

# Perspectives

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## Public Diplomacy for the 21st Century

by Judith A. McHale

The 20th century concept of diplomacy conjures images of men in three-piece suits hashing out world affairs behind secured doors, far removed from the daily lives of the people filling nearby bazaars and byways. We viewed the world through discrete lenses – military might, economic clout, political status, labor leaders – and built strategies for engagement around powerful elites.

Not anymore.

In the 21st century, the democratization and diffusion of information is dissolving traditional barriers to power. People in every part of the world are clamoring to be heard and demanding a role in shaping their own future. This change is irreversible, unstoppable, and eminently desirable. And it puts public diplomacy squarely in the middle of foreign policy for a new generation.

In a world where power and influence truly belongs to the many, we must engage with more people in more places in more ways and at every hour of the day. That is the essential truth of diplomacy in the internet age. Furthermore, we must contend with an increasingly savvy and motivated set of influencers on the global stage, each armed with a vast array of affordable and adaptable tools to spread their message.

The world we face is crowded and its challenges complex. So how do we stand out and respond in this new environment? By taking our public diplomacy into the marketplace of ideas.

For the past two years, I have been privileged to serve as the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. As we built a strategy and struggled with the changing nature and needs of public diplomacy in the 21st century, being in the marketplace of ideas was one of our guiding principles.

During my first year, we developed a strategic framework that identifies five mission-critical priorities to structure our public diplomacy efforts: shaping the narrative; expanding and strengthening people-to-people relationships; countering violent extremism; better informing policy; and deploying resources in line with priorities. In each of these areas, being out in the marketplace is a critical component.

This means empowering our public diplomacy officers around the world to proactively seek out opportunities to engage and to reach out to segments of the audience previously absent or underrepresented in our efforts. We want to hear from the young man who is unemployed and the woman who does not belong to any political party

and all the individuals who fell through the cracks for years because it was harder to connect with them. In 21st century public diplomacy, their views are critical.

Rather than hoping foreign publics come to us, we must find where important conversations are happening and respectfully add our voice. We must use the same venues and platforms that communities and activists use. To effectively engage in the marketplace of ideas, our responses must be immediate and direct.

We recognize that if we do not tell our story, someone else will, and we cannot afford to play defense in an ever-changing landscape. We must proactively engage with global media, harness the power of social media, and aggressively push back against inaccurate information.

We have spent the past two years working to put these ideas into practice while also addressing the multitude of urgent situational demands on public diplomacy. And we have made impressive progress in a relatively short period of time.

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First, we vastly expanded our use of social media to communicate with larger and more diverse audiences. The State Department has been experimenting with social media for years. Now, we are engaging across multiple platforms, in a variety of languages, in almost every country of the world. This has long been a necessity, but we provided the training and the staff to make it a reality. We have also tried to inculcate a tolerance for risk and a culture of innovation around

using these new tools.

Of course, we are not so naïve as to believe that we can build meaningful relationships with people using only social networking sites. There is no virtual equivalent for face-to-face interactions with Americans. So we have also placed an emphasis on being in the physical marketplace.

Growing up overseas, I remember studying in American libraries and the importance of American Spaces to community life. These have always been wonderful resources for public outreach, but the security concerns of the past decade have taken many of our centers out of local neighborhoods and relocated them behind Embassy barricades. This eliminates our ability to connect with curious passersby. In Lithuania, one such relocation of an American Center resulted in an 85 percent drop-off in visitors. Therefore, we have worked to revitalize our American Spaces as symbols of our desire to engage and to keep them located in the communities they serve, whenever possible.

Then we looked for new ways to meet people where they live and go about their daily lives. For example, we opened @america, a 21st century American Space, in a high-traffic shopping mall in Jakarta, Indonesia. In the first six months this center has been open, @america has already received upwards of 40,000 unique visitors. And we introduced mobile spaces to enable officers get out of the Embassy and into places where local publics congregate.

This same idea applies to our educational advising. Students from other countries who attend university in the United States add more than \$19 billion to our economy every year. They enrich American campuses, form friendships, and build mutual understanding that helps weave our world closer together. So we have renewed our focus on promoting study abroad in the United States.

