Digital Diplomacy:  
A New Frontier

By Victoria Esser

IN JUNE, the US Department of State held a live global Twitter Q&A with the Under Secretary of State for Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy, Tara Sonenshine. Under Secretary Sonenshine answered questions on issues as diverse as human rights in China, violence in Syria and exchange programs with Pakistan, Russia and NATO; and she reached a global audience of 16 million people in nine languages, including Chinese, Arabic, Hindi and Farsi.

This example is just one illustration of how technology has enabled many people around the world to have a more direct and real-time voice in policy conversations with their governments and with each other.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton saw early on that we needed a diplomatic answer to the increasingly digital world in which we live. She has made “21st Century Statecraft,” or the adoption of technology and innovation in the service of our foreign policy goals, a key part of the United States’ foreign policy agenda. Before the pervasive use of social media, diplomacy seemed to many to take place behind closed doors, or seemed to be not always such a public event, often limited to diplomats meeting in person with groups of private citizens. 21st Century Statecraft has given the public new ways to access American diplomacy and diplomats.

As a result of this, we at the State Department have embraced digital diplomacy. Not because it’s new or cool, but because it helps to make US diplomatic efforts more effective in three ways — understanding people and events more deeply; sharing information in real time and on a global scale; and directly engaging with citizens around the world.

Our ambassador to Thailand, Kristie Kenney, for example, uses Twitter daily to give her followers behind-the-scenes access to her meetings with the Thai government and key leaders in Thai society — access that was once only afforded to the powerful and well connected. Her personal blog on Tumblr, “It’s me, Kristie,” covers policy issues but is also full of stories and photos of her travels throughout Thailand, and posts are in English and Thai. Engagement like this affords our ambassadors a deeper understanding of the perspective of people from across the country in which they are based because of the informal, virtual setting and by eliminating physical distances.

Digital diplomacy also enables the US to share information on an unprecedented scale. When the disastrous tsunami hit northern Japan in 2011, our ambassador to Japan, John Roos, used his Twitter account to keep American and Japanese citizens apprised of breaking news and safety advisories.

As Ambassador Roos’ tweets became a primary conduit of authoritative information, his Twitter followers quadrupled to over 42,000 and his messages reached the 99.99th percentile globally in frequency of “re-tweets.” Before the advent of social media, reaching such large swaths of a population in real time would not have been possible, but social media enabled Ambassador Roos and the US Embassy in Tokyo to help calm an anxious population clamoring for timely and accurate information.

But more than informing people, digital diplomacy enables American diplomats to engage with people around the world on a macro and micro scale. For instance, our ambassador to the Republic of Korea, Sung Kim, has developed unique ways of interacting with his audience. In addition to his weekly blog, he hosts “Ask the Ambassador,” in which he personally responds twice a month via YouTube to questions submitted to the embassy through platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Me2Day.

In addition, the State Department has held more than 20 virtual press conferences over the past year, connecting journalists and bloggers all over the world with top Department officials using state-of-the-art digital technology. Since its debut in July 2011, the forum — called LiveAtState — has had participation from journalists and bloggers all over the world with top Department officials using state-of-the-art digital technology. Since its debut in July 2011, the forum — called LiveAtState — has had participation from journalists and bloggers all over the world with top Department officials using state-of-the-art digital technology. Since its debut in July 2011, the forum — called LiveAtState — has had participation from journalists and bloggers all over the world with top Department officials using state-of-the-art digital technology. Since its debut in July 2011, the forum — called LiveAtState — has had participation from journalists and bloggers all over the world with top Department officials using state-of-the-art digital technology. Since its debut in July 2011, the forum — called LiveAtState — has had participation from journalists and bloggers all over the world with top Department officials using state-of-the-art digital technology. Since its debut in July 2011, the forum — called LiveAtState — has had participation from journalists and bloggers all over the world with top Department officials using state-of-the-art digital technology.

For example, Director of Policy Planning Jake Sullivan participated last year in a LiveAtState to discuss US policy toward Asia, with more than 30 journalists from Asia-Pacific nations including China, Singapore, the Republic of Korea and Japan. Topics discussed included North Korea, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and Secretary Clinton’s travel to Burma, and the forum presented the opportunity to further explain our Asia-Pacific policies and amplify one of the Secretary’s strategic priorities: re-focusing on the region with “forward-deployed” diplomacy.

To be clear, digital diplomacy is not a replacement for face-to-face diplomacy, but rather a complement to it. As is the case with traditional shoe-leather diplomacy, relationships that begin online must be nurtured away from computers, through real-world interactions. For example, Embassy Phnom Penh in Cambodia invited its Facebook fans who correctly answered an environmental quiz to a screening of the movie An Inconvenient Truth, to celebrate Earth Day. And when the Embassy’s Facebook page reached 30,000 fans, two fans were selected through a random draw to tour the visiting naval ship USNS Mercy. Digital diplomacy is a means to start relationships and to continue them over time when face-to-face interactions are not always possible.

But time and distance are not the only things preventing face-to-face conversations from taking place. In many parts of the world, media is still tightly controlled, and candid discussion of certain issues remains prohibited. Digital diplomacy gives us tools to have honest, open conversations, even in restrictive environments.
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gives us tools to have honest, open conversations about a wide variety of topics, even in restrictive environments. In Laos, for example, where newspapers, TV, and radio are all controlled by the government, Embassy Vientiane’s Facebook page has become a platform for Lao people to voice their opinions about human rights, environmental degradation, corruption and other sensitive topics. Sometimes these discussions in the online world have led to groundbreaking action in the real world, such as when activists who had seen and commented on Embassy Facebook posts regarding gay rights organized the first Pride event in Laos’ history.

It is therefore important to recognize that the Internet, the basis for digital diplomacy, is value-neutral. Some governments use technology to curtail freedom of expression and block political content, or to overwhelm movements facilitated by social media through brute force.

That’s why the US is calling for governments and people worldwide to join with us in making choices that preserve the openness, freedom and security of the Internet so that it can continue to be an engine for ideas, innovation, and a catalyst for economic growth.

It’s also why the State Department, together with USAID, will have issued over $100 million in grants by the end of this year in funding to support access to information and secure communications on the Internet and mobile devices.

While not a panacea or a replacement for face-to-face diplomacy, connection technology has had a tremendously democratizing effect on information and influence; and on the ability to reach people on a global scale, yet also on a one-on-one basis. In so doing, digital diplomacy creates a space unburdened by custom, bureaucracy or physical distance, a space without borders or boundaries — and a space that cannot be ignored as an important part of the diplomatic toolkit of the 21st century to be employed long into the future.

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