau economic desk officer addressed fifty-five students from University of Texas at Austin via a digital videoconference on U.S. policy regarding the Eurozone crisis through our Foreign

Policy Classroom program. Initially, our “classrooms” were only accessible to students to who could come in and talk with us. But now that the program has gone digital, we are able to connect with students nationwide.

The Department also hosts foreign journalists on tours of the United States to ensure they have a solid context for writing high-quality, accurate reporting on U.S. policy for international audiences. For example, in June 2012 we hosted a group of thirty-two journalists from countries as diverse as Liberia, Oman, and Bulgaria to report on the role of youth in politics, with the aim of building upon a speech given by Secretary Clinton that touted the U.S. commitment to promoting youth activism and political involvement. The group traveled to Washington, DC and Houston to interact with a range of experts. The result? Over fifty articles published on the power of youth in America and abroad.

In addition to our strategic communications efforts aimed at maximizing and choreographing messaging, crisis communications remains a key component of our work. In response to the March 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear incident in Japan, the Public Affairs Bureau deployed crisis communications specialists to the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo and to the Department’s task force to assist with the public response. Ambassador John Roos used his Twitter feed to inform Americans in Japan seeking assistance, as well as those in the United States concerned about their friends and relatives in the devastated areas. Effective communication was essential for coordinating the response and for conveying to the Japanese people that we would stand with them in their hour of need. More recently, in the wake of Superstorm Sandy our crisis communications responders—

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the State Department’s Fly Away Communication Team (FACT)—traveled to New York and Connecticut to work with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as part of the Administration’s whole-of-government response. Our team found it gratifying to serve our fellow citizens directly here at home.

While our tools and methods of communicating U.S. policy both domestically and internationally are rapidly evolving, our basic principles

remain unchanged. As we promote our national security interests, we are committed to telling the truth, being as transparent as possible, and

supporting freedom of the press and Internet. In public diplomacy, as in any field, being a leader means openness to change, fostering a corporate environment that encourages and rewards innovation, and constantly striving to do better. We work to be at the forefront of effective communication, recognizing that it is critical for us to present and explain our views and values, not letting others define our narrative. As part of this effort, we are providing social media training to our communicators in the field, including sessions over the past year in Bangkok, Panama City, and Moscow. We have also empowered more officers at all levels to engage with the press, and have made participation in public diplomacy a criterion for professional advancement.

Despite the fact that views, hits, and “impressions” make media reach more quantifiable than ever before, measuring the impact of our efforts remains difficult. Ultimately, we strive to shape a narrative and persuade global audiences. To do so, we need to be part of the conversation, wherever it is taking place, from Twitter to Weibo, from university campuses to town squares. And, while we indeed struggle to determine how many minds we are changing, we do know that if we do not engage in the spaces where people are getting their news and having their chats, we will have no impact and will lose relevancy.

Our goal of effectively engaging domestic and international audiences to advance our foreign policy objectives drives all of our efforts as we navigate the ever-changing international media landscape. Yet, while we can't predict the next development in media technology, we must continue to strive to be a leader, constantly looking to further U.S. foreign policy and tell America's compelling story to the world through whatever platforms provide the greatest reach. ■