Again, this means sending our educational advisors out to the places where people conduct their lives so that potential students as well as their parents, siblings, or grandparents can pick up information on American universities. It means activating networks of exchange alumni and study-abroad participants to share their experiences with prospective students. And we have enhanced our online and mobile resources to reach millions more people than we ever could in person.

Not only have we moved out into the marketplace, we have worked to capture its full depth and richness by broadening the demographic base of our target audiences. This includes the young, the unaffiliated, the unemployed, traditionally marginalized populations, and women – all groups we have not fully engaged or heard from under previous strategies, but all critical groups helping drive the change we see happening all around our world.

In every aspect of our public diplomacy, we have pushed our programs out to gather, gauge, and influence opinions when we engage with individuals. Equally important, we have emphasized incorporating a consideration of those attitudes and opinions from the marketplace into our internal foreign policy making process.

One of the most important lessons I learned in more than 30 years in the business world is that structure drive outcomes. At the State Department, policy making and public diplomacy were once seen as separate and far from equal disciplines of our foreign policy apparatus, and the organization was structured accordingly. For years that undercut our outcomes from the start.

During the last two years, with the full support of President Obama and Secretary Clinton, we have brought public diplomacy perspectives in at the highest levels, and emphasized innovation in the field to support our foreign

policy directives. We have worked aggressively to reform the structures and processes of the State Department to enable better outcomes for 21st century diplomacy.

Recent events in Tunisia illustrate why this approach is so critical today. Only months ago, the set of actors who mattered in Tunisia was extremely limited. A small group held the keys to business and politics. Broader outreach was virtually impossible. And our Embassy and programs were designed to operate effectively in that world.

Then, in a matter of weeks, the system turned on its head. Where a small set of voices once determined the direction of the country, 11 million proud Tunisians now eagerly participate in shaping their future—from elections to education to economic development. More importantly, for the first time, they are able to access the information and tools they need to do so.

Tunisians are forming political parties and strengthening their civil society. They are expanding freedom of expression and bolstering education and job-skills training. They are sparking business growth and job creation. And we stand ready to aid these efforts if the Tunisian people ask for our support.

To help Tunisians seize this tremendous opportunity and ensure a successful transition to democracy, we are altering our model for engagement. We are going far beyond government ministries to engage deeply and broadly across Tunisian society.

Just as Tunisia ignited a wider trend in the Middle East, it is a bellwether of what is happening globally. Citizens around the world are increasingly driving political, social, and economic trends, and we must adapt.

In this rapidly evolving landscape, as we seek to advance our foreign policy and enhance the security and prosperity of our world, our approach must have market-based public diplomacy—and the citizens it seeks to engage—at its core.



Judith A. McHale is Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, helping lead America's engagement with the people of the world. Appointed by President Obama, she was confirmed by the U.S. Senate on May 21, 2009 and sworn in on May 26.

Ms. McHale is the former President and Chief Executive Officer of Discovery Communications. For two decades, Ms. McHale was a leader in building Discovery Communications, the parent company of the Discovery Channel, into a far-reaching and renowned global media enterprise with 1.4 billion subscribers in 170 countries. She forged partnerships around the world and created innovative strategies that focused on understanding and respecting different cultural contexts and tapping local voices to succeed in diverse markets.

In the 1980s, Ms. McHale served as General Counsel for MTV Networks, overseeing legal affairs for MTV, Nickelodeon and VH-1. Drawing on the experience developed over many years living abroad, Ms. McHale became a principal architect of the company's rapid international expansion.

In 1987, Ms. McHale became General Counsel at Discovery Communications, then a small company with a single U.S. cable channel. She went on to serve as Chief Operating Officer, Chief Executive Officer, and President, helping to grow Discovery into one of the most successful media companies in the world, with more than 100 channels available in 35 languages and distributed to more 1 billion subscribers in over 170 countries. During her tenure as President, Discovery's revenues increased tenfold, with annual revenues topping \$3 billion.

*Perspectives* is a monthly opinion piece authored by leading practitioners and academics in the fields of public diplomacy and Arab media. The publication provides a forum to contextualize and analyze salient topics, concepts and developments that are of interest to the public diplomacy community as well as to Arab media followers. The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Layalina Productions, Inc.

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