Perspectives

Social Media as Public Diplomacy
by Matt Armstrong

Now more than ever, the United States needs effective public diplomacy. America's national security depends on smart policies supported by effective and agile engagement to foster understanding of our government's policies, countering misinformation, developing partnerships, and most importantly, encouraging and empowering others to realize that the government's fight is their fight as well. This is where public diplomacy, engaging directly and indirectly with people around the globe, proves necessary.

While America created the Internet, Facebook, and Twitter, the appreciation of the tactical and strategic values of social media lags far behind our adversaries' practices.

In this age of mass information and precision-guided media, everyone from political candidates to terrorists must instantly and continuously interact with and influence audiences in order to be relevant and competitive. Ignoring the utility of social media is tantamount to surrendering the high ground in the enduring battle to influence minds around the world.

Social media breaks through geographical, cultural and even linguistic barriers, democratizing the access to, and distribution of information. The instant exchange of news and opinions among people today means that operations conducted in one place likely have an impact elsewhere. It can either be through sympathetic action (e.g. a terrorist strike by supporters who have only a cyber-connection to the perceived "wronged" party) or through a shift of the battlefield (e.g. a terrorist strike in the homeland or an allied city).

Through social media, international influence is as easy as a few clicks of a mouse. Anybody with a camera phone or laptop can now inform and influence global audiences. YouTube and blogs are the new "oxygen of publicity" on which terrorists and insurgents thrive, circumventing and manipulating "old" media to muster support.

According to David Kilcullen, in 1966, a Vietnamese villager had access to ten sources of information, half of which were government controlled. Forty years later, an Afghan villager has access to twenty-five, with the Internet counting as one and only five under government control. Among the twenty other sources are satellite phones and text messaging, as well as traditional sources (1). The products of social media extend through all of these channels and can be seen in the use of DVDs delivered with shab-nameh, or "night letters," in Afghan villages.

Terrorists and insurgents rely on the visceral effects of international reports on their past actions to garner support for their cause among sympathizers. Deny two of the three following components and an act of terrorism loses most, if not all of its hype-inducing value to the terrorist: knowledge of the act, who perpetrated the act, or the motivation of the perpetrator. It is not the death and destruction wrought by improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that is valuable. The real purpose of the attack is the imagery of David stoning Goliath across multiple media that creates ripples like a stone thrown in a pond. This is why IED attacks, as well as others, are filmed from multiple vantage points, edited and uploaded to the Internet with a speed any US media producer would envy.

Napoleon said that four angry newspapers were more threatening than a thousand angry bayonets. Today the same could be said of four angry bloggers, as the "CNN Effect" is now synonymous with the "Twitter Effect," the "YouTube Effect," and even the "Facebook Effect." Instead of a segmented media environment, we now live in a time better described as dominated by "Now Media" that combines the old and the new to create an instantaneous reel of information. Social media is central to this "Now Media" world and provides an early warning system, while creating opportunities to monitor and tap into discussions around the world.

> "Ignoring the utility of social media is tantamount to surrendering the high ground in the enduring battle to influence minds around the world."

Simply put, social media is public diplomacy. It permits direct and indirect international engagement and empowers individuals as well as groups. Similarly, the same limits that restrict America's use of social media apply to public diplomacy as a whole. Any improvement in social media will have immediate and lasting effects for the whole government.

The first step towards this improvement is to drop the quaint notion that ideas can be contained within geopolitical boundaries of nation-states. The US continues to orga-

nize and operate as if it were in the last decades of the Cold War, when traditional diplomacy took precedence over public opinion. This is due in part to the firewall created by Senators J. William Fulbright and Edward Zorinsky that was a product of their respective time and place.

In 1972, Fulbright said America's international broadcasting should "take their rightful place in the graveyard of Cold War relics (2)." In 1985, Zorinsky compared the United States Information Agency to a Soviet propaganda machine (3). Today is not yesterday. It is time to take the muzzle off and speak freely with greater transparency so that Americans may know what is said and done in their name (and with their tax dollars). An artifact of this belief that America's public diplomacy is unfit for regular Americans is the bifurcation of public affairs from public diplomacy within the State Department. The bureaucratic and functional division runs deep and is detrimental to agile and effective information-based leadership and engagement within the US government and the world (4).

Smart power requires smart foreign policies that are easily and readily supported by people around the globe who share and must participate in our vision of the future. It is time we start transparently and aggressively managing public opinion, a necessary skill of any democratic leader on the world stage. This means preventing others from maliciously framing our intentions and actions as well as those of our allies. Perhaps more importantly, it means actively holding our adversaries accountable for their actions among the constituents, "swing voters" and our own supporters. Those who subscribe or are sympathetic to terrorist ideology and actions rarely comprehend the true purpose of the groups they follow.

We are engaged in a struggle over the means to influence people to support and participate in a physical and ideological fight against common enemies. For too long we have accepted our adversaries' propaganda which framed conflicts as the US military against the civilian, when in fact the true struggle was between terrorists and insurgents and the local population. Social media is an essential tool to this end as it helps educate, encourage, equip and empower people to participate. This is what our enemies use it for and it is time we follow suit.

While we are improving in this area, and the new Administration's leadership gives reason to hope, overall we remain ineffective in countering the propaganda of our enemies that misrepresents both their actions and ours. Failing to correct accidental misinformation and intentional disinformation endangers the security of the US, its allies, and those we aim to protect and empower.

The broad, "always on" struggle for minds and wills requires agility – speed, accuracy, and flexibility – to undermine and not just counter the use of information by America's adversaries in influencing perceptions. Such agility requires the correct structures and empowerment. Social media is not a panacea but a tool whose use will represent either the upward or downward trend of future US public diplomacy.

1. Author interview with David Kilcullen.
2. Nicholas J. Cull, The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989 (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 314-15. An "anti-Fulbright faction" would develop against the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee that was likely the product of the Nixon Administration in response to Fulbright's attacks on the USIA. The situation got so bad that Fulbright demurred sponsoring legislation the State Department asked for, saying "Why should I offer it? It will just be beaten." See John Finney, "Vote in Senate Gives Fulbright Another in a Series of Rebuffs," New York Times, May 26 1972.
3. See "Senator Edward Zorinsky and Banning Domestic Dissemination by USIA in 1985", http://mountainrunner.us/2009/05/zorinsky.html.
4. There is a similar division within the Defense Department that requires its own discussion.

Matthew C. Armstrong is principal and co-founder of Armstrong Strategic Insights Group, LLC, and publisher of Mountain-Runner. Mr. Armstrong writes on the organizational, operational and legislative barriers to effective global engagement by the United States Government, particularly in regards to the "Now Media" information environment.

Mr. Armstrong obtained both his B.A. in International Relations and a Master of Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California (USC). He has done work at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, in the areas of US Intelligence, Contemporary European Security, and the Middle East. Prior to this, he spent a decade working as a technologist designing knowledge management systems subsequently developing high-value competencies in areas of Internet influence.